

石川県立高等学校 4 校における授業観察報告  
— 学習指導要領（平成 21 年告知）の実践状況 —  
Implementation of Government Course of Study in English  
Classroom at Four Ishikawa Prefectural High Schools

Kaori Burkart, Kana Oyabu, and Lewis Murray

**Abstract**

This paper reports the findings of classroom observation conducted at four Ishikawa Prefectural high schools during a public observation week in Kanazawa City, Japan. The observation was conducted in order to find the level of government Course of Study implementation in English language classrooms. The observers found that although there are teachers using mainly English, or using English and Japanese, still about 40% of teachers use mainly Japanese during their observation. Although students almost exclusively use Japanese among themselves, observation results indicated that spoken language patterns for teachers and students were quite similar, which might suggest that students emulate their teachers and might try to speak English if teachers used it more. In terms of structural formation of learning activities and integration, oral interaction and oral production activities in pairs and groups were observed in majority of classes indicating that students are well used to some forms of language activities. However, integration of skills was not yet developed. To ensure a smooth transition for these students, properly-structured and well-considered scaffolding instruction, along with quality input, is strongly encouraged. As it is a very limited observation, further research is needed in devising an effective observation technique.

本論は、金沢市における石川県立高等学校の英語授業参観報告である。この授業参観は、2013年度から施行された新学習指導要領による英語教育が、教育現場でどの程度実践されているかを調べた。教室での英語使用については、ほぼ英語で授業する教員や、英語と日本語を混ぜて授業する教員がいる一方で、参観した授業のおよそ40%の教員は、参観時間内においては、ほぼ日本語による授業を行っていた。生徒がお互いに使うのはほとんど日本語であったが、教員と生徒の言語選択パターンが似ていることから、教員が英語を使おうとしている場合には生徒も英語を使おうとしている可能性が示唆された。言語活動は、言語を発したり話し合ったりするペア・グループ活動は多くの授業で行われているが、いくつかの言語スキルを統合的に使う活動は、あまり行われていないことがわかった。このことから、金沢大学の新英語カリキュラムにおいては、高校で新学習指導要領の教育が100%行われていることはまだ授業運営の前提にせず、学生がスムーズに大学英語教育に移行できるよう、しっかりした構成と十分な支援がある授業展開と、質の高いインプットを心がける必要がある。今回の参観は非常に限定的なものであるため、今後更に効果的な授業参観方法を研究する必要がある。

## 1. Introduction

In April 2016, Kanazawa University Liberal Arts and Science Organization will be restructured to form an Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences. This restructuring is part of a reform in liberal arts education led by the President, the Director of Education and the committee for the preparation of the Institute.

In this reform, Kanazawa University liberal arts and science courses have undergone a major curriculum change. In English language curricula, 50% of its credits is allocated for TOEIC test preparation course, and another 50% of its credits for English as an Academic Purposes (EAP hereafter) courses. Such curricula seems to necessitate from the fact that the university needs to cater for students wishing to gain good TOEIC scores in order to ease their job-hunting efforts, and to cater for new first-year students who are the first to be educated under a renewed governmental Course of Study for high school subjects (implemented in 2013), and give them a good start for a college-level English education.

This paper reports our findings concerning the implementation of the Course of Study in English classrooms of four Ishikawa Prefectural high schools. The study was conducted in order to assess the level of the implementation of the Course of Study for foreign languages.

Our aim was to be aware of high school English education practices so that we can provide classroom management techniques suitable for students to make a smooth transition from high school English education to university English education.

In section 2, the Courses of Study for 2003 and 2013 are compared in order to specify the main point of the change in the Courses. Then, using a class observation sheet which focuses on the new change, six members of staff from Kanazawa University Foreign Language Institute conducted classroom observations. The method of observation is described in section 3. The results of our observation is stated in section 4, which is followed by discussion in section 5. The paper ends with the statement of limitation and suggestions for further study.

## 2. Background

While the overall objective of both the 2003 and 2013 Foreign Languages curricula are very similar, a number of differences are apparent. The following section outlines some of these and examines reactions to them.

From a cursory glance at the new curriculum, perhaps the most apparent change is the integration of language skills. Whereas the various classes detailed in the 2003 curriculum focus on each of the skills individually, the names assigned to the various courses in the 2013 curriculum suggest a very clear shift towards a more integrative approach. This is further highlighted in the latter's explicit move away from isolated grammar instruction, MEXT (2011) stating that such instruction should rather 'be given as a means to support communication through effective linkage with language activities' (p.7). While the overall objective of both is geared towards developing students' communication abilities, it is arguably better catered to within the integrated classes of the newer curriculum.

A number of studies highlight the new curriculum's implied move towards a more communicative approach to English (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Stewart, 2009; Tahira, 2012; Underwood, 2012b) which, Tahira (2012) comments, can be seen to 'place language activities at the center of language learning' (p.5). Stewart (2009), too, claims that the new curriculum appears to mark 'a notable shift from the grammar translation method' (p.10), and notes that the emphasis on communicative ability may be seen to suggest MEXT's belief that 'grammatical knowledge is not the ultimate goal of language study' (p.11). Underwood (2012b) echoes this sentiment, stating that one of the 'most apparent developments' in the new curriculum is the move to 'encourage Japanese teachers to focus more on English as a means of communication' (p.120). While the consensus regarding this shift is, in theory, positive, the realities of implementing it are not viewed so favorably.

Attempts to implement communicative language teaching (CLT) within the English curriculum and stress the importance of fostering communicative ability are nothing new. Stewart (2009) claims that MEXT's 1989 curriculum was 'influenced' (p.9) by CLT, and that such ideals were further emphasized in 2003. He goes on to argue, however, that the perceived need to prepare students for the university entrance exams insured that the grammar translation method prevailed. A survey of first year university students' opinions regarding how communicative their high school English classes were reveals that any fostering of communicative ability that occurred came a distant second to exam preparation (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). While Underwood (2012a) refutes the reality of this entrance exam perception, he does (2012b) see a need for better teacher training regarding how grammar might better be integrated into classroom activities before CLT can be successfully implemented. Both he and Tahira (2012) cite numerous studies which suggest that while CLT is supported in theory by many high school English teachers, it is not often employed.

One further difference between the 2003 and 2013 curricula is the explicitly stated instruction in the latter that 'classes, in principle, should be conducted in English' (MEXT, 2011), a policy that gets no mention in the former curriculum. While the move towards implementing CLT was, in theory at least, viewed favorably, this policy appears to have divided opinion. Hawkins (2015) ascribes the addition to the Japanese government 'still reeling from low rankings in English compared to its neighbors' (p.30). She goes on to argue that while it may be seen by some as necessary in moving towards CLT, in denying the opportunity to nurture greater proficiency in codeswitching in the classroom, it in fact only caters to 'an elite minority of the population' (p.36) who are likely to find themselves having to communicate in a monolingual environment. Conversely, Sato (2015) asserts that students' language production cannot be expected to improve without a significant level of quality input, and through the provision of opportunities for interaction in English. He concludes that if lessons are to become truly communicative, responsibility lies with EFL teachers 'teach[ing] English classes primarily in English' (p.17).

While MEXT do state that this policy should be adopted 'in principle', they provide no guidelines regarding situations where, in practice, it would be acceptable to speak Japanese. In this regard,

Tahira (2012) reports an instance of a MEXT official stating that there is ‘no need to conduct the whole class in English’, going on to say that giving grammar explanations in English is ‘often unrealistic’ (p.6). While the author acknowledges the clarification, she argues that without it being explicitly written into the curriculum, ‘MEXT’s expectations remain obscure’ (p.6). As such, until MEXT provide such clarification, the argument between those in favor and those against classes being conducted in English may remain unresolved.

### **3. Methods**

Data used in the current study was drawn from classroom observations of English lessons carried out across four different public high schools in Kanazawa City. The three of the four schools are chosen because three of them are the top three high schools sending highest number of their alumni to Kanazawa University in 2015. The last school was chosen as it has a six-year combined junior high school and high school, which is similar to academically-oriented private schools in urban areas – not seen in Ishikawa Prefecture. The last school also send the sixth highest number of its graduates to Kanazawa University in 2015. The four schools at which the observations were conducted were chosen as they might provide better insight into the English education experiences of ‘typical’ Kanazawa University students.

The observations were conducted by 6 English professors from Kanazawa University between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of November, 2015, during an education observation week. At such times, schools operate an open doors policy, making all classes available for observation by members of the public without appointment. As such, it was hoped that a more genuine impression would be had than viewing classes by appointment may have allowed for.

In total, 43 classes were observed, with observers rating items on a checklist (see Appendix 1) for each class. In addition to marking the type of class (e.g. Communication English 1), number of students in the class, and the grade (1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>), the items on the checklist may be grouped into three main categories: language used in class, content of the class (activities and skills), and level of integration of class activities. These may be seen to correspond to some degree to the areas discussed above. The length of time allotted to observing each class, and familiarisation with and interpretation of the class observation sheet, were at the discretion of the individual observers.

### **4. Results**

The results of the current study are reported in this section. Understanding how English classes are structured and taught is important for Kanazawa University English faculty. In particular, this was the first year for high school students to complete a new curriculum implemented by MEXT nearly three years ago. One of the primary purposes of the observation was to examine how communication-based active learning was integrated into classroom instruction. The results may guide adjustments in Kanazawa University English curriculum to improve language skill acquisition for future students.

The numbers reported in the results section were tallied by six individual observers without

specific rating directions. Thus in some cases the individual tally count does not match the total of 43 observed classes. The observation checklist results were tallied and are shown in the tables below (see Table 1, 2, and 3).

**4-1. Language use:** The language spoken in the classroom was monitored during the observations (Table 1). Nine teachers, including three Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and two team-teaching classes, mainly (more than 70%) spoke English to their students. A mix of Japanese and English was used in 14 classes. There were 17 classes in which teachers spoke mostly (over 70%) Japanese. The frequency and amount of students using English in class (e.g., answering the teacher's questions, speaking to classmates, and making statements) were also recorded. There were 7 classes in which students used English more than 70% of the time. Mixed usage of Japanese and English was seen in 12 classes. Classes where students used mostly (over 70%) Japanese numbered 16. The vast majority of students communicated with one another using Japanese (n = 30). There was only one in which the class mainly communicated in English. Seven classes used a mix of Japanese and English.

Table 1

*Spoken Language Use*

<u>Spoken by</u>	<u>Mainly English</u> <u>(Over 70%)</u>	<u>English/Japanese</u> <u>Mix</u>	<u>Mainly Japanese</u> <u>(Over 70%)</u>
Teachers	9 <sup>a</sup>	14	17
Students to teachers and the class	7	12	16
Students amongst themselves	1	7	30

<sup>a</sup> Includes 3 classes led by ALTs and 2 classes taught using team-teaching methods

**4-2. Structural formation of learning activities and integration:** The formation of learning activities here indicates the level of student interaction. There were 20 class sessions that involved whole-class activities, and 32 involving individual learning. Pair and/or group work activities were used in 36 classes. The observers reported 12 occurrences of classes facilitating active participation (Table 2).

Table 2

*Structural Formation of Learning Activities*

<u>Structure of Student</u>	<u>Numbers</u>
<u>Participation</u>	<u>Observed</u>
Pair/Group Work	36
Individual Activities	32
Whole-class Activities	20

Note: Minimum level of student participation was observed 12 times. Popular learning activities observed here were oral interaction (n = 22) and oral production activities (n = 6).

The observers reported the presence of active learning instruction in 11 classes. Less than half of the class activities adopted active learning instruction; more than half of the class activities adopting such methods numbered 4 (Table 3). In the instrument, measuring the level of active learning integration did not include the nature of the seating arrangement. When students have active learning opportunities, some level of action is involved in forming groups and discussing and/or working on a task in a small group. Auster and Wylie (2006) presented examples of active learning delivery modes, including role-play, cases, debate, pair/team/group work, and simulation games. All these learning modes involve some degree of change in seating configurations; the reported active learning level here does not include such information.

Table 3

*Levels of Integrated Active Learning Methods*

<u>Levels of Active</u>	<u>Numbers Observed</u>
<u>Learning</u>	
Minimum	11
Less than Half of	7
Class Activities	
More than Half of	4
Class Activities	

## 5. Discussion

The changes in the new high school English curriculum most distinct from the previous curriculum change in 2003 is the expectation that instruction be delivered in English. Results suggest that classes remain primarily taught in Japanese or at best mixed use of Japanese and English. In 17 out of 40 classes, teachers used Japanese mainly Japanese (over 70% in the assessment of observers) during the time of the observation, which is 42.5% of all the classes recorded. Although the new curriculum states that “consideration should be given to use English in accordance with the students’ level of comprehension” (MEXT, 2011), this provides only vague guidance that gives no direction on how and when to implement this English instruction policy

(Tahira, 2012a).

Students' spoken language tendencies may also provide an indication of their attitudes and comfort levels using English for communication. According to the observation results, students spoke to each other almost exclusively in Japanese. The only times students most spoke English with one other was during activities that involved inserting their own word choices into a written script. The students did seem to enjoy the activity and were comfortable reading the script.

Another interesting student speech tendency were usage patterns reflective of that of their teachers. Observation results indicated that spoken language patterns for teachers and students were quite similar, which might suggest that students emulate their teachers and might try to speak English if teachers used it more. In other words, classroom English language use might increase as teachers speak it more in class and expect their students to do so. The observation results suggest that teachers could serve as significant role models and have a strong ability to encourage their students to communicate in English (Underwood, 2012b). To promote this type of learning environment, teachers need to consciously deliver more quality input in their English instruction (Sato, 2015). While overall language use may imply that students are more comfortable to speak Japanese amongst themselves, they will more readily speak English with sufficient structure provided in class.

Students' willingness to adapt their speech patterns and teachers' efforts to provide some learning activities were apparent from the observations. Majority of classes had learning activities: 36 classes out of 43 classes (83.7%) observed had pair or group activities, 32 classes included individual activities (74.4%), and 20 classes had whole class activities (46.5%) during the observation period. Although a variety of activities were offered in class sessions observers rated those activities minimal or insufficient (less than half of class activities) in terms of time spent for the activities. Moreover, even those learning activities that seemed more effective appeared to exist without integrated connections with other activities. For example, a class might begin with checking homework answers before moving to introducing vocabulary for a new chapter. Then students pronounce the new vocabulary repeating after a prerecorded CD. Technically, this can be considered a whole class activity involving individual learning but it is devoid of communicative learning or teaching. Judging from these brief school observation results, there may be great potential for CLT if teachers are more aware of their existing teaching and learning environments. Sufficient scaffolding techniques seem to be a key solution for this situation. The term scaffolding as defined by Cummins (2002) is "a special kind of help that assists learners to move toward new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding" (p. 10). This sounds like what is needed for both JTEs and their students.

The Kanazawa University Foreign Language Institute (FLI) has developed a new curriculum based on high school English curriculum reform, to be implemented the beginning of the 2016 school year. FLI faculty should be aware that incoming students may not be ready for English-only instruction; this will depend on their high school English experiences. To ensure a smooth transition for these students, properly structured and well-considered scaffolding instruction, along

with quality input, is strongly encouraged.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

This section describes some shortcomings of the methodology used for this project. Re-examining instrument design and data collection strategies may provide insight that can improve future research.

Although the instrument served the purpose of recording a snapshot of each class visit, it could be modified to focus specifically on the purpose of the visit. For example, once the purpose of the observation is decided on, specific items could be shortened and pruned to select those contributing most to the purpose. The current instrument records an overall picture of the classroom by taking snapshots. The resulting pieces, however, are difficult to use in painting a comprehensive picture.

Some weaknesses became clear after the observation sheets were gathered and tallied. It should be noted that no observation protocol or calibration was established for the observers. Therefore, the lengths of each observation differed. Some classes were observed for a full 50 minutes but others were observed for only about five minutes.

The ratings were highly subjective and could vary widely across observers. Their individual perspectives and expectations related to high school English instruction could significantly influence the rating. For example, the questions of how much English is spoken by a teacher can be difficult to rate. If the observer has low expectations for English in the classroom and observes a teacher providing simple directions or commands in English, the observer may rate English language usage highly, despite it being below 10% of total instructional time. Moreover, the rating was developed as “more than 70%,” a standard met by fewer than 7 observations. The criteria for this rating are unclear or confusing, especially when an observation protocol was not established and a number of observers were rating at several different sites.

In addition, a lack of clear purpose for the observation may also be driving inconsistencies in ratings. First, some observers were not certain of the main purpose of the school visits and/or observational goals. Secondly, the observers did not have information on the learning objectives of the observed classes. Again, if observer assumptions about learning objectives differ from the actual learning objectives, the ratings may be inaccurate. It should be noted that one of the underlying goals of the high school visits was to observe genuine English learning environments, so unannounced visits were expected to reveal more of an everyday picture.

Given the shortcomings described above, stronger future studies can be developed with focused instrument design and methodological clarity. Establishing clear research questions will also help developing a methodology appropriate to the research goals, which can be supported by a well thought out observation protocol. Based on the protocol, the observers can discuss the project objectives and clarify their mission so that everyone is on the same page. Minimizing inter-rater errors is extremely important, particularly when multiple observers are sent into different survey environments. With appropriate permission, it would also be helpful if video recording of the



classes is allowed because this can reduce errors, increase the data validity, and guide continuous improvement in survey approaches.

To reflect and relate these activities to Kanazawa University Foreign Language Institute's new curriculum, it is essential to integrate multiple perspectives. Although the new curriculum is based on the assumption that students entering the university in the spring 2016 have successfully completed the revised Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) high school curriculum, annual high school visit reports can only provide snapshots. For future studies, it is important to learn from teachers and students actually experiencing the high school curriculum changes. This could be accomplished via not only observations but also interviews of high school teachers and students. Their struggles, opinions, questions, and any expressions can communicate valuable data to inform university English curriculum in preparing and better accommodate students in a new stage of learning.

### References

- Auster, E. R., & Wylie, K. K. (2006). Creating active learning in the classroom: A systematic approach. *Journal of Management Education, 30*(2), 333-353.
- Hawkins, S. (2015). Guilt, missed opportunities, and false role models: a look at perceptions and use of the first language in English teaching in Japan. *JALT Journal, 37* (1), 29-42.
- MEXT. (2003). Towards advancement of academic ability. Retrieved February 18, 2016, from: [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/hakusho/html/hpac200201/hpac200201\\_2\\_015.html](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusho/html/hpac200201/hpac200201_2_015.html)
- MEXT. (2011). Section 8: foreign languages. Retrieved February 18, 2016, from: [http://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/04/11/1298353\\_9.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/04/11/1298353_9.pdf)
- Sato, R. (2015). The case against the case against holding English classes in English. *The Language Teacher, 39*(5), 15- 18.
- Stewart, T. (2009). Will the new English curriculum for 2013 work? *The Language teacher, 33*(11), 9- 13.
- Tahira, M. (2012). Behind MEXT's new course of study guidelines. *The Language Teacher, 36*(3), 3- 8.
- Underwood, P. (2012a). Teacher beliefs and intentions regarding the instruction of English grammar under national curriculum reforms: a Theory of Planned Behavior Perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 28*, 911-925.
- Underwood, P. (2012b). The course of study for senior high school English: recent developments, implementations to date, and considerations for future research. 東洋英和女学院大学『人文・社会科学論集』第30号.

The authors would like to thank schools, their teachers and students where they and their colleagues have conducted this research.

## Appendix

Name of School \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Reporter Name \_\_\_\_\_

(Please circle appropriate words/phrases that describe the lesson)

Year	Number of student:			
1      2      3	less than 20,	20-29,	30-39,	more than 40
<b>Type of class</b> (name of course):				
Communication English I,      Communication English II,      Communication English III, 英語表現 (English Expression) I,      英語表現 (English Expression) II				
Other (Courses set by schools e.g.Science English, Global English.) _____				
Observation points (Please circle the appropriate words based on what you have observed)				
<b>1) Language spoken by teacher(s)</b>				
Mainly English (over 70%)      English and Japanese      Mainly Japanese (over 70%)				
<b>2) Language spoken by students (answering teachers' questions or speaking to the class)</b>				
Mainly English (over 70%)      English and Japanese      Mainly Japanese (over 70%)				
<b>3) Language spoken by students (among themselves during activities)</b>				
Mainly English (over 70%)      English and Japanese      Mainly Japanese (over 70%)				
<b>4) Type of student participation</b> (tick the appropriate boxes and circle the type of activities)				
<input type="checkbox"/> Minimum (Mainly listening to teacher(s))				
<input type="checkbox"/> Pair/Group Work (filling worksheet together, Q+A, role play, discussion, other)				
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual activity (reading or listening alone, writing or filling worksheet alone, other)				
<input type="checkbox"/> Whole class activity (chanting/reciting/singing, whole-class Q+A, presentation, debate, other)				
<b>5) Content</b> (today' s topic: _____ )				
(Tick the boxes below and circle or state the type of activities)				
<input type="checkbox"/> Grammar <input type="checkbox"/> Vocabulary <input type="checkbox"/> Intonation & Pronunciation				
<input type="checkbox"/> Reading (grasping the main idea, skimming/scanning passages, close/careful sentence by sentence reading, analyzing structure, other _____)				
<input type="checkbox"/> Writing (idea generation, logical order formation, writing an outline, guided writing, free writing, editing, other _____)				
<input type="checkbox"/> Listening (listening to recognize sound and rhythm patterns, listening to grasp the main idea, listening to identify key words, dictation, comprehension quiz, other _____)				
<input type="checkbox"/> Oral interaction (practicing set phrase or conversation, Q+A practice, free conversation, discussion, other _____)				
<input type="checkbox"/> Oral production (memorized recitation, prepared talk/presentation, debate, other _____)				
<b>6) Level and types of integrated activities</b>				
(e.g. read a passage and explain its content orally, interview a person and write a report about the interview, listen to information and draw a diagram of its content, etc.)				
Level: Minimum      Less than half of the class activities      More than half of the class activities				
Type of activity:				

**Other points noticed by the reporter:**