

English Education in Japan: (Re) Considering the Continuous Challenges in Communicative Competence

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1.0 Introduction

The language teacher-practitioner is explicitly and implicitly engaged in an ongoing process of assessing the methods, contents, aims, and outcomes of her lessons if effectiveness is any at all a goal towards which she strives. Further, as a member of a community of practitioners, in recognizing the value of the whole-the world of pedagogy-the teacher knows and prides the part she plays in contributing to the overall progress and development of the teaching and learning process. It follows that the language teacher-practitioner assumes the role of an 'organic' self-assessor. By 'organic' self-assessor, I mean that the 'how', normative, and cognitive dimensions of the teacher-practitioner's reflecting on both her performance and the vocation of teaching constitute, admittedly to varying degrees, a process that is symbiotic and ongoing. In short, the language teacher-practitioner as an organic self-assessor plays an important part of the whole system of self-assessment, leading to a pool of best practices, which becomes beneficial to all.

This essay serves as the first in a series of direct and indirect self-assessments of my role within the community of teachers tasked with improving English communicative competencies and intercultural / global awareness of Japanese students. In the first section, I briefly introduce points on the current policies, precepts, practices and their discrepancies. The next section looks at some of the barriers to communicative competence. In perhaps the most important section, I then do a content analysis of three from fifteen selected newspaper articles on 'improving English Education in Japan', which will be introduced in the first section. Finally, I conclude this indirect and organic self-assessment paper briefly pointing to how I may re-consider my own approach.

2.0 Current Issues

English education in Japan is replete with challenges. Practitioners, educational administrators and policy makers continue to grapple with what seems to be the most critical of the challenges faced: improving the spoken communicative abilities of students. English is not only the most popular but considered the most essential foreign language to be studied and acquired especially because of its *lingua franca* status (The Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goal in the 21st Century, 2000; MEXT, 2003). Today, English is the only language now recognized, promoted, and centrally funded by the State as the

official foreign language to be relatively introduced at the elementary school level and ‘seriously’ taught from junior high school level. The importance of having English skills for its obvious functional and cultural benefits (Omura et al., 1980:214 in Takahashi, 2009) has long been recognized by Japan’s authorities, though their efforts and seriousness towards its acquisition have often been questioned.

In recent times, criticisms have been mounting on the inability to reach satisfactory levels in the acquisition of communicative competencies within public school English programs (Hosoki, 2011: 1). The urgency of the concerns over the progress of English language education in Japan has been reflected in a slew of articles over a two year (2013–2014) period published in the **Japan Times** online edition. The issue seems to attract more attention as in five years time Japan will be hosting the 2020 Olympic Games and the value of a more widespread English communicative competences is without question. Among the headlines as they appeared in the **Japan Times** online edition include:

| Year | Headline | Ref # |
|------|---|-------|
| 2013 | To communicate in English, TOEFL is vital: LDP panel | #1 |
| | LDP looks to double JET Program’s ranks in three years | #2 |
| | Super global English schools | #3 |
| | Tokyo panel mulls ways to enhance high school English education | #4 |
| | Parents give kids early start in English | #5 |
| | Tokyo-area teachers of English face three-month honing home-stay abroad | #6 |
| | Japan should take English lessons from the Philippines | #7 |
| | English to get 2020 push but teachers not on the same page | #8 |
| 2014 | Schools fret about assistant teachers ahead of proposed 2020 reforms | #9 |
| | Immersion tactics come with risks and benefits | #10 |
| | No time for free reading? You can make it up at university | #11 |
| | Break ‘passive’ English effort: expert | #12 |
| | Could the lingua franca approach to learning breaks Japan’s English…. | #13 |
| | Osaka embraces English Reformation | #14 |
| | Required English for third grade eyed | #15 |

Figure 1: Selected **Japan Times** Article Headlines on English Education Published over a Two-Year Period

As a practitioner in the field, one must bear some sense of collective responsibility. Consequently, in the moments of reflection and self-evaluation one of the questions I have pondered is: Given Japan’s current comparatively low English ability status in Asia against the background of the huge sums of resources being poured into improving same, how can (foreign/native) teachers collectively and individually evaluate (qualitatively, at a minimum) the role they have been playing in what has been unfolding? Can the foreign/native teacher justifiably argue that even with their best of intentions and teaching com-

petencies, the situation could not have been any different from it is now? Such an argument could be suggesting that root causes are to be found elsewhere: state and institutional policies, cultural values and attitudes toward foreign language education and a cultural communication style that is antithetic to open expressiveness. There are certainly no easy answers to these questions.

3.0 Barriers to Communicative Competence

Kensaku Yoshida (2013) gave an interesting solution-focused presentation titled “Reconsidering Japan’s English Education Based on the Principles of Plurilingualism”. At the very outset, he reminds the audience of the current issues on improving English education:

- English in elementary school official subject
- Starting from an earlier grade
- ‘English’ teachers for elementary school
- Increasing number of Japanese students studying abroad
- By 2020 60, 000 high school and 1, 200, 000 college students
- Raising Japanese children’s academic level to world’s top level
- Creating of Global Super High Schools with Foreign language ability, and Grounding in global citizenship
- Teaching English through English in junior high school

Salient to Yoshida’s argument (pg.16) is what seems to be a call for a paradigm shift in the aim of English education in Japan: from *multilingualism*, which disposes learners towards an attitude of perfection and mastery in language learning to *plurilingualism*, which emphasizes basic communicative abilities, thereby putting less pressure on learners. The aim is therefore not to become like the native-speaker or for learners to think that they should set aside their own culture and native language in order to acquire the target foreign language. *Multilingualism* according to Yoshida is more appropriate in the context of English-speaking countries where immigrants, for instance, for assimilation and survival purposes, are motivated to not only acquire but also master the language (s) of their new society. In the case of Japan, an EFL context, adopting *plurilingualism*, as promoted by the European Council, whereby language learners are encouraged and supported to develop communicative abilities according to their needs. In the EFL context then, ‘instrumental motivation’ rather than survival or ‘integrative motivation’ as Yoshida puts it, is what drives learners to develop communicative abilities in a foreign language.

If *plurilingual* English education-a nuanced paradigmatic shift in focus- is the way forward for Japan, are the solutions now being put forward conducive to this framework? To be sure, the ‘instrumentalist’ approach would dictate that teachers, students, administrators, and other stakeholders understand that

the purpose of English skills acquisition should be for practical and functional use, which makes the goal of native-like mastery a misguided one. My own experience and of other colleagues working at the college level speak to low levels of self-confidence and motivation among students stemming from their pre-college experience of an inability to 'master' English or to speak like the native teacher. Were these the only or even the major barriers, then it seems the *plurilingual* or instrumentalist approach could have a magic bullet effect, if ever there was one in today's dynamic field of education. One practitioner, however, argues in effect that the problems with English education in Japan are multi-faceted and have no quick-fix.

Takanashi (2004) points to pedagogical and cultural barriers to improving communicative competences. He notes that while communicative language teaching (CLT) methods have been adopted in recent times in Japan, high school students/teachers remain caught up in a translation mode, fixated on grammar-based skills which are necessary to pass university entrance exams. Moreover, the communication styles of observing formality, deferring to age, showing extra politeness, maintaining social distance, and valorizing shyness are direct barriers to the kind of spontaneous and 'chit-chat' atmosphere that CLT facilitates between teacher and students. Furthermore, there have been institutional and curricular impediments to improving communication skills, namely, large class size, averaging 35 students, a generally late start to 'serious' English studies with most beginning at junior high level, and limited contact hours.

The good news, however, is that all these constraints to achieving greater English communication skills are being currently addressed by MEXT and other stakeholders including educational institutions and parents as evidenced by Japan Times online article series published in the last two years.

4.0 Newspaper Articles on Improving English Education

There have been ongoing discussions, plans announced and actions taken to tackle English education in Japan. As earlier mentioned, the issue has become more topical apparently because of the impending hosting of the 2020 Olympic Games, an event that will certainly bring to the forefront Japan's global and intercultural skills of which English communicative competence is a primary component. In the online edition of the Japan Times, a leading English language newspaper, although the articles published vary in their contents, most significantly they indicate that all stakeholders were on board in finding solutions to English education, even while their areas of focus and how best to tackle the problem may differ. For its part, the newspaper seems to have purposefully allotted a section of its national news focus to this English education crisis, bluntly captioning the columns: 'Getting Serious About English'. Two informative and solution-oriented articles published in this column: 'English to get 2020 push but teachers not on the same page' and 'Schools fret about assistant teachers ahead of proposed 2020 re-

forms' are worth reviewing. I will now offer a review of these two articles plus a third one titled, 'Break 'passive' English effort: expert'.

4.1 'Getting Serious About English'

'English to get 2020 push but teachers not on the same page' (article # 8) and 'Schools fret about assistant teachers ahead of proposed 2020 reforms' (article # 9) are sounding a warning on the bumpy road ahead to reforming English education- reforms aimed at directly addressing the much diagnosed and discussed problem of Japanese students' low English communicative competence.

The writers offer here a reality check on the MEXT's 2020 plans to implement fundamental reforms to public school English education by early and formal exposure from midway through elementary school with the expectation that by junior high students will have a basic communication grounding to begin 'serious' English study. As the articles' titles explicitly read classroom practitioners both worry about and are in disagreements over the reforms. These reforms are aimed at revamping English education in public elementary schools which began in 2002 as part of a "comprehensive studies" curriculum geared at increasing students' "international understanding." According to article # 8 , this method had limited impact as schools were able to decide how and when English classes were held resulting in inconsistencies across schools in content quality and contact hours. This led the education ministry in 2011 to set new guidelines and mandate all schools to offer fifth and sixth graders a once a week English classes focusing on basic, fun communicative activities. This new mandate, reports the newspaper article, had immediate impact: a 2012 survey done by the education ministry results' show that "77. 8 percent of junior high school English teachers indicated they felt some accomplishment from the English activities students were introduced to in elementary school" (Para. 14). Moreover "···72. 9 percent of the teachers said they noted positive attitudes from students seeking to actively communicate in English, and 65. 1 percent said students' listening ability improved compared with past students who did not have the same language activity opportunity" (Para 15). Furthermore, yet another encouraging findings announced by the ministry points to higher motivation as "··· 76 percent of elementary school pupils liked studying English" (Para 16).

These results it would seem boosted the education ministry to put on the table the bold plans and aims for the 2020 reforms. However, as both articles show by eliciting opinions of practitioners and experts, there are numerous reasons the 2020 reforms may remain only a pipe dream. In addition to concerns over the assistant language teachers (ALTs) as directly stated in headline (article # 9) there were many other disagreements varying from what ought to be the primary objective of the reforms to whether there are / will be the institutional and economic capacities to achieve the goals. Lack of teaching resources, insufficient contact time to achieve the aims, inadequate teacher training, and the need for ele-

mentary students to focus more on learning their native language were among some of the reasons drowning out the views of the few who support the reforms.

4.2 'Break 'passive' English effort: expert

Reporting on an advisory-cum-promotional speech by an expert to a group of English educators in Tokyo, this article is titled 'Break 'passive' English effort: expert' (article # 12). It begins:

“Efforts to foster a generation of more globally competitive talent will not bear fruit unless Japan breaks away from its traditional penchant for “passive” written English exams, Perry Akins, a well-known expert in the field of English-language education, said Friday in Tokyo”. (Para. 1)

Quite a common criticism and analysis of English education in Japan: communicative incompetence as the *result*, and the traditional, grammar-based teaching approach which is oriented towards passing English entrance tests as the *cause*. Akins, the educational expert, was doubling as both an educational adviser and a businessman, who according to his company's website was invited by a publishing company that distributes in Japan its iTEP (an internet-based English proficiency test services) to speak to English educators. Encouragingly, the occasion in search of solutions to Japan's English education crisis and its reportage involved five different stakeholders: business / publishing industry, expert consultant, educational administrators, practitioners, and media.

The transcript of Perry Akins' speech (2014, March), published on his company's website gave more food for thought. The opening lines of his speech were quite damning:

“English language instruction in Japan is a disaster, an embarrassment in spite of all the promises, all the training, all the teaching, all the new curriculum, all the new methodologies, and all the research. To solve this problem, consideration is being given to offering English language instruction in the 3rd grade instead. In other words, the solution to the problem is to increase the hours now being spent on a failed program as if additional hours will make everything better.”

Using strong, stinging words Atkins brands the English teaching methodology in Japan a “disaster”, and an “embarrassment”. After citing two personal examples of Japanese, one his friend, and another a student, who have both mastered English well in times he said could have been called the “dark ages”, compared to now, he reassures his audience: “So we know that Japanese can learn English and learn English well. And, I must admit, in my opinion, they are much better at learning second languages than most Americans.” The promotional or business purpose of Akins' speech might have been paramount as he attempts to sell the idea of the need for a proper testing system- one that tests active rather than passive skills. Tactically, he asked and advised nearing the end of his speech:

As a Japanese English language teacher, why would you take time teaching students to speak English or write English if those skills are not going to be tested by the system. When the system begins to test active language skills, then the teachers and curriculum will support those goals. Teachers will not teach what is not tested. (Para. 19).

As someone who is practicing the craft but does not subscribe to the notion of ‘teaching to the test’, I have reservations about the educational philosophy and methodology that the above reasoning advances. However, at the end of his speech, Akins *almost* won me over with his six-point formula for effective language teaching.

- 1 . A teacher who knows English. (Language camps for teachers)
- 2 . A teacher who is excited about teaching English
- 3 . A student who is motivated or who can be motivated
- 4 . A program of study concentrated over a relatively short period of time
- 5 . Opportunities to practice
- 6 . An effective method of assessing progress

Akins’ six-point formula would have been more agreeable to the Japanese context if it included at least a seventh point: *A teacher who is culturally-sensitive, with an adept knowledge of the particularities of the environment within which s/he operates.*

5.0 Concluding Remarks: (Re) considering my own approach

The efforts at achieving English communicative competence on a wide scale among Japanese students continue apace despite the many and varied challenges. At the college level, and speaking of my own experience, students enter each year with varying levels of English communicative abilities; for reasons outside the scope of this essay’s topic, students, more than average, seem to have little motivation to study, let alone the courage if not the confidence to challenge learning communicative English. The seemingly well-formed negative attitudes toward participating actively in functional and performance based lessons can make the college teacher’s job become disheartening. What then does one do, if it is not about merely showing up at the lesson and proceeding through the motions?

I am constantly engaging in interpreting my own role and expectations relative to that of each cohort of students against the background of the broad goal of increasing quantitatively and qualitatively students’ functionality in English for practical use. Admittedly, the communicative language teaching (CLT) classroom in Japan has to contend with cultural barriers including communication styles of observing formality, showing extra politeness, maintaining social distance, and valorizing shyness as Takahashi (2004) argues. My own approach has been not only to accept this as a given handicap. Concomi-

tantly, I ask myself how I can use the knowledge of the fact as an advantage. Deftly and empathetically including these cultural barriers in a performance feedback to a whole class and an individual student has proven effective in the displaying of greater efforts at and confidence in future performances.

The preceding point directly relates to the triple inter-related challenge of (1) motivating Japanese college students, (2) helping them to adopt a positive attitude towards the study of functional / communicative English, and (3) helping them to see the potential if not actual benefits of English for normative and/or instrumental purposes. This reality doubtlessly puts a lot pressure on the teacher demanding her to be armed with a certain set of skills: pedagogical of course, but equally salient to the Japanese context are the soft skills of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and occasionally an attunement to the fleeting and ever-changing Japanese youth sub-culture. Regarding this latter point: for students to recognize that their teacher, the native teacher in particular, is 'foreign' and even of a certain generational distance yet is showing interest in and being cognizant of their world and points reference opens up a rare window of opportunity.

Fortunately, the opportunity for the teacher-practitioner, as an 'organic' self-assessor (reflexively evaluating the methods, contents, aims, and outcomes of her lessons), is symbiotic and ongoing. Content-based language lessons-informed by *plurilingualism* as philosophy and theory, directed by *content and language integrated learning* (CLIL) (Marsh, 1994) as praxis-privileging *function over form* while selecting materials that can inspire, pique interest, and encourage critical thinking is the approach that I intend to adopt liberally as I reconsider my own role in Japan's English communicative classroom. I intend to report on and discuss this hybrid approach in the next self-assessment of my role within the community of teachers tasked with improving English communicative competencies and intercultural / global awareness of Japanese students.

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【Abstract】

「日本の英語教育：コミュニケーション能力の
継続的な挑戦の（再）考察」

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本論は日本人学生の英語コミュニケーション能力と異文化間の / グローバルな意識を伸ばすことを課せられた教員コミュニティにおける自己の役割についての、一連の直接的、間接的自己評価の最初となるものである。第一節において、現在の方法、指針、実践、またそれらの不一致について要点を簡潔に述べる。第二節では伝達能力へ障害となるいくつかの問題に注目する。おそらく最重要である第三節では、第一節で紹介した「日本の英語教育の改善」に関する十五の新聞記事のうち、三つの内容分析を行う。最後に自分自身のアプローチを再考し、この自己評価論を終える。

