

## Japanese Teachers' Attitudes towards Incorporating CLT in the High School English Language Classroom: An Ethnographic Study

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the attitudes of Japanese teachers of English towards using CLT in high school English classrooms. Results from an ethnographic study employing observations, short-answer questionnaires, semi-formal interviews and informal conversations that were conducted both prior and subsequent to CLT implementation (2010-2011; 2014-2015) at two high schools located in Kyushu, Japan, are analysed. This paper will provide data for consideration by teachers, managers, and CLT researchers to further understand the concerns and fears that are evident, improve the teaching of English as a whole, and lead to further dialogue with teachers about teaching

### **Introduction**

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) implemented new curriculum guidelines for Junior and Senior high school foreign language education, to be implemented in schools in 2013. The curriculum now focuses on incorporating Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) tasks in the English Language classroom in order to improve students' communicative abilities in English. According to MEXT, the new curriculum is designed to "create students who would be able to use English in their everyday lives after high school, and for university graduates to be able to use English in the workplace" (Monbuka-

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gakusho, 2010). This change is designed to facilitate an enhanced Japanese voice in global business and international transactions in an increasingly globalized world.

In Japan, prior to implementation of the new curriculum, MEXT encouraged CLT, but educational institution management were not obliged to enforce communicative practices. Despite this encouragement, many researchers such as Gorsuch (1999) found that foreign language classes were mainly taught using *Yakudoku* (Grammar Translation) teaching methods.

Through outlining how CLT was perceived by 19 teachers working at a private high school and a public high school in Kyushu, Japan, this paper aims to present in microcosm a view of issues that are pervasive in the wider Japanese English language teaching context. An overview of data collected pre-implementation in 2010-2011, and post-implementation in 2014-2015, will be cross-analysed to see what changes to teachers' opinions, pedagogy, and practice have occurred since the new curriculum phase-in began in April 2013. Through interpretation of these data, areas for further investigation and development are identified.

An ethnographic approach informed the data collection. Analysis and data collection tools used throughout both phases of data collection were observations, questionnaires, semi-formal interviews and informal conversations to discover what changing views and opinions were evident. This allowed identification of areas for more in-depth research, involving detailed consideration of factors pertaining to individual teachers, workplace and national curriculum implementation level. Factors of age, gender, and years of experience teaching were considered during data analysis.

## Literature Review

Earlier studies of CLT in the Japanese context have shown that teachers harboured various anxieties regarding the impending incorporation of CLT. These concerns particularly focused on examination success, teachers' ability to adopt CLT as a teaching style, and its appropriateness in the Japanese classroom. The fundamental pedagogical aspects of CLT are summarised by Brown (2000) as follows:

- 1) Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence;
- 2) Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes;
- 3) Teachers see fluency and accuracy as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques;
- 4) In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts.

As recorded and analysed by Browne (1998) in a survey of English language teachers in Chiba prefecture, there was a lack of communicative ability and a minimal understanding of pedagogy and methodology of CLT in Japan. Browne claims that even in the late nineties, teachers in Japan were not competent in communication and did not use it within the classroom:

When one considers that the vast majority of English teachers in Japan receive no formal teacher training or practical English conversation usage. . . . and that every MEXT approved textbook comes with a teachers' manual that has detailed lesson plans emphasizing translation and drill focused teaching techniques, it is not surprising that a wide gap exists between the communicative goals of the guidelines and actual classroom practices. (p.18)

Research by Gorsuch (1999), Kitao (2007), and Nishino (2011) has since adduced various factors explaining the continued use of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). These included: teachers' lack of facility with communicative skills in English, an absence of practical teacher training, the top-down organisational management structure, and an examination system focused on reproducing information and multiple choice tasks.

According to Humphries (2015), who investigated the teaching style of four Japanese teachers, even after implementation of the new curriculum, Japanese students have not been presented with practical opportunities to use English in the classroom by their teachers. Rather, teachers continued to use GTM, rote learning, and repetition tasks to provide students with the knowledge to pass examinations, rather than to become enhanced communicative language users. This implies that both Japanese teachers and students consider grammatical competence of paramount importance to university entrance success, which hinders any attempted transition to a CLT methodology through subversion of any communicative-focused activities.

Theorists on this issue, such as Gorsuch (1999), Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt (2000), Nishino (2008), Tanaka (2009), and Luton (2015) similarly conclude that teachers either do not or cannot use CLT tasks because of intrinsic language limitations, practices where professional interactions are dictated through social hierarchy, and absence of sufficient teacher education and/or motivation for incorporation of CLT within their existent teaching repertoire.

Overall, the current literature suggests that, traditionally in Japan, foreign language classes are used as a means for students to get high scores on multiple choice and reading for information-focused University Entrance Examinations and Centre Examinations. However, these goals are in tension with stated ministry expectations. According to Tahira (2012), MEXT policy, both past and recent, states that students

are not presented with enough opportunities to either listen to or speak the language in a communicative, personalized way, a point consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Gorsuch (1999) and which clearly still prevails. The new curriculum, whilst potentially affording learners improved opportunities to develop communicative skills, requires more effective implementation in order to achieve its aims.

As a result of studies on Japanese students' spoken abilities, Humphries (2015) concluded that Japanese high school students and teachers are broadly not competent in using English as a tool for communication. Although this incompetence might explain the implementation by MEXT of this new curriculum, within some schools, management and other senior hierarchy are hesitant to implement new teaching styles within their schools. When compared to other countries in the region, such as China and Korea, where more CLT tasks have been adopted within the classroom, the literature suggests Japan is falling behind in regard to the number of people who are able to use the English language for communicative purposes (Okuno, 2007). This state of affairs is of particular importance given Japan's long-term aspirations of becoming a global business leader, but also in the short-term, where the expected influx of foreigners due to the impending Tokyo Olympics of 2020 raises questions as to the number of Japanese persons able to communicate orally effectively in English

Past experiences in the classroom play a role in how teachers approach their own lessons. Research by Ruegg (2009) and Tanaka (2009) shows that teachers who themselves were educated in a *Yakudoku* GTM method became accustomed to teaching with the same methodology, and were accordingly unmotivated to adapt, and/or not confident enough in speaking English to do so. Thus, depending on the focus of the English subject being taught (grammar, reading, writing, translation, and discussion), some teachers see communicative and spoken focused tasks as irrelevant to examination and their students' future success. As a result, Japan had and continues to have a successful but unofficial English conversation school culture, in which interested students attend English conversation classes outside of official school and class times (MacNauton, 2008). Out of the current literature emerges suggestions that incorporating CLT within schools would be a way to remedy this situation and raise the communicative competence of all learners.

The first suggestion is to implement mandatory training programs, and promote teacher talk in the work environment, to support teachers who are still unfamiliar with how to adapt CLT within their classrooms. Nishino (2011) continues by recommending:

Opportunities to learn from colleagues are necessary. These opportunities are essential as it takes a considerable amount of time for teachers to switch to new

ways of teaching, to accumulate experiences using communicative approaches, and at the same time to overcome obstacles and constraints including class sizes and pressure from the grammar-translation university entrance examination system (p.149).

### **Methodology: Socio-cultural Considerations**

Japanese society and workplaces are strongly centred on a hierarchical, rather than a horizontal structure; certain features of this organisation hinder promotion of CLT in Japanese schools. The specific and unique nature of this phenomenon makes an ethnographic approach essential due to personal opinions and workplace environments being analysed.

As discussed by Sugimoto (2010), age and years of experience in the same company, rather than educational background and specialisation, are generally more valued in Japanese hierarchies such as schools, especially by those selected as subject coordinators, course managers, and leader teachers. This circumstance underpinned the present choice of methodology, data collection tools, and analysis procedures that were undertaken within this project. As the CLT curriculum promotes giving students opportunities to use the language, rather than teachers giving lectures in English, conversations between teachers shows there is confusion about how to conduct classes due to the long-standing Japanese cultural belief that "teachers are the deliverers of knowledge and students are the receivers of that knowledge" (Sugimoto, 2010). Hofstede (1983), who writes on hierarchy and social constructivism, states that Japanese society pervasively displays uncertainty avoidance and large power distance. Through formal rules and institutions, people are protected from the unpredictability of human behaviour, which implies an intolerance of divergent behaviours and opinions. This factor is evident in staff meetings in Japan, where normally the oldest, longest working member of the group is the one who decides what curriculum is to be followed, without discussion of other teachers' beliefs and opinions being shared for development purposes (Chiba & Matsuura, 2004).

### **Participants**

Participants in this research were full time high school English teachers at a public or private high school in Kyushu, Japan. Participants' ages ranged from 23-44(newer teachers), and from 45-60 (experienced teachers). Participants from both sexes were selected to provide a heterogeneous sample. Age differentiation and segregation is important because at the schools being investigated, people were still

classified as new teachers when they had not been working in the organisation for more than 10 years. All teachers who took part in this project were provided with consent forms, and were able to withdraw from the project at any time. Participants were English language teachers who also had other responsibilities that are common to the Japanese high school workplace, such as homeroom teacher, club supervisor or course coordinator.

Data analysis looked for common themes in the qualitative responses given by participants and was tabulated to divide participants based on responses obtained, to show what viewpoints were most prevalent, and to what extent these viewpoints were shared.

### **Findings: Pre-implementation Results Examination Fears**

Pre-implementation results collected between March and August 2010 and June – September 2011 showed that teachers were concerned about their understanding of the new curriculum, and whether they were able to properly implement CLT tasks in tandem with existent responsibilities aimed at preparing learners for exams. Age variables of teachers showed that experienced teachers within these organizations felt that CLT was not a supportive tool when preparing students for University Entrance and Centre examinations. Due to a lack of a tested spoken component in either Centre or University Entrance exams (other than recommendation students in University Entrance exams), teachers were concerned about time constraints in regard to the amount of grammar, vocabulary and listening practice that they already had to get through, without adding the extra task of speaking and communicating in the classroom.

The main reasons given by teachers for this variable was the fact that the Entrance Exams influence the way that teachers choose to teach, the materials teachers choose to use, and their framing of the overall objectives of foreign language study. It is important to note that more than 80% of experienced teachers felt that CLT would be an agreeable way to keep lower level students motivated in the classroom, who do not intend to take University or Centre Examinations, but did not see it as a tool for academic success. Teachers were concerned as to how CLT would affect students' results in the University Entrance examinations.

Results were both deepened and clarified when analysis based on demographics of age and gender showed that newer teachers were more receptive to use CLT in the language classroom, and saw it as beneficial to both the motivation of students to want to study English as a foreign language and to students' language abilities as a whole, with 65% of newer teachers either agreeing or strongly agreeing that CLT

is a useful method in improving students understanding of language. The main findings that newer teachers provided were that communicative teaching should enhance students' language abilities and complement students' abilities in reading, writing and listening. However more experienced teachers, especially male ones, had a more negative outlook in regard to CLT having a positive impact on examination results, separating the importance of communication and grammatical and theoretical functionality in English, as different priorities. Thus showing that since GTM is more exam-focused than the comparatively pragmatic CLT, experienced male teachers were more resistant to notions of adapting curricula for the purposes of developing communicative skills.

### **Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance**

Although MEXT distributed DVDs of example lessons using CLT in the classroom to schools, survey results show that at the time of the study, more than 50% of teachers had yet to watch them. Furthermore, only head department teachers from the private school were sent to professional development days about CLT and the new curriculum. An identifiable weakness is that the information was transferred to classroom teachers from the head teacher, which was where this research shows that communication between MEXT and teachers seemed to break down. As more than half of the newer teachers at both the private and public schools reported, the problem with this, as stated by a 24-year-old male participant was that "the head teacher is an older teacher who doesn't have theoretical or practical experience with CLT, and is usually a person who has used the same rote learning / GTM style for years, and is non-receptive to change. When the teacher comes back to school and reports the findings of the information session, their responses are very broad and they don't view the new program positively because they don't seem to agree with or want to adapt to a CLT teaching style. For those of us who are interested in learning more about the curriculum, we miss out because the older teachers weren't responsive to the information being presented to them in the first place".

The newer teachers at both schools state that a lack of voice within decision making causes them to become worried about the new curriculum, because they are not able to access more detailed, relevant information that expands on the brief outline received from the Ministry. Therefore, these teachers are left to discover on their own how to adapt to incorporating CLT in their own classroom. It was reported in informal conversations that in meetings, senior member of staff were reluctant to discuss CLT or move away from a GLT method, thus hindering understanding, discussion, or change. As GTM methods have been the predominant style for the last 30 years, older teachers were concerned about how to incorporate com-

municative teaching in the classroom in an efficient manner.

In regard to discussions and preparations, newer and lower-ranked teachers felt that their opinions and experiences with studying CLT theory in university teacher preparation courses were not being used due to the top-down management structure and lack of workplace discussions. Implementing or showing support for the CLT curriculum in front of senior members of staff was de-facing, and newer staff expressed concern during semi-formal interviews about being viewed as a non-conforming member of the group. To maintain status and not cause conflict or differing opinions in the work place, newer teachers put their motivation to use CLT in the classroom on hold, to follow the curriculum and teaching styles that have been evident in the workplace before they began their employment as not to cause friction in the workplace or jeopardize their position and standing within the workplace as a whole.

### **Lack of Confidence in Speaking English/ Private Skills Development**

In regard to language abilities, two experienced female teachers from the private school and one experienced female teacher from the public school have admitted to attending English conversation school to improve their communicative competence in speaking English. All 3 teachers stated that they did not want anyone to find out that they were attending English conversation school as they were embarrassed of being singled out as either not confident or not competent in speaking and using English, even at the high school level. Lastly, more than 70% of senior staff members during informal conversations voiced concerns about grading students and what appropriate output from students would be in the CLT classroom, thus insisting that the skill of communication should be limited to the Oral communication classroom, and graded by the native speaking ALT.

### **Findings: Post-implementation Results Dissatisfaction with New Materials**

In 2015, the same questionnaires were adapted in order to provide a baseline from a pre-curriculum focus to a post-curriculum focus, and given to the same participants to explore how these teachers' approaches to incorporating CLT had changed since prior to the new curriculum and textbooks being implemented. Results from questionnaires showed that 60% of teachers were not happy with either the new textbooks or provided lesson plans, and believed that they were not adequate to prepare students for the examinations that they would need to undertake. As a result, private school teachers more so than the public school had used the

textbook minimally, and had resorted to using photocopies from textbooks that they used during the old curriculum to increase the amount of rote learning and GTM tasks that students undertook in the classroom. This further shows that private school teachers have more at stake in regards to examination success results when it comes to recruiting students. Although some teachers have responded that they feel that they attempt to speak more in English in the classroom to their students outside of English conversation classes, teachers adapt the new textbook to focus on GTM based tasks during the majority of class time.

Experienced teachers who teach students bound for university state that they prefer using prints and old entrance exam tests as classroom tasks, and use the newly-designed textbooks as a basic introduction to the grammar point being studied before turning back to old textbook photocopies. More than half of the experienced participants revealed during informal conversations that for the first couple of months after the new curriculum and textbooks were introduced, they tried to adapt to the lesson plans and tasks outlined in new textbooks, but felt that wait times for students to respond, and the amount of preparation time for classes more than doubled, which stalled the amount of progress being made when compared to the old curriculum and teaching plans.

### **Lower Level Focus / Exam Priority**

Newer teachers within both of these organisations who teach students who are in university-focused courses stated that they still felt that the lead is being taken by experienced teachers, and that they follow the guidelines instructed by those senior staff members. Those newer teachers who teach classes that are not university entrance or centre exam-focused said that the textbooks that were provided with the new curriculum were easier to teach to lower level students because the academic level of the tasks compared to the textbooks used in the old curriculum are much more watered down and more generally focused. The concerns raised by these teachers centred on marking and test-making. Due to the fact that these teachers feel that the material is much more watered-down and broad, creating end of semester tests that would last for the required 50-minute time allotment became a concern.

Regarding support after the new curriculum was introduced, all teachers reported that there was an increase in collegial discussion at the beginning of 2013, a couple of months before the new curriculum was to be implemented. They reported this as being based on fear and panic, but state that once the new semester started, discussion dwindled and experienced teachers recommended supporting the new textbooks with photocopies from old ones. These actions show that even though textbooks had been provided, and that the new curriculum was progressing, teachers

were still not adopting the new curriculum of providing discussion-based tasks during class time, contravening the instructions outlined by MEXT.

Thus, it continues to be evident that examination preparation pressures, a lack of knowledge about CLT theory, pedagogy, and practice still persists in spite of the new curriculum being in full swing. Also, since there is no pressure from management, principals, or senior members of staff to adapt, use, and incorporate more CLT tasks, and given that there are no formal government checks of schools and teachers' practices, CLT has continued to be subverted to GTM within the two schools that were investigated. That is not to say that the number of teachers who have attempted to incorporate CLT has not increased. Compared to prior implementation, the number of teachers who feel that CLT could be of benefit to students based on a comparison of questionnaires showed an increase from 5 to 13 teachers. However, the practical implementation has not occurred at the same rate due to tight time constraints to get through the required materials for examinations. This shows that teachers are becoming more accepting of CLT as a theory, but are still unfamiliar with methods of pragmatic incorporation within their classrooms in a manner that supports examination preparation and time constraints.

### **Conclusion**

In both of the schools examined in this study CLT has taken a back seat to GTM. Although newer teachers are attempting to increase the amount of time teaching in a CLT method, examination success pressures and experienced teachers' inflexibility with respect to moving away from GTM methods are still dictating the way that all teachers approach their lessons. As newer teachers need to maintain decorum and not be seen as breaking away from their position on the hierarchical ladder, voicing support for CLT and showing usage of it is seen as a form of nonconformity to the job, their role, and the organisation's structure.

Questionnaire and informal conversation results both show that the new textbooks are seen as a watered down version of the materials that are important for examination success, and as a result teachers use supplementary materials more often in the classroom to rectify this issue. Without the introduction of a compulsory spoken component in Entrance and Centre examinations, the focus of teachers is unlikely to change for classes that are focused on University entrance success. Lower level classes, which do not have the same examination pressures, are easier for teachers to implement CLT in, thus showing that communicative competence in English is seen as a tool for entertainment rather than a necessary skill.

Thus, it can be concluded that the purposes or outcomes stipulated in the new curriculum differ to those held by schools. Until more conversations and understand-

ing occurs on both sides, the enhanced use of CLT in the English language classroom in Japan appears uncertain. Until people in senior positions of the hierarchy begin to see or understand the benefit of CLT in all areas of language testing and learning, the situation is unlikely to change. The fear of being the first to try something new in the hopes of getting better results on Entrance exams, similar or better than those attained from a GTM focused lesson, is the biggest hindrance to CLT being implemented during more class time. All participants stated that since the examination system is the same, and since GTM is still providing the results to keep senior management satisfied, that the motivation and will to change to CLT is not and has not been ignited. Thus until the examination system changes, or GTM results start to waver, changing to a yet proven to provide results on examinations in these teachers' views remains the biggest hindrance to change. While the debilitating effect of top-down rejection of changes is clearly borne out in this study, it is perhaps to some extent perfectly understandable that where a new curriculum is not supported by a complimentary change in university examinations, and where those examinations are overwhelmingly the object of extrinsic motivation, that no serious adaptation in pedagogical practices are taking place. The lack of external enforcement of the new guidelines' implementation, combined with this perpetuation in traditional standards of university-entrance testing, must be viewed as the prime obstacles to enacting serious communicative-focused change in these contexts.

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