

# Fostering Communicative Competence in Japanese Junior High Schools

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Nicholas Kemp

## Introduction

Seven years ago, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter referred to by its acronym MEXT) revised its policy for English language education within the junior high setting. The two main aims of this revision were to 1) foster a positive attitude towards communication with foreigners and 2) equip students with basic ability in the four main skills of English: speaking, listening, reading and writing (MEXT, 2003). This article is based upon a presentation delivered on July 17 of this year<sup>1)</sup> and argues that whilst MEXT's policy revision was obviously made with good intentions, there are still many issues that need to be addressed before its aims can be fully realized.

The format of this article mirrors that of the presentation on which it is based. The first half identifies problem areas in the junior high English education system. The latter half proposes measures that may help to rectify, at least in part, the identified problem areas. Whilst reference is made to academic research on the topic, the majority of the content in this article is based on the author's five years of experience as a foreigner teaching English in a Japanese public junior high school.

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1) July 17, 2010, *Fostering English Communication Skills in Japanese Junior High Schools* 九州国際大学国際関係学会学術講演会

## **Problems**

### **Lack of Prior Knowledge**

In the field of second language acquisition the debate continues as to what is the best age to start studying a second/ foreign language. Some claim it is desirable to start learning at an early age when synapses are still being developed whilst others argue that it is better to start at a later stage when one can draw upon knowledge of his or her first language to help understand the rules of the language being learnt (Ellis, 1994). However, MEXT has deemed it necessary for all junior high school students to learn a second language, which in all but the rarest exceptions is English. Whilst some Japanese households send their children to private English classes, a much larger proportion of the population have no such experience. With the exception of sporadic and often ineffective exposure to English at elementary school, many junior high school students commence their study of English with practically no prior knowledge of the language. Compared with other academic subjects taught in junior high school, this lack of knowledge on the students' parts puts English teachers at a significant disadvantage to their counterparts in other subject areas.

### **Time Constraints**

Any person who has learned to speak a foreign language with any degree of success will testify to the fact that it takes time. Unfortunately for junior high school students learning English, time is a commodity in short supply. With an average of three or four lessons a week (often as short as 45 minutes in duration) and accounting for factors such as class administration, junior high students are likely to study English for perhaps as little as 50 hours per academic year.

### **Behavior Issues**

A harsh reality of teaching English in Japan's public schools (often overlooked by academics) is the issue of student behavior. For any number of reasons (not least simply because they are teenagers), junior high school students can behave disruptively and impede any progress that may stand to be made in a lesson. Unfortunately, for many teachers and students alike, issues such as bullying, vandalism and truancy prevent any learning from taking place.

### **Classroom Management**

Even in classes where behavior is not a significant issue, the matter of classroom management is still one that cannot be overlooked. In classes of up to 40 students it is little wonder that the lecture-style (teacher talks and the students listen and take notes) delivery method is often preferred. However, in the case of teaching a class how to communicatively use a foreign language the lecturing approach is unlikely to prove effective. Therefore, effective management of the class (often co-ed and invariably mixed level) is essential yet extremely difficult.

### **Motivation Levels**

In close relation to the issue of behavior management is the matter of motivation. Indeed, behavior issues in the classroom can have a direct and negative influence on motivation levels. Behavior issues aside, motivation is believed to be an important determinant of learning. While some students may be positively motivated to study English, others may lack such motivation or indeed be motivated to not study. Children from families that harbor negative feelings towards the English speaking world (especially the United States) may understandably resent the fact

that the study of English is compulsory. The media plays a powerful role in how English is perceived by the Japanese. English fluency is often portrayed as glamorous and admirable and yet English is often presented as difficult (perhaps even impossible) and frequently features in the forfeit games of variety show regulars. With an estimated 72% of Japanese junior high school students watching at least 1 hour of television every day (Mullis et al. 2007), the influence media has on teenagers' attitudes towards learning English should not be underestimated.

### **Limited Resources**

The past few decades have witnessed a staggering increase in the availability of language learning resources and materials. In addition to the ever-growing list of textbooks, often tailored to the needs of very specific learner groups, there are also DVDs, interactive CD Roms, podcasts and other digital media to cater for today's computer-savvy students. Public school teachers however are limited in the resources they can use. Textbooks are predetermined by their local board of education which in turn chooses from a shortlist of Ministry approved publications (none of which could be described as taking a communicative approach). Supplementary materials such as workbooks may be chosen by teachers. These are invariably written task biased and thus popular for their potential as homework. Despite often having access to up-to-date and expensive digital media, many teachers lack the knowledge, training or perhaps motivation to utilize them.

### **Restrictive Curriculum**

As already mentioned, MEXT dictates what textbooks can be used in the junior high school English classroom. All of these textbooks

rigidly follow the official English syllabus. Teachers are expected to follow this syllabus and students are regularly tested on its content. Despite stated aims to make the curriculum more communicative, it remains doggedly grammar-translation based. A brief glance at any of the Ministry approved textbooks will show that they are all based around discrete grammar points. Some of these grammar points are rarely used in everyday communication. Furthermore, items introduced in the curriculum are seldom revisited or reviewed at a later stage reducing the possibility of internalization on the part of the students.

The current curriculum requires a much more radical revision if it truly hopes to foster communicative ability. As has already been suggested, this is highly unlikely to happen as long as the pressure to prepare for entrance examinations persists. Assessment of true linguistic proficiency requires both time and resources and is difficult to achieve with accuracy. Testing based on grammar translation however can be unambiguously evaluated. This perhaps explains why there is still no speaking element to many entrance examinations in Japan.

### **Team Teaching Relationships**

A final point, of close personal interest, which may not necessarily be viewed as a problem, is the presence of native speaking assistant/team teachers in the classroom. Generalization on this matter is undesirable yet it seems that there is a distinct lack of consensus or clear policy as to how team-teaching should be carried out and to what end (Mahoney, 2004). Native speakers have the potential to be an enormous resource to English classes in Japan though at present, in many places, this potential is not being realized and in some cases native teaching

assistants are regarded as an unwelcome presence.

### **Proposals for Change**

Thus far, a number of problems with the current English education system in Japanese junior high schools have been identified and discussed. Obviously, some of these problems are deep-rooted and cannot be easily rectified. However, the following part of this article aims to propose a number of measures that could potentially improve the situation.

#### **Building a Bridge**

The first measure proposed is improved dialog between elementary schools and junior high schools leading ultimately to a new and unified English curriculum that spans the two. The age of a student somewhat dictates what he or she is capable of learning. It is therefore suggested that elementary students learn basic nouns and verbs in addition to receiving a comprehensive grounding in phonics. Junior high school students would then hopefully find listening and pronunciation less daunting and be better equipped to deal with the linguistic challenges of expressing more complex concepts such as time, opinion and relation.

It has already been established that languages take a long time to learn and that time is very limited in junior high schools. The newest editions of the Ministry-approved English textbooks feature content that overlaps with other subjects such as science and social studies. In order to give students the increased exposure to English they need, it is proposed that conversely English content also be added to other subjects. Successful language learners will testify that language is often best

acquired when it is needed to accomplish a goal external to the process of acquisition itself. Passive exposure to English could also be increased by making signs and notices around the school bilingual for example.

Much time can be eaten up by discipline issues in the classroom. Unfortunately, there is no magic cure for behavior problems. However, behavior problems that arise as a result of boredom, lack of interest or frustration at the level of difficulty of the class can be remedied or at least reduced by taking positive measures in the class. Clarity of instruction is vital for comprehension. Clarity of instruction covers a whole range of necessary steps; some of them include: clearly stated objectives (both long and short term), clearly stated instructions (with illustrations and examples where required), clear feedback (not only on areas of improvement but also difficulty areas with advice on how to improve) and well prepared lesson plans that follow a logical progression and allow for gradual familiarization and confidence building.

### **Stimulating Lesson Content to Increase Intrinsic Motivation**

Clear instruction should have the effect of reducing confusion and increasing comprehension. Motivation should also be expected to rise as a result of an increased sense of achievement. Motivation is not only an important influence on student behavior but also on language acquisition. There are many approaches to increasing motivation. Some teachers favor 'point systems' whereby students are rewarded for correct answers or participating in the class. Such systems however could be criticized for making students lose sight of the true purpose of learning. If students enjoy their time in class and the very process of learning feels rewarding, then such award systems should not be necessary.



Devising lessons that feature tasks with attainable outcomes and activities that enable students to find out about themselves and their peers are two very powerful methods of fostering intrinsic motivation.

### **Creating a non-threatening environment where no student is left behind**

Difficulty and failure can have a very damaging effect on student motivation. Hopefully, lessons should not feel difficult if the teacher has been careful to use clear instruction. However, it could be argued that learning English requires a different mindset to studying other subjects such as Math. It may take significant adjustment to accept the notion that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process. Japanese students in particular seem to be highly cautious of making mistakes in front of their peers. It is important then that the instructor nurtures an environment whereby mistakes are viewed as not only acceptable but also to be expected. No student should be made to feel shame for making an error.

### **Low cost, high impact resources**

Motivation can be nurtured and instruction can be made clearer with the use of well-considered resources and materials. However, it is recognized that budgets are finite and often inadequate. Budgetary considerations need not restrict one's resources though. Providing that the teacher can be creative and prepared to invest a little time and effort in the making of materials, highly effective results can be achieved whilst incurring very little financial expense. Anyone with access to the internet and a computer with Powerpoint can create a slideshow to introduce and practice almost any aspect of English language. Digital and

video cameras can also be used to great effect particularly if they are used in conjunction with the class television. But often the best materials are those made entirely by hand. Self-drawn flashcards show the student that you have invested time in their learning which makes it more likely that they will too. The teacher need not worry about a lack of artistic talent: students often take more delight in badly-drawn pictures.

### **Making content real**

Teachers (in public schools at least) are obliged to use the textbook and follow the Ministry-approved curriculum. As has already been established, this curriculum was not primarily designed with communicative learning in mind. Adapting the content of the textbook to a more communicative style of lesson will require a fair amount of innovation on the part of the teacher. It is possible however. Some of the content, as it is presented in the textbooks, seems to have little use in real life situations. What is the point for example of asking someone in the same room as you 'How is the weather?'. Why would one need to remark 'I am as tall as you' when it is visibly apparent? Students are unlikely to see the need to learn if logical contexts for usage are not readily apparent.

Let us return to the first example of asking someone how the weather is and now let us imagine that the two people are not in fact in the same room but speaking on the phone instead; immediately we have a logical context. The second example 'as-[adjective]-as' is somewhat more problematic. Students could be asked to comment on graphs and produce the desired language to describe what they see but again this is

merely verbalizing what is visibly apparent. If something is visibly apparent then the value of it being put into words is questionable. So a situation where one party is unable to see the items being compared would be more logical. It is difficult to imagine such a situation however. Thus one should consider other ways that this structure may be used. 'I'm as hungry as a horse', 'He is as quiet as a mouse' the 'as-[adjective]-as' construct is often used for exaggeration. Focusing on this type of usage allows students to be creative, expressive and also become familiar with well-known English idiomatic expressions (something noticeably absent from the textbooks).

#### **The importance of communication and cross-cultural understanding**

Finally, let us consider the issue of team-teaching. Teaching (even in the Japanese high school where the curriculum is rigidly structured) is a highly personal skill. Every teacher develops their own individual approach and having to share the classroom with another person can require significant adjustment and compromise. In the case of English teachers, adjustment to not only the other teacher's approach but also their cultural outlook is necessary (Kobayashi, 1994). Therefore, effective communication between the JTE (Japanese Teacher of English) and the ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) is vital. Cultural misunderstandings are likely to occur if neither party is sensitive to their differences and in worst case scenarios this can lead to confrontation, disputes and even working relationship breakdowns. The confines of this paper do not allow for a full discussion of this important relationship but it shall suffice to say that successful partnerships are built on mutual understanding, cultural awareness, effective communication, thorough planning and self-critical analysis of already taught lessons.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to identify some of the problems with the current system of English language education in Japan's junior high schools and suggest measures that could be taken to rectify or at least reduce their effects. Above all, what is really needed is increased dialog on the matter. The Ministry of Education, teachers and linguists need to carefully review the current system together and assess whether or not the methods being used are sufficient for realizing their objectives.

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