

What are the obstacles to communicative language teaching in Japan and what can we do to remove them?

James M. Hall

1.0 Introduction

In 1989, the Ministry of Science, Sports, Education, and Culture (Monbu Kagakusho) revised the national English curriculum and placed pedagogical influence on fostering students' communicative abilities (Taguchi, 2005). These revisions included relaxing the tight restrictions on the sequencing of grammatical and syntactic structures in the curriculum so teachers would have more freedom in their use of language and the introduction of oral communication classes into the High School English curriculum (Wada, 2002, p.33). According to Wada, to provide theoretical support for these reforms, the authors of these guidelines referred to the framework of communicative competence proposed in two seminal papers by Canale and Swain in 1980 and Canale in 1983. Alas, 16 years later, these initiatives have yet to be embraced by local schools as many Japanese teachers of English continue to be indifferent to the communicative approach (Gorsuch, 2001; McConnell, 2000; Taguchi, 2005). In this paper I will consider why communicative language teaching (CLT) has yet to be embraced by many Japanese schools and the implications for English teacher training at the Iwate University Faculty of Education.

2.0 What is CLT?

CLT is based on the theory of language learning that comprehensible input, i.e. language that students can understand, and negotiation of meaning, i.e. interaction between speakers who change their speech and use other techniques in order to ease communication, is necessary for L2 acquisition. CLT emphasizes the communication of meaning between teacher and students and among the students themselves in group or pair work (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p.92). Grammatical forms are focused on to clarify meaning. The ultimate goals of the CLT curriculum are to develop students' communicative competence and prepare them to use the L2 in the outside world (Savignon, 2002).

Communicative competence is knowing "when and how to say what to whom (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 121)." The components of communicative competence, identified by Canale and Swain, are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse

competence and strategic competence¹. According to Savignon (1997, p.83), communicative competence is dynamic rather than static. In other words, communicative competence is context specific: The language that we use depends on our understanding of the environment that we are in and the roles of the interlocutors. As an example, please look at Mrs. Ai Tanaka's approach to asking for salt and pepper in Scenarios 1 and 2 (Borrowed from Hall, 2005).

Scenario 1: *Mr. Hide Tanaka, Mrs. Ai Tanaka, Mr. Bill Gates and Mrs. Gates are at Mr Gate's house for dinner.*

Mr. Hide Tanaka: Mr. Gates, I must say these potatoes are fantastic.

Mrs. Ai Tanaka: Oh, yes. um, is there any salt and pepper?

Mr. Bill Gates: Oh, yes, of course. Excuse me. Here you go.

Scenario 2: *Hide and Ai Tanaka are at home eating dinner.*

Mr. Hide Tanaka: The potatoes are pretty good, eh?

Mrs. Ai Tanaka: Yeah, but they need some salt and pepper. Can you get some?

Mr. Hide Tanaka: OK.

2.1 The Tenets of CLT

To develop students' ability to use the proper language in the proper context, CLT operates on the following tenets (Savignon, 1997, pp. 28-29):

Tenet 1: Language use consists of many abilities in a broad communicative framework. The nature of the abilities needed is dependent on the roles of the participants, the situation and the goal of the interaction.

As Scenario 1 and 2 showed, language use is context dependent. Thus, language in the communicative classroom is never separated from context: Learners learn language to achieve some kind of communicative purpose - introducing themselves, asking directions, explaining to a partner where something is etc. - rather than, for example, learning the progressive tense for the sake of learning the progressive tense.

Tenet 2: Language use is creative. Learners use whatever knowledge of the language system

¹ For further discussion of the components see Terui (2005)

they have to get their meaning across.

There is no such thing as a perfect listener or speaker of a language. Whenever we meet a context we have never experienced before – for example, ordering a pizza – we might struggle because we have to use or listen to language whose usage or meaning we did not know. Given the infinite number of different contexts that exist, we will inevitably find ourselves in a situation where we do not understand the other speaker or our conversation partner does not understand us. Thus a person's ability to use whatever knowledge she has to get her point across is essential for using language in the outside world. In the communicative language class, unless the focus is on accuracy, students' utterances will not be corrected as long as they are successfully communicating their intended meaning.

Tenet 3: L2 learning, like L1 learning, begins with the needs and interests of the students.

Tenet 4: An analysis of learner needs and interests provides the most effective basis for materials development.

CLT is learner-centered; this means, according to Harmer (2001, p.56), that it is students' needs which drive the syllabus, not some imposed list. It is postulated by Savignon (1997, p.35) that L2 acquisition will be most effective when learners can rely on their previous knowledge to interpret meaning within a new linguistic code.

Tenet 5: The basic unit of practice should always be a text or a chunk of discourse. Production should begin with the conveyance of meaning. Formal accuracy in the beginning stages should be neither required nor expected.

Tenet 5 is stipulating that students should never be given isolated sentences to analyze but rather a text or dialogue. Thus, any new grammar is learned in context. This discourse, however, should be related to the students needs and interests rather than be a meaningless piece of text designed to demonstrate a target structure.

Tenet 6: The teacher assumes a variety of roles to permit learner participation in a wide range of communicative functions.

Since CLT incorporates such activities as group-work, pair-work, individual work, class-work, student presentations, and teacher presentations, the teacher must assume numerous roles. According to Harmer (2001, pp.55-67), the communicative language teacher has the following roles: 1. Controller; 2. Organizer; 3. Assessor; 4. Prompter; 5. Participant; 6. Resource; 7. Tutor; 8. Observer. In addition to these roles he describes a teacher's duty as

being a performer because the different roles require different teacher behaviors. Lastly he says that a teacher must also function as a teaching aid. By teacher aid, Harmer means that teachers, themselves, can be considered pieces of teaching equipment. Like a language learning video, the teacher can mime and gesture so that students can understand her. Like the text being studied, the teacher herself can serve as a language model for the students. Finally, like the teaching materials, the teacher herself can provide students with comprehensible input.

2.2 Why CLT?

The grammar translation approach or *yakudoku* and controlled speaking practice (i.e. *ondoku*, rehearsed dialogue etc.) are still the prevalent pedagogical methods in English teaching in Japan (Gorsuch, 2001; Pateck, 1996; Hubbell, 2002; McConnell, 2000; Taguchi, 2005; Sato, 2002). This was also evident in a *Teaching and Assessing Speaking Workshop* given by the Iwate Association of English Educators (*iwate eigo kyouiku kenkyuukai*) where a featured presenter argued that Japanese junior high schools should focus on grammatical competence and not the other components of communicative competence. Grammatical knowledge, although indispensable for L2 acquisition, will not suffice by itself.

According to Van Patten and Lee (2003), second language acquisition (SLA) involves the creation of an implicit or unconscious linguistic system. The development of this system is multifaceted and consists of different processes. There is no evidence that the simple transmission of grammatical knowledge from teacher to student alone will help this complex system evolve. Students *can* develop their implicit linguistic systems, though, through receiving comprehensible input and negotiating meaning in communicative activities. However, it is important that there also be some form — focused (grammatical) instruction and corrective feedback (Lightbown and Spada, 1999, p.152). Thus, one can conclude that communicative activities are essential for SLA.

Controlled speaking practice is useful for practicing pronunciation and intonation. However, most of real speech is spontaneous involving the use of language in real-time (Hughes, 2002, p.13). Speaking in real-time involves the acquisition of different “output procedures” that enable the speaker to produce utterances instantaneously. These output procedures are acquired in a predictable order. Although an environment in which learners must produce their own, original language either instantaneously or after a little planning can help these procedures develop, there is no evidence that the memorization of dialogues and practice of pronunciation and dialogue alone is of any benefit (Savignon, 1997).

Overall, one can conclude that the chances for students to engage in real communication in real contexts together with grammar instruction and pronunciation practice can help facilitate students' SLA: A dynamic process that simple teacher to student transmission will not benefit.

3.0 Problems with implementing CLT in Japanese Junior and Senior High Schools

In the past few years there has been substantial literature about the reception of CLT in Japanese schools (Please see the bibliography). Although entrance examinations, large classes, and limited class time are listed as obstacles to introducing CLT, the literature also emphasizes other deterrents such as teachers' lack of expertise in CLT, poor textbooks, teachers inability or unwillingness to use English as a medium of instruction and limited opportunities for professional development. In this section I will focus on the latter deterrents as I believe that we, the department of English, can help to remove them.

3.1.1 Obstacle 1: Poor Textbooks

In a 26-item survey sent to 1222 high school English teachers in Chiba Prefecture (Wada, 2002), the most frequent answer to the question "What influences your classroom teaching the most" was "to teach the contents of the textbook". Since textbooks seem to have a strong influence on the content of an English class, it is necessary to ask the question as to how compatible these books are with CLT. Wada (ibid.) notes that there has been little research that has investigated this issue. However, papers by Murata (2002) and Taguchi (2002) have found that many textbooks for oral communication classes encourage little interaction between students and are not compatible with CLT. Furthermore, in Páček (1996), after returning to Japan, Japanese teachers of English who had participated in an English language teaching professional development program in England, wrote that an obstacle to implementing CLT were the textbooks. Thus, it seems that there could be a conflict of interest between Monbu Kagakusho approved English textbooks and the goals of the English education curriculum. However, this matter needs to be investigated further.

3.1.2 Response to Obstacle 1

CLT tenets 3 and 4 state that L2 learning should focus on the needs and interests of the students and so should material development. To meet the needs and interests of students, sometimes a section of the textbook will have to be supplemented with other materials. Thus, English teacher trainees and current English teachers need training in how to make materials

to compliment CLT and how to evaluate textbooks to determine their communicative value. At an English teachers' workshop, a participant once complained to me that he and his students found the English textbook boring. It is in these kinds of cases where teachers need to know how to supplement materials that do not interest their students. At Iwate University, not only should we provide materials development workshops for current and aspiring teachers, but we should encourage students to explore such topics in their graduate theses. To reduce the individual burden of designing materials, English teachers at local schools should collaborate in designing materials that will meet the interests of their students.

3.2.1 Obstacle 2: Teachers' Lack of Expertise in Designing Communicative Activities

It has been pointed out by Taguchi (2005 & 2002) that many teachers lack the expertise and willingness to design and implement communicative activities. As a possible explanation, Taguchi (2002) offers the following:

Expected roles of a student in a traditional Japanese classroom are to listen to the teacher attentively and to take notes; however, such roles are obstacles to the success of a communicative class where it is crucial for students to engage in speaking (para 23).

3.2.2 Response to Obstacle 2

What can be gathered from this account is that teachers struggle to take on roles necessary for a communicative teacher. As stated in section 2, in a communicative classroom the teacher must relinquish some of her control to the students and take on the roles of organizer, prompter, resource, observer, and participant to facilitate student group-work. I believe that not only is it necessary to explain these roles to teacher trainees, but it is more important to have them practice these roles. Through microteaching in the university teaching methodology classes and team teaching at Nakano Elementary School, students can practice being a coordinator of group work.

It is also necessary for teacher trainees to understand what kind of class management issues and discipline problems they might have and how they could possibly respond to them. To make this a reality, I plan on having students this year correspond with current English teachers throughout Japan through web logging.

3.3.1 Obstacle 3: Teachers cannot (or will not) use English as the means of Communication in the Classroom

Professor Kiyoko Kusano Hubbell (2002), a Japanese part-time lecturer of English at a Japanese university, tells about how one of her universities does not permit Japanese teachers to teach English communication classes. She also tells how students often react in surprise, that she, a native speaker of Japanese, conducts her classes only in English. It seems that many in Japan have the belief that Japanese cannot (or should not?) teach an English class in English. As Professor Hubbell rightly points out, what kind of message is this sending to Japanese students of English?

3.3.2 Response to Obstacle 3

An English teacher should serve as an English speaking role model for his students. If the teacher uses English as the primary medium of communication in the class, this is sending the message that Japanese people too can be fluent speakers of English. My subjective observation is that many students I have taught in Japan are not very shy in speaking English to native speakers of the target language but hesitate to speak English to other Japanese. At Iwate University, it is important to conduct English teaching methodology classes only in English where students receive comprehensible input from the teacher and interact with each other in the target language. Although challenging, because the content is difficult, it is not impossible to participate in a class run entirely in English. In Tsui (2003), it is written that the way teachers were educated as students has a profound influence on their teaching styles. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect English teacher trainees to conduct classes only in English if the classes they themselves took were conducted primarily in Japanese.

In addition to students taking classes in English, it is important for them to observe Japanese teachers conducting English classes only in English. The Department of English Education should locate such teachers and introduce them to the students. Lastly, students need to develop the skill of simplifying difficult language and using gestures so that their students might be able to comprehend what they are saying. This is a skill with which even some ALTs struggle. If aspiring English teachers do not master this skill, they will be unable to teach a class only in English.

3.4.1 Obstacle 4: Lack of Learning Opportunities

Sato (2002) in his case study of a senior high school English department, found that most EFL teachers in this particular context chose not to participate in learning opportunities such as

workshops, correspondence courses, and sabbaticals to pursue further study. Those teachers that did, however, never shared their new ideas or innovations with their colleagues. Although the teachers struggled with teaching English, they never consulted each other about the problems they were having. The collective learning that did happen was based on teachers mastering routine patterns (giving the same worksheets on the same day), keeping pace with other teachers (in the textbook), and learning how to manage students and various kinds of work (p.79).

3.4.2 Response to Obstacle 4

Most teachers when they begin their careers inevitably struggle at the beginning. Tsui (2003, p.257) writes that expert teachers are able to “theorize practical knowledge and ‘practicalize’ theoretical knowledge”. In the former, teachers reflect on their successes and failures to theorize what is sound practical teaching behavior. In the latter, teachers use theory to make sense of their practices and improve upon them. Learning opportunities such as teachers’ workshops, correspondence courses, asking colleagues for advice or observing colleague’s classes, or applying for a sabbatical to study are necessary for teachers to reflect on their own practice and theorize their practical knowledge as well as “practicalize” their theoretical knowledge.

As eloquently stated by Sato,

For innovation [in English language teaching] to happen, we must find ways to help teachers to become lifelong learners in a collaborative environment (ibid, p.81).

First, what the Department of English Education can do is build a collaborative learning environment in which students work together to develop into communicative English teachers. One such example is the teacher-training conducted at Nakano Elementary School in which students from *English Teaching Methodologies I and II* prepare to teach an English class in groups, receive feedback from their peers and the elementary school faculty, and lastly reflect on their experience.

4.0 Conclusion

This paper has defined CLT, explained that its features can facilitate SLA processes, and discussed some of the obstacles to its implementation as well as steps that the Department of English Education at Iwate University can take to eliminate these deterrents. The type of

English class I personally want graduates of the English program to teach is one rich in language; in this class, the teacher would serve as the linguistic model and supply students with plenty of comprehensible input. Furthermore, the classroom would be a vibrant place where students were frequently engaging in communication. In order to make this a reality, tenets of CLT such as practicing language in context (Tenet 1), encouraging the creative use of language (Tenet 2), choosing and designing materials that interest the students (Tenets 3 & 4), never practicing language in isolation (Tenet 5), and the teacher assuming a variety of roles to encourage group work (Tenet 6) should be practiced. Currently, CLT is not being practiced widely in Japan. I have suggested that the Department of English Education can help remove some of the obstacles to CLT by encouraging students to research materials development, train students in assuming the different roles of the teacher in CLT, conduct our teaching methodology courses strictly in English and introduce students to English teachers who conduct their classes entirely in English, and create a collaborative and cooperative learning environment within the department.

On a final note, in addition to the work to be done at Iwate University, the collaboration between all those involved in English education - parents, students, school teachers, university professors, and school principals - will be necessary for innovation in English education. This year, through the activity of the Iwate Association of English Educators, I hope to take a step in this direction.

Bibliography

- Gorsuch G. Japanese EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Communicative, Audiolingual and Yakudoku Activities: The Plan Versus the Reality. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 9. Retrieved March 9, 2005 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v9n10.html>
- Hall, J. (2005). The Characteristics of a Good Speaker. In J. Hall (Chair) *Teaching and Assessing Speaking*. Workshop conducted by the Iwate Association of English Educators at Iwate University, Morioka, Japan.
- Harmer, J. (2001). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Harlow: Longman
- Hubbell, K.K. (2002). Zen and the Art of English Language Teaching. In S. Savignon (Ed.), *Interpreting Communicative Language Teaching: Contexts and Concerns in Teacher Education*. (pp. 82 – 27). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hughes, R. (2002). *Teaching and Researching Speaking*. London: Longman
- Iida, H. (2004). Current Issues in Teacher Training. *The Language Teacher*, 28(5), 13-18.

- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2002) *Teaching Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lee, J.F. & B. Van Patten. *Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Lightbown, P.M. & N. Spada *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McConnell, D.L. (2000). *Importing Diversity Inside Japan's JET Program*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Murata, Y.G. (2002) "How Do I Respond?": A Survey of Interpersonal Aspects of English in Japanese High School Oral English Textbooks. *The Language Teacher*, 26(12). Retrieved March 7, 2004 from <http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2002/12/murata>
- Pacek, D. (1996). Lessons to be learnt from negative evaluation. *ELT Journal*. 50, 335-343.
- Sakui, K. (2004). Language Teaching in Japan. *ELT Journal*. 58, 155-163.
- Sato, K. (2002). Practical understanding of CLT and teacher development In S. Savignon (Ed.), *Interpreting Communicative Language Teaching: Contexts and Concerns in Teacher Education*. (pp. 41 – 81). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Savignon S. (1997). *Communicative Competence Theory and Classroom Practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill
- Savignon S. (2002). Communicative Language Teaching: Linguistic Theory and Classroom Practice. In S. Savignon (ed.) *Interpreting Communicative Language Teaching: Contexts and Concerns in Teacher Education*. (pp. 1 – 27). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Taguchi, N. (2005). The communicative approach in Japanese secondary schools; Teachers, perceptions and practice. *The Language Teacher*. 29(3). 3 – 12
- Taguchi, N. (2002). Implementing Oral Communication Classes in Upper Secondary Schools: A Case Study. *The Language Teacher*, 26(12). Retrieved March 7, 2004 from <http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2002/12/taguchi>
- Terui, A. (2005). *A Study of How Elementary School English Activities Can Affect Student's Communicative Competence and Motivation*. Unpublished bachelor's thesis, Iwate University, Morioka, Iwate Prefecture, Japan.
- Tsui, A.B.M. (2003). *Understanding Expertise in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wada, M. (2002). Teacher Education for ELT Innovation in Japan. In S. Savignon (ed.) *Interpreting Communicative Language Teaching: Contexts and Concerns in Teacher Education*. (pp. 31 – 40). New Haven: Yale University Press.