

Facilitating Teaching English Through English in Japanese Junior and Senior High Schools Through Applications of the MERRIER Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the MERRIER approach within the context of Teaching English Through English (TETE) in Japan. TETE has become a focus point for the improvement of English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning in Japanese public and private high schools. The paper provides the background and theoretical underpinnings of the MERRIER approach, and to outline practical applications of the approach reports how this approach was presented in the workshop on MERRIER done as part of the International Christian University (ICU) In-Service Teacher Development seminar in 2015 and 2016. It concludes with some ideas and suggestions for the inclusion of MERRIER applications in EFL teaching to facilitate the spread and implementation of TETE in Japanese junior and senior high schools.

According to a 2014 survey conducted by the educational corporation Benesse, 90 percent of junior and senior high school students consider having the ability to speak English as being *kakkooii* or stylish and attractive. Furthermore, according to the same study, 95.1 percent of students see it as desirable to gain the ability to speak English to some extent. However, in terms of popularity, English as a subject has languished near the bottom of subject rankings for the past 25 years (Benesse, 2017). As students highly evaluate spoken competence, it would seem that incorporating more effective teaching methods in the Japanese EFL classroom context which are both enjoyable and improve students' English oral proficiency is crucial. An examination and trial of various methodologies and approaches is necessary in order to understand which may be more effective and practical in Japanese EFL classrooms.

One innovative approach to teaching English in Japanese elementary and secondary schools can be found in the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology. CLIL is somewhat similar to Content-based Instruction (CBI) which has been a popular approach in English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching contexts. However, one important difference is that CLIL was developed in Europe to realize the idea of plurilingualism and has since become popular in EFL classrooms (Watanabe, Ikeda & Izumi, 2011). Furthermore, Watanabe, Ikeda, and Izumi (2011) illustrate a unique feature of CLIL in that CLIL has a framework called the 4Cs. These 4Cs guide teachers' lesson planning when they use the CLIL methodology, the 4Cs being: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Community. They explain that successful CLIL lessons should deal with new content so that students can acquire new knowledge or skills from the learning, and should facilitate the learner's target

language development through communication, including not only Lower-order Thinking Skills (LOTS) but also Higher-order Thinking Skills (HOTS). Successful CLIL lessons also promote students' understanding of others through pair and group work as well as raise their awareness of belonging to a global community. In addition, Watanabe, Ikeda, and Izumi (2011) discuss the flexibility of CLIL. They state that CLIL can be soft or hard, light or heavy, partial or total, and bilingual or monolingual. For example, if teachers allow the use of the first language (L1), it can be called bilingual CLIL. On the other hand, if teachers and students use the second or foreign language (L2) only, it will be called monolingual CLIL. These researchers add that these classifications are a "continuum" (p. 11) and emphasize that these types are not always clearly separable and teachers can/should adapt the extent of L1 or L2 usage flexibly according to the students' needs. However, regarding the last item (bilingual or monolingual), they claim that it is more desirable to use the CLIL design which is closer to monolingual CLIL for the students' language development. Thus, in the Japanese context, Teaching in English through English (TETE) matches current thinking regarding the CLIL approach.

In Japanese high schools, since 2010, TETE has become the standard of the national curriculum standard for upper secondary schools as instructed by MEXT (2010):

When taking into consideration the characteristics of each English subject, classes, in principle, should be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English, transforming classes into real communication scenes. Consideration should be given to use English in accordance with the students' level of comprehension. (p. 50)

In addition, for the Tokyo Olympic year, 2020, MEXT has further indicated promotion of higher level linguistic activities such as presentation, negotiation, and debate in high schools (2014). Therefore, it is highly likely that CLIL, particularly monolingual CLIL, which aims to include various thinking skills (Cognition) and incorporate collaboration (Community) will see wider acceptance.

A survey conducted by MEXT (2016) revealed that the number of high school instructors who use English increased by 3.0 percent in English Communication I and 3.2 percent in English Communication II over the previous year. Nevertheless, it also shows that overall only 11.0 percent of instructors answered they teach English through English in more than 75 percent of their class, 34.0 percent of them answered they teach English through English from 50 to 70 percent, and more than half of them (54.9 percent) answered they teach English through English less than 50 percent in 2016. Hence, it seems that TETE has not been widely employed in Japanese high schools yet and for many high school English instructors implementation of TETE is still challenging. One of the objectives of the In-Service Teacher Development Seminar at ICU is to help teachers employ TETE in their classroom teaching and interaction with their students through an understanding and application of the MERRIER method.

MERRIER and the In-Service Teacher Development Seminar at ICU

Aimed at the professional development of high school English instructors, the In-service Teacher Development Seminar was first offered at ICU in the summer of 2015, and

again in 2016. The seminar has attracted a wide diversity of teachers. Attendees include teachers starting out in their careers and those with many years of experience, teachers working in high level academic schools and those with students who are challenging to teach in terms of level and motivation. Participants have included teachers working in many different areas of Japan in junior and senior high schools and junior/senior high combined schools. The seminar has not aimed at acting as a teacher training course teaching useful tasks and activities, or teaching methodologies, but rather as course for teachers to develop improved self-analysis and self-development perspectives they could apply to their teaching and images of themselves as educators throughout their careers. In the two-day seminar, the key sessions are, a) applying TETE through MERRIER in the classroom and working with Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), b) task analysis viewed through Littlejohn's task analysis framework (Littlejohn, 2014) and c) reflective analysis particularly through the ideas and concepts developed by Thomas Farell (Farell, 2013). ICU instructors and the Director of the ELA program organize, develop, and implement the two-day seminar. The authors of this paper were responsible for the session a) from the years 2015 and 2016.

One of the key elements of the first session, applying TETE in the classroom and working with ALTs, has been the introduction of the MERRIER approach as a way to facilitate a greater, and more effective, use of English in the EFL classroom in Japan. The session on MERRIER comes at the beginning of the seminar after a short ice-breaking exercise using the activity called Fluency¹ (Maurice, 1983), designed to introduce teachers to each other and start exchanging ideas on teaching. Introducing MERRIER at this point has three important goals. The first goal is to continue the ice-breaking stage, encouraging teachers to get know each other a little more. The second purpose is to introduce some practical and easy to apply classroom strategies and behaviors for teachers to be able to use immediately on their return to their respective schools. These ideas are combined in a framework to help teachers understand and further develop ways to improve their everyday teaching practices to aid learner understanding. Third, participants start to reflect on themselves as teachers using TETE (or to what extent), which will steer the seminar towards the main sections, focusing more specifically on teacher self-understanding and self-development.

The Theoretical Background of the MERRIER Approach

The MERRIER approach was originally called the MERRI approach (Watanabe, Morinaga, Takanashi & Saito, 1988). It was developed and renamed as MERRIER by Watanabe (1995). According to him, MERRIER stands for the following seven concepts: Miming (or Models), Examples, Redundancy, Repetition, Interaction, Expansion, and Rewarding. He described the approach's theoretical background as founded in Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis, and explained that by incorporating these seven ideas, teachers can make their classroom input more comprehensible. Through understanding the MERRIER approach, teachers should be able to become more aware of how they can make their classroom input more comprehensible, particularly when they use English as a medium of instruction.

The importance of becoming aware of how teachers can teach English through English

¹ Fluency is a pair work activity rotating partners and practicing speaking fluency by assigning a speaker to talk about the same topic three times, every round the time they have is decreased.

more effectively by knowing how to provide comprehensible input can be confirmed by the four levels of competence described by Reed and Michaud (2010). They claim that there are four levels of competence and they use this model to explain the L2 learners' language development. According to their explanation, Level 1 means unconscious incompetence; learners are not aware of a certain rule and therefore they cannot follow that rule. The next level, Level 2, means conscious incompetence; learners are aware of a certain rule, but they cannot follow the rule. Then, at level 3, learners are aware of a rule and can use the rule if they pay attention to it. Finally, at level 4, learners can perform appropriately by following a rule without being conscious of the rule. Reed and Michaud claim by moving learners to higher levels by providing necessary instruction and practice, learners are able to progressively develop their foreign language skills (2010). Although they present this model focusing on language development, this model can also be applicable to other pedagogical settings as long as they are related to the learner's developmental process.

In the workshop, if the MERRIER approach is introduced and practiced, it is hoped these teachers will be able to become more aware of how they can conduct TETE effectively and by experiencing some activities using the MERRIER approach, they can improve their grasp of these four competences. If teachers can master the MERRIER approach, they will be able to conduct TETE more smoothly and they can provide comprehensible input more successfully when they use CLIL. If the teachers can give improved comprehensible input to their students, the students will be more likely to develop their language skills. Based on these concepts, this approach was included in one of the main sessions in the ICU In-Service Teacher Development Seminar.

MERRIER in the In-Service Teacher Development Seminar

In the seminar, due to time constraints, two activities out of the seven concepts of the MERRIER approach were introduced in 2015, and one more activity was added in 2016. The concepts were Mime/Model, Redundancy, and Expansion. In this section, we will describe what these concepts mean as well as illustrating how these activities were introduced to the seminar participants.

Mime/Model

According to Watanabe (1995), Mime/Model has two meanings. First, when instructors are explaining content and grammatical forms to their learners, it can be effective to add some visual support. Second, instructors can also incorporate gestures or change their facial expressions to facilitate understanding. Adding these can make input more comprehensible. The activity we introduced focused on this second type of Mime/Model. After briefly explaining this concept, we demonstrated the activity, following the procedure described below.

In this activity, participants were asked to make pairs. One member (A) selected a card and read the card to the other (B). B repeated the phrase adding body language, i.e. a facial expression or gesture providing some appropriate physical cues which would assist in a learner understanding. Some examples of phrases introduced in the seminar were taken from classroom English phrases in Ishiwata and Huysmans' (2014) work and are listed below,

- Please read the text silently.

- Make a group of four.
- Pass your papers to the front.
- Please go back to your seats.

The importance of activating improved understanding through adding appropriate facial expressions and gestures cannot be underrated, when we consider that research into the impact of a message has consistently shown that nonverbal communication plays a significant role in communication (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013; Mehrabian, 1971). The participants spent three to five minutes practicing this activity.

Redundancy

Redundancy refers to the process that after instructors say something, they add other input which has the same or a similar meaning (Watanabe, 1995). The first way to do this is to simply rephrase one's own speech and add an explanation which does not have exactly the same meaning but can work as a hint to help the listener understand the original explanation. The second way is to give another explanation by changing the perspective through changing the subject of the sentence, by giving some implicit explanation, or by changing the sentence structure, from active to passive, for instance.

In this activity, after an explanation of what Redundancy means and how to use this concept, participants were asked to make groups of three. We prepared a different set of cards with classroom English phrases adopted from Ishiwata and Huysmans' (2014) work. One member (A) read the phrase aloud, and the other members (B and C) were required to rephrase the expression. Two examples are provided below.

Example 1.

A: (reading from card) Do you have any questions?

B: Does everyone understand?

C: Are there any parts you don't understand?

Example 2.

A: (reading from card) Does anyone want to add something?

B: Any other ideas?

C: I'd like to hear some other opinions. Anyone?

This strategy requires the teacher to be closely attuned to the classroom and student needs, able to rephrase to support understanding (for lower level students) or challenge understanding (for higher level students). After observing our demonstration of this activity, the attendees worked on this task for five to eight minutes.

Expansion

This is the activity newly introduced in 2016. According to the explanation given by Watanabe (1995), Expansion refers to a type of recasting speech. If a student uses an incorrect grammatical form, the instructor should rephrase the student's speech using a grammatically accurate form. In addition, if the student uses incomplete sentences, the teacher can recast this to make it longer and more complete.

In this practice, partner A has a card with a phrase containing a commonly made error by Japanese learners of English. Partner A reads this, playing the role of the student, Partner B, in the role of the teacher, listens and offers a more grammatically correct form. A hint is given on the back of the card to help B. Two examples are given below.

Example 1.

A: (reading from card) She's belonging to a basketball club.

B: So, she belongs to a basketball club?

A: That's right.

Example 2.

A (reading from card): Do you have a *hoochikisu*?

B: Oh, do I have a stapler?

A: Yes.

This practice closely resembles authentic interaction between speakers as it features the important functions of clarification and confirmation. This can allow teachers to build a dialogue in English with learners who may still have a weak grasp of grammar and a very limited vocabulary, while at the same time modelling structures that are more appropriate and natural. After the explanation and demonstration of this concept, the attendees practiced the activity for five to eight minutes.

Other MERRIER Concepts and Modifications

Although we did not have a chance to introduce other concepts of the MERRIER approach in the TETE seminar due to the time constraint, we explained the rest of the concepts as well as summarized all the concepts of the MERRIER approach and included it in the seminar's booklet (see Appendix). Whilst the focus of the original MERRIER approach was on how teachers can make their input more comprehensible, we added some related concepts to the original ones so that this modified version of the MERRIER approach can function as a guideline for TETE. In total, four modifications were made.

The first modification was made to the concept of Model/Mime. Based on the Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) model, we added the idea that it is important for an instructor to demonstrate how to perform an activity clearly by providing a model. This was presented every time we introduced activities related to the MERRIER approach. This kind of modelling is particularly necessary before an instructor conducts some interactive activities such as pair and group work.

The second modification was made to the concept of Repetition. According to Watanabe (1995), Repetition refers to the technique of repeating the same phrases, expressions, and explanations for scaffolding, whose concept is reflected in the concept of Redundancy: a method of making input more comprehensible by adding further explanations. However, as a guideline for TETE, we added the idea of using the same activities and tasks repeatedly. By employing the same activities frequently, an instructor can spend little time in making sure whether his/her students understand how they are supposed to perform a particular activity. In daily lessons, having good time management skills is crucial and time saved by repeating and recycling the same activity can be spent on the students' productive learning.

The third modification was to the concept of Interaction. Watanabe (1995) describes Interaction as a concept which is similar to Examples. He claimed that it is important to concretize ideas by giving examples while teachers are explaining a particular content or form and emphasized the necessity of doing so through interacting with students. While he focused on Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis and thereby underscored the teacher-student interaction, to make TETE successful, student-student interaction should be promoted as well, which is

supported by Swain's (1985) output hypothesis and Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis. Thus, we added a description of the importance of interaction among the students as one of the concepts of Interaction.

Finally, the fourth modification was to the concept of Reward. Although Watanabe (1995) argues that praising the students is needed no matter when and no matter how they respond to an instructor, to facilitate the students' effective English learning and help them keep their motivation, providing concrete formative feedback should be combined with praise.

By attaching these related concepts to the original MERRIER approach, we consider the modified approach can serve as a more complete guideline for TETE in Japan. While we did not have a chance to introduce these concepts as practiced activities, it is hoped that in the future TETE workshop, these concepts will be presented and practiced so that attendees can become aware of and internalize this modified MERRIER approach.

Reflection and Conclusion

This paper reviews the theoretical background of the MERRIER approach and reports how the MERRIER approach was introduced to Japanese teachers of English who teach at a junior and/or senior high school at the two-day seminar held at ICU. By having them learn and practice the three important concepts of the MERRIER approach, Mime/Model, Redundancy, and Expansion, it is hoped that attendees became able to understand how to teach English through English more effectively. In addition, we presented the modified version of the MERRIER approach by adding some other important elements without changing the core concepts so that it can function as a framework for conducting effective TETE. In the future, these other concepts of the MERRIER approach including the ones we newly added to the original MERRIER approach could be explained and practiced in the seminar.

Mandates and policy decisions from MEXT are providing positive direction and momentum for Japanese teachers of English in Japan to increase the amount of English used in their classrooms. However, teachers must also be given the tools, strategies and practical knowledge necessary to carry out those admirable aims. If teachers are not supported sufficiently and given the training necessary, those aims will become another example of good intentions, but without results. MERRIER, particularly the modified version of this approach, offers a framework for teachers to understand applications of TETE in the classroom context and develop original and innovative ways to increase and enhance the effectiveness of their interaction with their learners.

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Appendix

MERRIER Approach for TETE (refined) . . . The parts modified are underlined.

1. Model/Mime... (a) To add some visual aids
(b) To use nonverbal codes (gestures/facial expressions)
(c) To show a model before an activity
According to Watanabe (1995), this refers to (a) and (b) only. However, (c) is also important.
2. Examples... (a) To give examples (details) through interaction
e.g. Okinawa's independence from the U.S.A. in 1972 (Watanabe, 1995, p.189)
T: "Before 1972, who made the rules in Okinawa? The Japanese people or Americans?"
S: "Americans."
T: "Yes, in those days, Americans made the rules for Japanese people in Okinawa. The Japanese people could not make their own rules. But do you know why?"
S: "No."
T: "Because before 1972, Okinawa was not a part of Japan but a part of the U.S.A. However, since 1972, people in Okinawa has made their own rules. Why?"
S: "Now, Okinawa is a part of Japan."
T: "Exactly. Okinawa is not a part of the U.S. anymore. It is a part of Japan. It has become independent of the U.S."
(b) To add examples and explanation to avoid ambiguity
e.g. "U.S. culture such as...", "Use time 'efficiently.' By 'efficiently,' I mean..."
By giving examples or details, learners can increase their understanding. Since the meaning of some simple words (esp. adjectives and adverbs) can be unclear, it is often helpful to share a concrete image with the students by offering some specific examples or giving additional explanation (definition).
3. Redundancy... (a) To rephrase his/her own speech
(b) To rephrase his/her own speech from a different perspective
If the speaker explains something again, listeners can have more chances to understand the meaning. For this, not only paraphrasing by using other synonymous expressions

but also paraphrasing by changing a perspective (e.g. subject, explicitness, and grammatical structures) will be helpful.

4. Repetition... (a) To use the same phrases repeatedly
(b) To repeat the same expression and explanation
(c) To repeat the same activities/tasks repeatedly

According to Watanabe (1995), this refers to (a) and (b) only. However, (c) is also important because teachers can save time to explain the tasks or activities and students can focus on the tasks (content or language) more easily if the same tasks/activities are recycled.

5. Interaction... (a) Interaction between a teacher and student is important (see Examples section above).
(b) Interaction among the students is important.

Watanabe (1995) talks about (a) only, but in TETE, make sure that everyone (S-S) uses English. Even if an instructor uses English a lot, if his/her students never use English, this is not a successful TETE approach.

6. Expansion... (a) To paraphrase others' speech accurately
(b) To paraphrase others' speech by making it longer

This refers to a technique of "recast." Even if a student uses incorrect form, as long as this is not the focus of that lesson, an instructor should rephrase the student's speech accurately. Also, if the student uses incomplete sentences, the teacher can make that speech longer and complete.

7. Rewarding... (a) To praise the students
(b) To provide formative feedback

According to Watanabe (1995), this means (a) only. However, to maintain the learners' motivation, both (a) and (b) are important.