

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Richards and Rogers (2001) describe Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as causing a major paradigm shift within language teaching in the twentieth century and that such ramifications continue to exert an influence on the contemporary English language classroom. Whether regarded as revolutionary or evolutionary, it can surely be argued that CLT's influence is far reaching and influential. Most classes, books and ideologies claim to be communicative in some way. Nevertheless success in adopting a method created by English native speakers is less clear when attempting to utilize the approach in a country such as Japan where the culture of learning differs from the methods the approach advocates. In an analysis of how CLT has been adopted in Japanese secondary schools a host of socio-cultural and educational factors, such as the cultural appropriateness of the approach, the prevalence of grammar based University entrance exams and teacher perceptions are given for the apparent difficulties that prevent the successful implementation of the approach. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has strived to improve the communicative ability of secondary school students through various educational reform measures and teacher training which according to the teachers it is aimed at has caused confusion in how the approach can be, if at all, implemented within their teaching context. Mandating such educational reforms from the top isn't always the easiest or most effective approach and judging from the analysis here a more grassroots bottom up approach may be more beneficial starting from how the teachers and students respond to it and how it can be adapted to fit the Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment.

Keywords: CLT. Japanese English classrooms, Teaching methodology.

INTRODUCTION

The 20th century has seen the rise and subsequent fall of a number of language teaching methods and approaches as the pendulum clock has swung from one trend to the next. Within the last thirty years communicative language teaching (CLT) has been put forth as the new and improved way to teach English as a second or foreign language. CLT was conceived from a sociolinguistic approach to language learning that stresses an emphasis on activities that engaged the student in language use that was more meaningful and authentic. This was in stark contrast to the more mechanical like practice of language patterns associated with the movements that preceded it, such as the Audiolingual (US) or situational (UK) approaches to language teaching. This shift had a profound effect on language teaching and is widely seen as the starting point of what has been deemed the 'communicative revolution'. But as Nunan (1999:9) argues "Whether the effect was quite so pervasive or profound in language classrooms themselves is open to question". This paper attempts to evaluate how CLT has been executed within the Japanese EFL classroom.

Since 1989, The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has strived to improve the communicative ability of secondary school students to combat the label of

its citizens as having one of the lowest levels of English proficiency in the developed world (Muligan, 2005). Even after 6 years of studying English as a core subject communicative ability still lags behind other English learning nations. MEXT has encouraged teachers to implement a CLT methodology within their classrooms. The *course of study* which started in 1993 aimed to incorporate new communication courses and its 1999 successor looked to develop more 'practical communication abilities'. In 2003 MEXT produced a 5 year action plan with the purpose of emphasizing English communication abilities in its students. However, regardless of such educational reform the use of the traditional grammar-translation method or *yakudoku* remains in use. In addition the dominance of grammar focused university entrance exams are still exerting an influence on English learning within the Japanese EFL classroom.

The concern here is to analyze how CLT has been interpreted and implemented in Japan at secondary schools and to examine the relationship behind the theory and the practice of the approach. A second issue is does CLT work well within the Japanese English classroom and what are the implications for Japanese English teachers and their students? The analysis will then look at ways of improving and adopting the CLT approach in Japan.

The Rise of CLT

Before examining some of the objectives as outlined in the introduction it is necessary to give a brief overview of the rise of CLT. During the sixties it was becoming evident that the long standing structuralist view of language teaching was weakening with the rise of psycholinguistics, social-linguistics, and an attraction to semantics that was to revolutionize language teaching approaches. The emphasis now shifted to real language use. Catalyst to this approach was Hymes (1972) 'communicative competence' which gave birth to the communicative movement. Rejecting Chomsky's (1965) own 'linguistic competence', Hymes argued that being grammatically competent does not take into account the fact that language use must be appropriate in relation to the context it is used. In other words "There are rules of use without which the rules of syntax are meaningless". (Hymes 1972) According to Hymes (1972:281) a person who attains communicative competence has the knowledge and ability for language use with respect to:

- i. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible.
- ii. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available.
- iii. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated.
- iv. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what it's doing entails.

Across the Atlantic and mirroring Hymes (1972) notions of the time, Halliday's (1975) systemic linguistic approach to language reinforced the view of perceiving language in a social context, examining language as a tool for communication and not as a set of rules. Halliday (1975) gives seven basic functions that language performs as children learn their native tongue. These parallel advocates of CLT, who view second language learning in a similar vein. Specifically the attainment of linguistic skill to realize a variety of language functions. These are:

- a. The instrumental function: using language to get what you want.
- b. The regulatory function: the use of language to control the behavior of others.
- c. The interactional function: using language to get along with others.
- d. The personal function: using language to express personal feelings, the expression of the self.
- e. The heuristic function: using language to learn and explore.
- f. The imaginative function: using language to create a world of your own.
- g. The representational function: the use of language to communicate information.

With such theories stemming from dissatisfaction with the Chomsky (1965) approach the scope of linguistic theory was widened and the rise of CLT emerged.

The Features of CLT

The fundamental difference between the more traditional structural approaches of language teaching and the communicative approach is that the latter focuses on meaning and conversational interaction with references to grammatical accuracy if and when the teacher deems it necessary. CLT is best considered, as an approach to language teaching, with its main aims and theory a reflection of a communicative perspective on language which can be used to support an unlimited amount of classroom procedures. Classroom activities typically focus the student on completing tasks, solving problems and assisting learners to communicate meaningfully in the target language. There is an emphasis on communication rather than the accurate use of structure or form. Fluency is given priority over accuracy as errors are seen as part of the learning process, the teachers' therefore find themselves in the role of facilitator and monitor providing feedback at the end of an assigned activity. The grammatical structure based syllabus will have been abandoned in favour of a more functional or notional based syllabus-

However these versions of CLT as outlined above find themselves open to scrutiny and interpretation. Howatt (2004) distinguishes between a strong and weak version of the approach, the weak being described as pre communicative tasks. Littlewood (1981:8) states these tasks "aim to equip the learner with some of the skills required for communication without actually performing communicative acts." These activities can take the form of drills or controlled dialogue practice. These exercises therefore are a necessary stage and "develop links with meaning that will later enable him to use this language for communication purposes." (ibid:8). Howatt's (2004) suggests the strong version allows the teacher a less dominant presence, with low teacher talking time. They act as mediator while the students find themselves responsible for their own language learning. In contrast to the idea of presenting the language and then practicing it the teacher begins with communicative activities that permit the student to actively learn for themselves. This strong version however has been vulnerable to attack. Harmer (1982:164) suggests that students are thrown into a communicative situation "as a prelude to any instruction: all subsequent teaching is based on whether they sink or swim".

Richards & Rogers (2001:51) state that CLT marked "the beginning of a major paradigm shift within language teaching in the twentieth century, one whose ramifications continue to be felt today". However despite the dominance and attention that has been given to CLT a variety of issues still prevail regarding the workability of the methodology. Tanaka (2009) shows concerns over its cultural appropriateness in Japan. Li, (1998) questions the practicality of the learning method in EFL situations where students need to take grammar focused examinations. Other concerns regard the suitability of the approach for non-native English teachers (Medgyes, 1988). These issues are very much applicable to the situation we have in Japan.

The History of CLT within the Japanese Context

In 1984-85 Monbusho (Ministry of Education) implemented an investigation of its English language teaching as part of government educational policies at the time. Recommendations included the hiring of native speakers and the adoption of a more communicative approach to language teaching. The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program stemmed from this and thousands of foreigners were placed into secondary schools across the country. 90% of JET participants are ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) who usually assist the Japanese English teacher in their classes. ALTs require no specific qualifications apart from a Bachelors degree in any discipline. The scheme has attracted criticism of this policy of hiring inexperienced and non-qualified 'teachers'. Mulligan (2005:34) comments that "Most (ALTs) are basically here for the cultural experience. They have been ineffectually used, often as mere human tape recorders and sometimes not used at all".

The MEXT 5 year plan produced two documents, the *Developing a Strategic Plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities* and a report called *Regarding the establishment of an action plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities* both of which outlined the goals to reform the language

education system. In order to reach such English proficiency goals they outlined a number of areas to be targeted for the improvement of communicative ability with the language and the implementation of a CLT approach to classroom activities. Within secondary schools now English classes are divided into six categories, English 1, Oral communication 1 (OC1), Oral communication 2 (OC2) Reading and Writing. English 1 adopts the *yakudoku* or grammar translation method that focuses on the form and structure of the language and this is taught side by side with OC1 which focuses on utilizing what has already been learned in a communicative way with the goal of greater communicative competence. MEXT (2003) states, “communicative activities should be conducted in concrete language-use situations so that students play the role of receivers and senders of information, ideas, etc” The expectation here they advise is for the focus to be on meaning rather than form and for students to communicate authentically rather than robotically rehearsing language they have just been taught. These oral communication courses therefore reflect the characteristics of communicative language teaching as illustrated in the literature.

Nevertheless Ogura (2008) states that the textbooks being introduced in oral communication courses appear to inadequately provide students with the chance to develop their oral communicative competence with the language. She further suggests that if these textbooks are inappropriate for the goals they wish to achieve then teachers must work creatively to design supplementary activities to allow students to communicate more authentically which may already place a higher burden on teachers who are perhaps already struggling with the CLT approach.

Samimy & Kobayashi (2004: 258) state that “CLT...is not adequate nor feasible for Japanese English education due to socio-cultural and educational factors such as limited access to English, learners’ restricted communication needs, non-native teachers, a different culture of learning, and the dominance of university entrance exams.” Let us then look at these factors in the assessment of how communicative language teaching is implemented within English language education in Japan.

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Educational Factors: Exams And Teacher Beliefs

Taguchi (2005) in a small scale study of how teachers perceive and practice the communicative approach in secondary schools found that there were some major obstacles in the implementation of the CLT. In a reflection of the washback effect, or the influence of testing on teaching and learning, teachers were found to use grammar focused activities or the *yakudoku* method in oral communication classes in order to prepare students for the grammar based university entrance exams. This objective to pass university entrance exams invariably influences the type of activity teacher’s use. They consequently feel pressure to get their students to pass exams rather than to develop their communicative competence in the language.

Gorsuch (2000) suggests that if University entrance examinations were to be more communicative in nature and test communicative ability then teachers would think that the English school curriculum could also change accordingly. However she continues that Japanese teachers of English may feel uncomfortable implementing the approach as it goes against their belief in a teacher fronted approach to teaching with the use of memorization and translation as learning techniques. In conclusion she argued that without reforming educational conditions and changing ingrained attitudes CLT may not become widespread even if entrance examinations were to change. Nishino (2008:31) writes that “contextual factors such as the *yakudoku* method, university entrance examinations, and learner beliefs have all had negative effects on the use of CLT activities by English teachers in Japanese classrooms”. Similarly Sakui (2004) suggests that the integration of CLT and grammar instruction poses serious problems for teachers as a result of student perception of the methodology. Their concern stems from the belief that students may think CLT is just ‘fun’ with little educational benefit while the grammar focused method reflects serious study with the objectives of taking university examinations.

However attitudes appear to be changing. Gorsuch (2001) found that secondary school teachers mildly approve of the methodology and Taguchi (2002) discovered that teachers want to use CLT but still adhere to the long standing practice of exam orientated teaching strategies. Even with the change of attitude towards the approach concerns still remain, such as the difficulty in how CLT is interpreted and practiced by teachers. There seems to exist a difference between teacher definition of CLT and the practice of it. In Sakui's (2004) study she suggests teachers' understand CLT in its weak version, that is with the integration of grammatical structures and the performance of communicative activities. However in actual practice a method close to audiolingualism that focuses on the correct production of sentences was observed.

Along with pressure to prepare students for exams teachers have spoken of time constraints, the shortage of class hours, the difficulty of class preparation and class management due to large classes of 40-50. Nishino, (2008), Sakui, (2004), Taguchi, (2005). A lack of experience and expertise on the behalf of the teachers in CLT would explain some of these difficulties.

Mulligan's (2005) titled paper 'No English educational reforms will be effective unless Japanese English teachers can and will speak English in the classroom' perhaps reflects teacher confidence in their ability to teach English using the communicative approach. In my experience with Japanese English language teachers through seminars and meetings is that after years of grammar based passive language teaching the urge to speak and use English more within the classroom, and in a communicative way has been met with some teachers questioning their own ability. They understand the language in a passive fashion and teach it accordingly but active output from role-plays to pronunciation is something they are not as familiar with. Mulligan (2005) calls for Japanese English teachers to just use English in the classroom, and for new incoming teachers to be evaluated on their communicative language abilities through speaking and listening assessment. The government has tried to introduce training schemes that aim to improve teacher ability and confidence in a communicative approach.

Teacher Training

The Japanese ministry of Education has been sponsoring training programmes for its Japanese English teachers with 6 months to a year overseas training programmes and month long domestic courses. The objectives are stated as the attainment of better communicative ability in English and methods on how to utilize CLT within their classrooms. However as Nishino (2008) points out many teachers on these programmes indicated that they still had less confidence in their ability to implement CLT than in teaching grammatical knowledge, that classroom conditions such as class sizes did not compliment the use of the approach and that MEXT recommendations had not strongly influenced their classroom practices. Kurihara and Samimy (2007) have illustrated the problems teachers have in implementing the approach in Japan even after receiving these training programmes abroad. The teachers felt in a stronger position to teach communicative English but that the practicalities of executing what they had learned abroad was difficult to execute as a result of barriers and constraints as illustrated in the table below.

Table 1. Internal barriers that prevent change

<i>Perceived benefits of the training</i>	<i>Barriers that prevent change</i>
Emphasis on communicative ability.	Entrance examination preparation pressures.
Better classroom management. (pair and group work)	Backlash from students and parents.
More methods and materials used.	MEXT textbooks inappropriate for CLT.
Understanding of the role of English as a communication tool.	Institutional cultural beliefs.
Understanding of foreign cultures.	Cultural appropriateness. (differences in learning methodology)
Less grammar translation focus.	Large class sizes.

Taguchi (2005) writes that English is often seen as an academic subject in Japan and acquiring knowledge to pass entrance exams is the main purpose for studying English. EFL teaching in Japan means there are few chances to practice what you have learned outside of the classroom and as Savignon (2002) remarks bridging the gap with the classroom and the outside world is a major issue with the communicative curriculum. Japan is a homogenous country and although there is a large private English conversation industry flourishing in Japan, outside of territory education students are often at pains to find English speakers to converse with to improve their skills. This leads those who can afford it planning home stays abroad via their secondary school, university or even English conversation school programmes. Those that can't may remain frustrated at the lack of opportunities to use their English.

Cultural Appropriateness

CLT is a western concept and as such reports Ellis (1996) may make it unsuitable for Asian learners as it emphasizes the importance of process over content and meaning over form. In Japanese universities the native speaker teacher usually teaches the English communicative courses and their Japanese co-workers focus on the grammar based part of the teaching. According to Matura et al (2001) Japanese universities tend to adopt more innovative approaches like CLT but that their students prefer the old style traditional teacher centered approach to language learning. This I would suggest however is not the case at my institution where students constantly comment through class evaluation surveys that they appreciate the communicative method to the 'tedious' grammar based approach that they learned at secondary school and that their ability to communicate, which previously laid dormant, has greatly improved.

However most foreign language instructors do not have the constraints of preparing for university exams and the consequent parental pressure, or to adhering to set textbooks, (in our case all materials are created) and many universities opt for the qualified 'native speaker' to teach the communicative courses within their English departments.

Japanese English teachers at secondary school level have to contend with a 'culture of learning' which dictates beliefs and expectations people have as to what constitutes good teaching in any given culture. The current model of communicative competence, which is viewed as the basis of CLT, has been developed on native-speaker norms that are different socioculturally and educationally from those of the Japanese. The students are expected to interact more with each other and to express original thinking. The learner is not seen as an empty glass with which the teacher fills with knowledge but is an active participant in their own learning. This lies in strong contrast to the grammar translation method or *yakudoku* as long practiced in Japanese secondary schools. This method emphasizes teacher fronted and centered instruction with the student playing a passive role whereby they do not stand out from the group. This is perhaps a reflection of the 'culture of conformity' or collectivist principles as illustrated in the Japanese proverb 出る杭は打たれる *Deru kui wa utareru*, which literally means 'The nail that sticks out gets hammered down', a proverb that emphasizes the importance of group identity and conformity.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CLT

The definition of revolution is 'great change' and evolution 'gradual change'. If CLT is considered to be a revolution within English language teaching then perhaps we can talk of a great tide of change that has swept away all that has gone on before it. An evolutionary process however would perhaps suggest that a reconstruction is underway and is not yet complete. The old and new could possibly be combined in harmony and that past language learning and teaching ideas have not been completely abandoned. A communicative approach would run more smoothly in Japanese secondary schools if the process was seen as a compliment to current teaching practices and not there to replace it completely. The evolutionary process could therefore take shape over time.

According to Thompson (1996) one of the main misconceptions of CLT is that it completely omits grammar or grammar teaching. This can obviously be considered an ill advised approach for Japanese studying for grammar based examinations. Thompson (1996) does concede that early renditions of CLT such as the 'strong version' were grammarless, perhaps as a vehement backlash to the structural approach that had dominated the teaching landscape for so long. However he (1996:10) states that "...the exclusion of explicit attention to grammar was never a necessary part of CLT". If the heart and soul of CLT is the attainment of communicative ability then as Savignon (2002:7) suggests, "research findings overwhelmingly support the integration of form focused exercises with meaning-focused experience." The weak version of CLT would as Fotos (1994) states allow the teacher to employ a communicative way of teaching grammar as in grammar awareness tasks. Tanaka (2009:118) states that this weak version "will be more easily tailored to each classroom depending upon cultural appropriateness and the contextual needs, particularly in a context such as Japan where more grammatical knowledge is required for university entrance examination".

Richards and Rogers (2001) suggest that CLT's general acceptance is due to its wide variation of interpretation and the fact that advocates of differing educational disciplines can identify with it and subsequently mold it into their own vision of what English language teaching should be. CLT is essentially an approach which means it is unrestricted and abstains from fixed rules or procedures which lends it an elastic quality allowing for applications and procedures of several kinds. This gives it a power of longevity. Consequently they can be updated as new practices are introduced. Widdowson (1985: 158) suggests that CLT was not intended "...as a manifesto for revolutionary change...Its purpose was to provoke, not to persuade; to liberate thought; not to confine it by the imposition of fixed ideas."

However, Japanese government policies, it could be argued have been implemented to persuade rather than provoke with external factors handed down to teachers. Mandating such educational reforms from the top isn't always the easiest or most effective approach and judging from the analysis here a more grassroots bottom up approach may be more beneficial.

WHERE TO NEXT? OBJECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

Before government policies are enforced to reform Japanese English education a re-examination of the grassroots foundations of English language teaching needs to be considered. No teaching approach will be valid unless the teachers who use it and the students who are the receptors of it, accept it. The approach may be difficult to implement as result of the long standing cultural practice within the English classroom but adapting the approach according to your teaching context would help reconcile CLT and cultural practice. Thompson (1996) suggests there is a sense of ambiguity amongst the practitioners of CLT, especially in the area where theory meets practice, for example, what does CLT set out to teach? Japanese English teachers need to outline their objectives when utilizing the approach. This involves acknowledging the issue of conflict that CLT classroom practice has with the traditional grammar driven approach and adapting it according to cultural practices of learning within the Japanese English classroom. Tanaka (2009) writes that considering that Japanese English lessons are so teacher fronted this would allow the teacher to take the initiative and successfully implement the approach rather than rejecting it because of cultural conflict. Teachers who express a positive attitude to the change have the power to influence their students to think likewise.

Japanese English teachers and MEXT need to be aware of the difficulties of this imported approach. Finding ways of reducing class sizes that would allow for better classroom management that would lend itself to pair and group work which would be a push in the right direction. However persuading students that their communicative ability in the language is important when their university entrance exams says otherwise will not breed support for the approach amongst them and their worried parents. A connection between MEXT communicative goals and the realities of entrance exams needs to be made which will allow for a better understanding of the objectives of MEXT and CLT. If the exams included oral competency or communicative ability than student beliefs in what they are studying could be more positively inclined. Otherwise we could have a continuing situation of grammar

orientated teacher practice regardless of the fact that these teachers want to embrace and adapt CLT for their classroom.

CONCLUSION

The sociocultural and educational factors as outlined in this paper make the implementation of CLT within the Japanese English education system, which is based on native speaker norms, a difficult model to execute. Japanese English teachers will continue to interpret and mediate CLT to harmonize with the needs of the teaching context they are within and as such will continue the need for grammar based tuition for university entrance examinations. If university entrance examinations were to focus more on communicative English we may see the approach adapted and accepted more by teachers, students and parents.

CLT has allowed teachers to introduce purposeful communicative activities and principles within the classroom while retaining the best components of other methods and approaches rather than confining them to the linguistic waste bin. The approach therefore claims the best from both worlds as exemplified in its weak approach which has been the model from which classroom practice is based on and the recommended version for the Japanese EFL classroom. If CLT can be adaptable and molded to be culturally sensitive to student needs and expectations we can argue that University entrance examinations can be made to be equally flexible so that both can live in harmony with each other rather than causing confusion and conflict between the two.

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