Coping With Institutional Regimes: Towards a Japanese CLT

Brad Smith

Abstract

Despite the Japanese government's attempt to implement Communicative Language Teaching methods in secondary English classes, CLT has been slow to gain acceptance among English teachers in Japanese secondary schools. This resistance to CLT is due not only to a misinterpretation of CLT methods and goals but also due to factors such as classroom size, a part of what is known as "institutional regime", which have severely hindered Japanese teachers of English from fully accepting and adopting CLT in their classrooms. Until Japanese teachers of English are provided with some way to deal with these institutional factors, CLT may continue to have a difficult time being adopted as a teaching method in Japan. This paper attempts to gain a better understanding of and explore practical solutions for how CLT might be adopted in Japanese classrooms in light of these realities.

In the last thirty years, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become a major focus both in second language teaching and research among applied linguists. Growing disillusionment with the audio-lingual method in the late 1960s fueled research into classroom methodology and ideas about communicative competence in the 1970s (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), which along with the development of sociolinguistics, led to a groundswell of research into how real communication could be both used and taught effectively in the second language classroom.

During the infancy of CLT, researchers such as Widdowson (1972) argued for the teaching of language functions for the purpose of achieving communicative competence in the target language. This proposal helped to inform the growing amount of literature about communication and its role in the second language classroom and concepts about communicative competence. These ideas were further refined in a seminal model described in depth by Canale and Swain (1980), which established and defined four major aspects of communicative competence. According to this model, second language learners need to develop a broad range of skills in order to achieve overall language competence. The implications of these ideas helped to broaden the types of activities for teachers to use in the classroom. They also changed the teacher's role from a disseminator of knowledge to a facilitator who assessed student needs and provided opportunities for growth.

Richard and Rodgers (2001) further developed notions about CLT as a teaching method that is focused on elements of meaning rather than structure pointing out that "activities that involve real communication promote learning". In terms of syllabus, CLT theorists emphasize an approach based on the students' needs and proposed that the teacher's role in the class should be to facilitate communication, offer on-going evaluation, and help guide the students towards their own language goals (Breen & Candlin, 1980). Activities that might occur in a CLT classroom include simulating real-world situations in role-plays or allowing learners to discover language rules through text analysis, which could later be used for a dialogue or for writing a letter, for example. Richards and Rodgers (2001) also point out that there are a very wide variety of techniques that can be used for CLT, many of which are borrowed or adapted from other teaching methods, suggesting that CLT activities are "evolutionary rather than revolutionary" in nature. Perhaps due to its "something for everyone" nature, CLT has grown to become the dominant mainstream language ideology in the past thirty years among applied linguists. Despite this widespread adoption, however, there has been much written about the constraints and inhibiting factors that prevent many other teachers from doing so.

The Japanese Context and CLT

In contrast to learner-centered CLT methods, Japanese schools have predominantly been using variations of the "yakudoku" method to teach language even before the onset of World War II. Yakudoku is a teacher-centered method, closely resembling grammar-translation methods, which primarily uses the L1 for instruction and has a heavy emphasis on teaching grammar (Gorsuch, 2001). The primary goal of the yakudoku method is to prepare students to answer questions correctly on the university entrance examinations, which are primarily grammar-based tests. Yakudoku is still overwhelmingly favored as a method of teaching English in Japan. Recognizing that the yakudoku method has been largely ineffective in developing Japanese fluency in English throughout the post-war era, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology (MEXT) published a 2003 "Action Plan for Cultivating Japanese with English Abilities", which has since attempted to shift classroom teaching from this grammar-based method to communicative teaching methods. Despite this new direction from MEXT, recent studies have shown that Japanese secondary school teachers have been extremely reluctant to change their teaching methods and MEXT's 2003 Action Plan has largely met with failure and disappointment in terms of achieving its goals. (Nishino, 2008)

A Framework for Analysis: TESEP and BANA
Adrian Holliday's (1994) seminal article titled, "The House of TESEP and the communicative approach" offers several explanations for the problematic nature of adopting CLT outside of Inner Circle countries such as Britain, Australia, and North America (BANA). Holliday places most of the blame for the failure of CLT in non-BANA countries on both a misinterpretation of CLT and a lack of ownership by non-BANA teachers. Due to this misinterpretation, teachers in non-BANA (or TESEP) countries have largely rejected CLT because they believe it does not acknowledge their own situation or "institutional regime" such as classroom realities and constraints.

Holliday argues that CLT needs to be re-interpreted by teachers in order to understand variations on how it can be applied in different contexts and that TESEP teachers need to take ownership of CLT methods and work to adapt them to their own classroom realities. With an appropriate framework for studying the problems of CLT in other countries, it is possible to use Holliday's ideas to examine Japanese interpretations of CLT and how the Japanese institutional regime affects the adoption of CLT.

The Dichotic View of CLT and Yakudoku
As Holliday notes, one of the reasons that TESEP teachers have avoided adopting CLT is because they tend to understand its methods in a narrow sense - as a form of learning that focuses primarily on oral communication with a strong emphasis on pair and group work with little regard to established frameworks of reference such as Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence. Recent research has shown that Japan is no exception to these misconceptions about CLT.

Sakui (2004) observes that Japanese teachers perceive CLT methods as primarily geared toward teaching Japanese students' oral proficiency with a heavy reliance on pair work and learner-centered methods, in contrast to the grammar-focused and teacher-led yakudoku methods. As a result, they perceive CLT as unhelpful to students' overall goal of preparing for the university entrance examinations. Her case studies and interviews reveal that Japanese teachers perceive occasional CLT lessons as primarily used for "fun" and to help motivate students in their more "serious" yakudoku method classes. Although many teachers profess the desire to teach communicative English, they view the choice of different methods as a zero-sum game where CLT classes are seen only as an ideal construct that must be forsaken in order to properly prepare students for their examinations (O'Donnell, 2005). Holliday states that teachers need to re-interpret CLT as a much broader method that does not favor teaching one particular form of competence over another. Although giving teachers training in a

broader interpretation of CLT and showing them aspects of CLT methods that can be used to teach grammar competence could help clear up these misconceptions, there are an inadequate number of these training courses to meet this need (Browne & Wada, 2010).

However, even if Japanese teachers did have the proper training and knowledge of CLT, there is little direct support from MEXT to help them change their teaching methods in the classroom. This problem is well documented among the few teachers in Japan who do understand the broader interpretations of CLT methods (O'Donnell, 2005). Holliday notes that among teachers in TESEP countries who do receive training in the range of techniques and theories behind CLT, there is still a major obstacle in terms of the institutional regimes that prevent its adoption in the classroom. As Holliday (1994) observes:

> Teachers who read the books and attend the seminars and courses, once the peculiarities of the discourse of BANA science are overcome, will be able to articulate the basic concepts of the technology, discussing and working it academically, finding it professionally soothing to go through the motions of up-to-date talk. However, this mastery of the theory will remain divorced from the reality and practice of the classroom, where, as I have argued above, the technology cannot really be applied. (p. 8)

So it is with an eye to the practical classroom realities that we must now turn to examine the deeper reasons for the failure of CLT to be adopted in the classroom. The next section will focus on class size and student/community expectations, which are two of the biggest institutional regimes that work against teachers.

Classroom Realities and Institutional Regimes

Holliday argues that despite the widespread use of CLT methods in BANA language classrooms, there are serious impediments in TESEP to adopting CLT due to constraints put in place by the institutional regime in these countries. These institutional restraints are part of the wider educational, cultural, and national contexts into which CLT is being imported and can include standard class size, notions of classroom hierarchy and authority, and curriculum objectives. When CLT is adopted as a methodology by TESEP countries, the environmental context needs to be taken into consideration even in cases where training and teaching of the methodology is adequate and teachers understand its principles correctly. Japan, like any other TESEP country, also faces very similar problems to those pointed out by Holliday, such as issues of class size and the expectations of students, both of which are very different from BANA countries. Both of these factors play a large role in determining whether or not teachers choose to adopt CLT methods in their classrooms.

Holliday has discussed the wide gulf between the average numbers of students in TESEP classrooms versus that of BANA classes. The average Japanese secondary school class size is 40 students, which is in sharp contrast to the BANA language classroom's "learning group ideal" of only 15 students (Holliday, 1994). Because of the small class size in BANA countries, Holliday mentions, pair and group work can be effectively monitored by the teacher whereas the classroom size in TESEP classes is much larger and more difficult to control, made even more problematic by the fact that all of the students speak a common L1. Japanese teachers have cited large class size and management problems as issues of major concern and the loss of a clear delineation of authority makes CLT less appealing for many teachers (Takanashi, 2004). MEXT has thus far shown no signs of willingness to change class sizes to help teachers adopt CLT methods.

Holliday (1994) also observes that one of the problems of importing CLT methods is that "the so-called communicative methodology that TESEP teachers may read about in books is unlikely to have been geared to the expectations of *their* students." As Sakui (1999) has pointed out, beliefs about learning are based on social contexts and past experience, and can play a large role in how students form expectations about how learning does or does not occur. Exactly what these

expectations are in Japan has been the topic of much discussion over recent years. For the most part, Japanese students share similar views of CLT as their teachers (Sakui, 1999). Surveys have shown that they consider team-taught weekly communication lessons with foreign teachers as fun but they feel uneasy that the time being spent on communicative activities is "taking away" from time that should be spent on preparing for the university entrance examinations (Nishino, 2008). Teachers report they feel a great deal of pressure from the community around them to fulfill expectations set by strongly entrenched educational traditions and perspectives on learning and teaching (Aspinall, 2006). Changing classroom methodology, therefore, is a considerable risk for a teacher to undertake and may not be worth jeopardizing one's own future prospects of promotion in order to implement.

Towards a "Japanese CLT"

The adoption of CLT methods in Japanese classrooms will continue to be very slow as long as the institutional realities of most classrooms are left unaddressed. Although MEXT has made some efforts in training teachers to adopt communicative approaches in their teaching, it has done little to address the classroom realities which prevent its acceptance and adoption by Japanese teachers. In light of current budgetary constraints and the increasing need for government expenditures to go towards an aging population, it is very unlikely that the resources will be made available for schools to make major changes. Due to this situation, Japanese teachers of English will likely struggle with the problem of how to adapt western concepts of communicative teaching methods for a Japanese educational setting until some form of compromise is found that addresses the demands and realities placed upon them. Once Japanese teachers can feel comfortable enough developing and using their own CLT methods and practices in their own classrooms, the problem of investment and ownership will be largely resolved. It is important to note that for this to occur, Japanese teachers themselves must take the initiative in experimenting with and sharing their own ideas.

Holliday has already provided some insight into how CLT methods can be adapted to fit institutional realities in countries such as Japan. For example, in the case of large class sizes, which pose problems of classroom control and effective monitoring, Japanese teachers of English should set clear and measurable communicative goals for students to work towards in class. Providing students with interesting group-oriented tasks which would be evaluated regularly using simplified rubrics may help to encourage students to stay focused on communication goals, which might help reduce the workload of teachers and the need for classroom management. Holliday recommends using communicative writing and reading techniques to help with class control as well, which would be especially beneficial for students who will be taking heavily text-based university entrance examinations. In terms of changing student expectations, Nolasco and Arthur (1986) have demonstrated that CLT methods can be successfully used in a larger classroom by slowly integrating communicative activities with traditional teaching methods in a class of Moroccan students, which gradually changed students' expectations and increased their receptiveness to CLT. There is no apparent reason why the same technique would be fruitless in Japanese secondary schools.

Conclusion

Despite the widespread adoption of CLT in many countries throughout the world in the last thirty years, Japan's English language teachers have largely maintained their use of grammar-based yakudoku methods in the classroom. Many Japanese teachers express a deep reluctance to change methods due to their misunderstanding of the key elements and features of CLT along with its goals and range of techniques. Consequently, Japanese teachers view CLT and yakudoku methods as dichotic in nature and believe that although CLT methods are ideal for teaching "real and useful English", the practical need for students to answer grammar-based university entrance examination questions requires the primary use of yakudoku methods. It is not only teachers' beliefs about CLT but also a lack of institutional support for changing methods which inhibits its adoption.

Large class sizes and the pressure to meet student expectation also prevent teachers from using CLT methods. To resolve these issues, Japanese teachers need to re-interpret CLT methods in a broader sense, set clear goals and tasks that work in favor of classroom management, and work to change student expectations through gradual introduction of communicative techniques.

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