

The Current Situation and Future Prospects of Japanese English Teaching

YAMAOKA Kenji

1. The Dichotomy between Grammar-translation and Communication

1.1 Grammar-translation Methods for the Examinations.

Japanese English teaching has been under severe criticism for its inefficiency—the Japanese cannot speak English even though they have studied English for ten years from junior high school to university. Around 1970s it was often pointed out that Japanese students could read and write but they could not even respond to such simple questions as “Where are you from?” The reason for this extreme imbalance is simple. It was because in junior high and high schools the students were not trained to speak though they were trained extensively in reading and writing.

The emphasis on reading and writing has a great deal to do with Japanese traditional attitude toward foreign languages. Since the Meiji Restoration, the quickest way to absorb Western cultures had been to gain knowledge through books. Thus people in those days learned grammar of foreign languages and translated books written in them. The grammar-translation method in Japanese English classes has its origin in this style of contact with Western cultures.

The entrance examinations for high school and university further encouraged teaching in the grammar-translation method. Most of the questions for the exams require the examinees to translate English sentences into Japanese and Japanese passages into English. To prepare the students for the exams, teachers got them to thoroughly learn

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The swing of the pendulum between grammar and communication

Criticism against Japanese English teaching
around 1970

- Students can read and write English but can't speak well though they have studied English for 10 years.
- The motivation for studying English goes down as the students advance in years.

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Reasons why students were unable to speak English

1. They were not required to speak or listen to English in the entrance examinations.
2. Most teachers didn't place a high value on communicating in English or were not confident in their communication skills.
3. Textbooks were not compiled to improve the students' communicative competence.

English grammar and memorize many words in order for them to deal with difficult translation questions. This met university teachers' requirements; they wanted students who could read academic theses in the original. Listening and speaking abilities are of less importance because they didn't need these skills in universities in those days. Therefore, listening comprehension tests were to be found only in the examinations for departments of foreign studies and education.

In the old grammar-translation style reading class, teachers read the passages and had the students translate sentence by sentence or read the translation they had done at home the previous day. The teachers corrected the translation, if necessary, and explained structures or grammatical forms and meanings on the blackboard. The students just listened to the teachers and copied the board in their notebooks, or wrote down the teachers' translation. Except those who were called on to read the textbook, nobody uttered any single word of English throughout the class.

In writing classes, the students were expected to write their translation on the blackboard. Teachers corrected the translation and explained grammatical items related to the sentences. In these classes also, there was no interaction using English. The students did work very hard to learn grammar and vocabulary, and acquired a considerably high level of translation skills. Good students were able to read essays by Bertrand Russell or Robert Lynd and had a vocabulary stock of about 10,000 words. But they were not able to speak English so well, and their motivation to study English went down rapidly after they entered university, except for those who majored in English.

The teachers then were not good speakers of English, either. Since they did not need to teach students to speak English, and they themselves had no need to communicate in English, most teachers found it hard to speak English. If asked whether they could speak English, they would answer that speaking English was not a sophisticated skill and that it was not what school education should seriously take up. "Reading academic writings is what the students should do," they said, and communicating in English was looked upon as shallow English conversation skills that even a three-year-old native speaker possesses. Even motivated teachers who thought speaking was as necessary as reading and writing gave up the idea of introducing communicative ways of teaching because of the pressure of the entrance examinations. They used to say they could not possibly change their ways of teaching unless the examinations should change.

In addition, textbooks were not compiled so that the students could improve communicative abilities. It was true that the course of study mentioned the importance of communication, very

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Teachers' assertions against the criticism

- English "conversation" is a superficial skill which English teachers should not be seriously engaged in.
- Unless examinations for high school and university change, it is useless to teach English communicatively.

few textbooks included communicative practice or how to use the English language elements they dealt with.

I don't mean that the grammar-translation method is all bad; it is indeed an efficient way to check whether the students have understood the meaning of English passages and also a good way to enable the students understand the construction of English sentences. But I do doubt if we could foster students who are willing to communicate in English and can use their English skills in the real business situations.

1.2 Drastic Change toward Communication

As Japanese people had more and more opportunities for international exchange and globalization advanced, the criticism against Japanese English teaching became a request to improve its quality. The economic circles strongly urged the Ministry of Education to make English teaching more communication-oriented. In 1987, the JET Program was launched and for the first time in history native speakers began to teach English nation-wide.

At the beginning of the program, classes changed into quite active ones with the presence of ALTs. Students enjoyed communication games and singing English songs. It was really a drastic change turning students into active participants in class.

In 1994, another drastic change came with the start of oral communication classes at high school. The textbooks were edited in a totally different concept than the former ones; they were made to improve the students' communicative ability in daily situations. They did not place much stress on grammar or writing English, but contained dialogs, communication practices for the students to learn to speak English.

Teachers' reactions to these changes varied. In fact, there were some teachers who welcomed these native assistant teachers, especially junior high teachers, but still more teachers were perplexed at this sudden change. Many college-bound high schools

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From grammar-translation methods to
communication-oriented teaching

- The introduction of assistant language teachers(1987)
- Oral communication classes at high school (1994)

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How did the teachers react to this shift?

- Communicative teaching is the enemy of training for entrance examinations.
 - Communication-oriented ways of teaching do not help the students to pass the entrance examinations.
- Grammar is the enemy of communication.
 - Focus on grammar does not improve the students' communicative competence.

rejected accepting ALTs saying they were not necessary for training the students for the entrance examinations. They did not like oral communication classes, either. Under the name of oral communication class, some schools openly taught grammar instead. For those who strongly believed that communication in English was incompatible with entrance exam training, ALTs and oral communication classes were eyesores.

On the other hand, there were teachers who thought grammar-based teaching would not improve the students English ability, not to mention speaking skills. They even said, “The Japanese people’s English ability does not improve because they study grammar.” What they did was communication activities with the utmost utilization of native speakers. Some totally stopped the traditional grammar-based teaching and translation practices.

1.3 What This Change Brought About

With a greater emphasis on communication, there have been favorable changes as well as unfavorable ones.

The greatest favorable change is that many students have shown a positive attitude toward communicating in English. Even though they are not confident in their speaking skills, they try to speak out. Also, their listening comprehension ability has improved. The second good thing is that more students has taken interest in communication in English through acting in class. The last, but not the least, favorable change is that English teachers’ communication skills have improved.

The greatest unfavorable impact that is often pointed out is that the students’ basic ability has declined. With a lot of communication activities, there were fewer classes for studying grammar, and more emphasis on fluency than on accuracy have made it difficult for the students to form sentences with correct structures.

The students have become able to say easy things, but other than that, their communication ability

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<p>Favorable outcomes of this shift</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students have obtained positive attitude toward communicating in English. 2. There have been more communication activities in English classes. 3. More listening comprehension quizzes have been included in term exams. 4. Teachers’ communicative competence has improved.

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The swing of the pendulum between grammar and communication
<p>Unfavorable outcomes of this shift</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students’ basic ability to form accurate and structured sentences has deteriorated. 2. Students have not learned much other than basic conversational expressions. 3. There has been a great gap between oral communication classes and other classes. 4. In college-oriented schools, oral communication classes have changed into grammar classes.

has not reached a higher level. The third thing I would like to point out is that there is a great gap between communication-oriented classes and other ones like reading and writing. However eagerly the students learn to communicate in oral communication classes, they have very few chances to express themselves in other classes. Lastly, as I mentioned above, there are still teachers, though not so many as in the 1970s, who think communicative classes do not help the students to pass the entrance examinations.

Though a great shift from grammar-translation ways to communication-oriented teaching has been made, there still exists a dichotomy between the two. Both have advantages and both have problems. And they seem to be two opposite ways of approach to English teaching. They seem to be incompatible like oil and water.

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<p>The dichotomy still exists.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication-oriented teaching<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Lack of basic knowledge of English and the decline of English ability. • Teaching with Grammar-translation methods<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Studying for entrance examinations deprives the students of their motivation. Students' communicative competence remains low.

1.4 Recent Policies to Better Japanese English Teaching

With more need to foster the Japanese with English proficiency, the Ministry of Education carried out a strategic policy called Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities in 2003. Among several projects under this plan, I think the following three have made successful outcomes.

Though there are more teachers who can speak English than there were 30 years ago, English teachers' lack of communicative competence is still singled out for criticism. To improve their competence and teaching skills, the Ministry required all the local governments to hold intensive training seminars. All the junior and high school English teachers took part in the seminars in five years.

In 2006, listening comprehension tests were first included in the nationwide Center Test. This has led high school teachers to incorporate more listening and communicative practices into their classes.

Under the so-called SELHi Project, the Ministry designated high schools which would take on the challenge of reforming their English teaching. Starting in 2002, this project has changed the ways English is taught in 169 high schools.

All these efforts have been made to get English teaching in Japan to be more communication-oriented. And English teachers' consciousness for the need to develop the students communication skills has gradually been raised. In time with these attempts, the Ministry of Education issued the new course of study last year. This lays more emphasis on fostering communication skills. It requires that English classes at high school should basically be conducted through English. And it encourages impromptu speeches, discussions and presentations. In junior high schools they are

going to have four English classes a week instead of three, and the total number of English words the students are supposed to learn by the time they graduate from high school has jumped to 3,000 from 2,200. But the most remarkable perspective of the new course of study is that it demands that English classes should aim to improve four skills of students integrally and comprehensively. At present, they learn reading only in reading classes, speaking only in oral communication classes and writing only in writing classes. But under the new course of study, in every class, teachers are expected to improve four skills impartially. For example, the students will write down their ideas after reading a newspaper article, and then they will discuss the matter in groups. The teaching, therefore, should necessarily be content-based. Classes in which teachers only teach grammar rules or ask the students to translate English passages will run counter to the aim of this course of study. It also describes that grammar should be a tool to support communication. This idea deserves special attention to break the dichotomy between grammar and communication and wipe away the misleading idea that studying grammar hinders communication.

1.5 Things to Overcome for the Future and Suggestions to Better English Teaching

Next year English activities at elementary school officially start. It is expected that children will get interested in English early and acquire the basic awareness of the English language. Things are, however, not so simple as they seem. There are quite a few problems to be solved. But they will work out better and the quality of exposure to English will be much higher in the future. The important thing is, then, how junior high and high school teachers can improve the students' overall abilities of English and motivate them to study on after graduation.

Grammar and vocabulary are indispensable tools for the students to develop all the skills. But if they are taught in the traditional way in which teachers only explain the rules and students do grammar exercises on paper, they will never come to use the rules for communication. Nor will they be able to read a lot of English faster if they are only trained to translate all the English sentences into Japanese.

What about communication activities? They are indeed good to motivate the students to communicate, but simple conversation practices after memorizing useful expressions alone will not enable the students to communicate better or read and write accurately. Without learning grammar and vocabulary, their English abilities will remain low and they are very unlikely to pass the entrance examinations.

What I would like to suggest for English teaching at junior and senior schools is content-based

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Future Prospect of English Teaching in Japan

1. Improved four-skills approach.
2. Learning grammar and vocabulary through communication tasks and dealing with contents.
3. Debates, discussions, presentations after reading and writing.
4. Teachers' communicative competence is required.

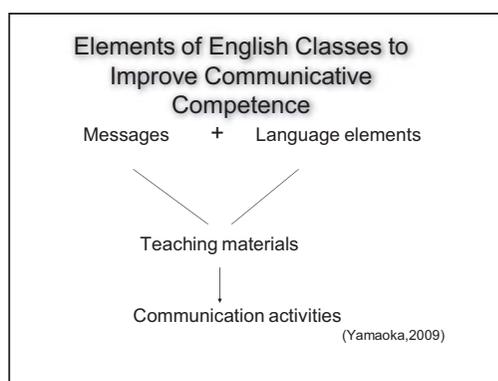
and grammar/vocabulary conscious teaching. The ultimate goal of class is the students' expressing themselves in English. They are required to speak out their ideas fluently and write them down accurately. Before expressing themselves they are directed to read a lot of English which contains target grammatical constructions and vocabulary. After reading, they will summarize what they have read using the constructions and vocabulary they have learned. Of course, conscious effort to learn grammar and vocabulary is inevitable, and drills and exercises should be utilized to get the students used to forms or spellings, but the aim of learning them should be geared for output.

I tried this approach in high school English classes I taught several years ago. The students at first did want me translate every sentence and did not show any enthusiasm in expressing their ideas in English. But as they once got used to this method and realized how useful it was to read much English and learn grammar and vocabulary, their overall English skills jumped up dramatically.

In order to organize English classes so that the students' four skills can improve, there are four things to consider: messages, language elements, teaching materials and communication activities. Communication starts when someone has got a message to convey, so messages or contents are an essential element for language teaching. The students learn the message through reading or listening to English passages on a particular topic and think about them to form their opinions. I think it extremely necessary to incorporate target language elements in the reading or listening texts or pick them up from the texts so that the students can learn them there and through self-expressing activities. Thus, we need good teaching materials which carries good messages or provides the learners with a good opportunity to think about some problem. It also should include language elements that the students must acquire in the process. This means that we should carefully choose our teaching materials or we should make them on our own to suit the students' interest and ability. Lastly, the students are engaged in communication activities regarding the message, using the language elements they have learned. Speeches, presentations, discussions and debates are good communication activities in which students can express themselves using what they have learned on the topic.

This approach may sound difficult and good only for high level students, but if we start with easy topics and the students show eagerness to work on them, it will surely bear fruit even with beginners. And it is true that to cope with this way of teaching, teachers should have good communicative competence. They must always be ready to give students good clues and chances to express themselves. At first, no teacher is efficient enough to do this, but they will gradually

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become more and more competent through facing various situations day by day.

If the teachers realize the importance of improving the students' four English skills, they must teach English classes much more communicatively. Here teaching English through English counts. Japanese English teaching is now at a big turning point. Though far from perfect, conditions to cultivate Japanese with English abilities are almost set. It is all up to the teachers whether to avail themselves of this chance to reform English teaching of this country.

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