

Appropriate Methodology for English Language Education in Japan : An Argument for the 'Strong' over the 'Weak' Version of the Communicative Approach.

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Abstract

Summarizing the present situation of English language education in Japan, Koike and Tanaka (1995) claim that "It may be said that we are in the middle of some drastic changes and that some confusion about the final choices is inescapable." (p24). These changes refer to government proposals and guidelines which regulate foreign language education in schools in Japan, and specifically pertain to concrete changes in areas such as teaching methods and materials, courses of study, objectives, examinations, and teacher-training and assistant teacher programs. They are 'drastic' with respect to both the broad extent of the reforms as well as the fundamental nature of the changes aimed for. This paper focuses on two areas of change: in teaching methodology, and in the focus on particular language skills or areas. It is argued that a wider rendering of the communicative approach, the 'strong' version as opposed to the 'weak' version, is important for these changes to be truly effective and for various interest groups within the system to be able to come together. The importance of the skill of reading for Japanese EFL students within the present system is stressed, and the significance of the entrance examination system is also examined. These are taken into consideration in suggesting changes in the approach to literacy in English in Japan.

Introduction

Controversy over compulsory foreign language education has existed for a long time in countries all over the world. Crystal (1987) gives some of the criticisms against Foreign language learning in schools: the time would be better spent on science, mathematics or the mother tongue; after years of study students are still unable to use the language for everyday purposes, especially given the widespread use of traditional methods. This argument is more common in English-speaking countries than in non-English speaking countries, where English is usually the most favored foreign language. In Japan the issue of compulsory *English* language education was publicly debated most recently in 1975. (See Ike, 1995; Tanaka and Tanaka, 1995). The same argument as above, as well as similar ones, such as the lack of student motivation, since proficiency was not needed in society in general, were put forward against compulsory English education. There was also the proposal that English be dropped from the entrance examination requirements. One of the strongest arguments for maintaining English as a compulsory subject, and an important component of entrance examinations, was that it was very useful in assessing student effort, diligence and mental discipline. Thus, the function of English in Japan has been to act as an ancillary language in general society, but to fulfill a very important role in the educational system. (e. g. see Hill and Parry, 1994a). As Japanese ties with the rest of the world have become increasingly more numerous and diverse, the part that English plays in society, though still ancillary, has grown, and the question has shifted away from 'Should English language education be compulsory in Japan?' or 'Why should English be taught in Japan?' towards 'How should English be taught in Japan?' (For example, Nozawa, 1995; Sasamoto, 1995).

Koike and Tanaka (1995) claim that since before World War II there have

been two opposing sides regarding this question. One side, guided by teaching philosophy originating in the West, Harold Palmer's Oral Approach, stressed the Aural / Oral skills. The other side, led by practical considerations of what was needed more in general society, reading and translating skills to import foreign knowledge, technology and ideas, predominated and used a form of Grammar-Translation, called 'Yakudoku' (see Hino, 1988). The changes occurring at present have been initiated by Mombusho, on the side of the Aural / Oral group, and is generally supported by the majority of people, including teachers and students, who feel that after six years of formal, regular study, better results in terms of oral ability should be expected. This time around the prevailing TEFL philosophy is the Communicative Approach. There has been a kind of stand-off, with many teachers seeking further qualifications and new methods, trying 'communicative' activities, group work, and using more English in class. Other teachers have stuck with traditional methods, which are still effective in preparing students for entrance examinations. The pressure, so far, has been on teachers, who use traditional 'Grammar-Translation' methods, to introduce more 'communication-oriented' activities into their classrooms. There needs to be however, an equal attempt on the part of the 'communication' group to consider the practical side: the education system in Japan, including the entrance examination system; the fact that, despite the growth in the use of English in Japan and by Japanese, for travel, business, international politics, and sport, it will continue to be an ancillary language in society; and the reality that "For many students, reading is by far the most important of the four skills in a second language, particularly in English as a second or foreign language." (Carrell, 1988, p. 1). Hino (1988) suggests that the dominance of 'Yakudoku', has not merely been due to laziness or resistance to change, but that it has been effective in meeting certain needs. A major advantage is that it is a system which can easily be learnt and then used independently by students of all levels for self

- study. He also suggests the need to understand the historical background and cultural context within which it has been successful, in order to make effective change. It is the specific context of the Japanese education system, including university entrance examinations, with which this paper is concerned.

The Japanese Education System

For detailed information concerning the education system in Japan, the reader is directed to Shields (1993 a & 1993 b) where he provides lists of publications in English on Japanese education. The limited scope and purpose here, is to put forward some basic aspects or characteristics of the Japanese education system which needs to be taken into account when applying the Communicative Approach, or any other approach, to the Japanese context.

Singleton (1993) argues that effort, *gambaru*, is more highly valued than I.Q. or intelligence, in education in Japan. Ingulsrud (1994) supports this when, describing a nationwide entrance examination, he states that it “is an ‘achievement’ test, not an ‘aptitude’ test. There is a preference in Japanese society, for achievement tests, since hard work and perseverance are generally valued above inherent ability.” (p.67). Although Singleton stresses the moral and social development behind this principle while Ingulsrud focuses on the objective independence that the system provides, both agree that the separation of the entrance examinations from the schools, the belief in the level playing field that this provides, and the stress on achievement through effort, are strong cultural aspects of the Japanese education system.

This observation of effort being valued over ability may come more from a cross-cultural perspective than from an internal one, as Amano (1993) seems to give equal weight to them in his analysis of the success of the Japanese educational system. He does, however, also stress the important role that the entrance examination system has played in providing equality of opportunity,

especially for children of poorer families. Amano's conclusion is that there is urgent need for reform in the education system, and this necessarily includes the entrance examination system, around which the education system is centered. Considering the importance of English in the examination system, any reforms in the general education system must have a great impact on English language education, and vice versa.

University English entrance examinations

The importance of the entrance examinations, and of the English language component of them, necessarily means that it has a strong backwash effect on English language education in schools. (For further reading on *backwash* the reader is directed to Hughes, 1989). For this backwash to be positive, and for examinations to be valid 'achievement' tests, they should be testing what is taught, or the recommended syllabus. The recent Mombusho guidelines have moved further away from university entrance examinations, and thus not only increase negative backwash and decrease content and face validity of these examinations, but also place the public high school teacher between the horns of a dilemma. One effect of this may be to increase even more the importance of preparatory schools, *juku* and *yobiko*, in preparing students for entrance examinations. Another result may be the widening of the gap between the Oral / Aural English classes and teachers, and Reading / Writing classes and teachers.

The relationship between entrance examinations and the teaching and learning that takes place at schools is not completely one-way. Universities do take such factors as, Mombusho guidelines, syllabi, recommended vocabulary lists, teacher and student feedback, and average student ability into consideration when devising examinations. However, there are various limitations and restrictions which examination writers have to work within. For example,

it is impossible, except in a few cases, such as with returnee students, for universities to conduct speaking tests. The other aural skill fares relatively better. Many universities have introduced listening components to their English tests. However, again due to limited facilities or potential problems with sound quality and standardization of tests conducted in different locations, it is not possible for many universities to attempt to measure listening comprehension. Another objection is that listening tests give students from larger metropolitan areas an unjust advantage, with their easier access to such things as English language radio broadcasts and real-life native English-speaking people.

Limited facilities, in this case personnel time, often precludes the inclusion of a writing component as well. The time needed for grading along with the fear of lack of fairness, reliability, and objectivity, usually override test validity concerns. This leaves reading as the skill which is easiest to base examinations on. But limitations also exist, and because of its simplicity and reliability of marking, the multiple choice format dominates over more open-ended, short answer type questions. Many universities, in fact, have examinations which are wholly, or almost entirely, computer-marked.

Given the significance of entrance examinations, their intent to evaluate effort as well as ability, as well as other physical constraints, which hinder most universities from directly testing the four language skills, there is bound to be harmful backwash, when we consider Mombusho's guidelines. Its 1994 version recommends that, for junior high schools, "In conducting language-use activities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, priority may be given to activities in one or more skills according to students' learning stages, but no particular emphasis should be placed on activities in any one or more skills over the three-year period." (Mombusho, 1994, pp. 9.). For senior high schools, it stipulates that, "At least one of the three subjects, *Aural / Oral*

Communication A, Aural / Oral communication B, and Aural / Oral Communication C, should be taught to all students.” (Mombusho, 1994, pp.18).

Given the importance of entrance examinations in the education system, the constraints within which they are devised, and the objectives and recommendations that guide schools and teachers, teachers find themselves in an unenviable situation. The details of the situation vary from school to school, class to class, teacher to teacher, and student to student, but the conflicting pressures make it extremely difficult to meet the demands satisfactorily. It is at the level of this day-to-day situation that the appropriateness of any methodology will be judged. In addition to the general education system and cultural context, important details, such as large class sizes, monolingual classes, the strong extrinsic motivational power of the entrance examination, and very little concrete instrumental motivational sources in society at large, are major factors in the success or effectiveness of techniques and methods. At present in Japan, the majority of techniques and activities associated with the communicative approach derive from application of a philosophy of language learning and teaching in situations with quite different needs and characteristics. The next section will briefly look at this approach to language teaching, about which so much has been claimed, and from which so much is expected.

The Communicative Approach

The term ‘communicative’ has been thrown around loosely to describe all kinds of teaching ideas and activities. This has especially been the case in Japan in recent years. It is one of those terms which come to have such a broad meaning that it may have lost much of its usefulness. When used by teachers or educators in Japan its meaning usually derives from its contrastive or differential reference, namely, a technique or procedure not

related to the 'Grammar-Translation' method. Thus oral / aural activities are considered to be of themselves more 'communicative' than reading / writing activities, 'learner-centered' activities more 'communicative' than 'teacher-centered' ones, and using only or mainly English in class more 'communicative' than using mainly Japanese.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a thorough account of the Communicative Approach. [For a more detailed description and history of its ideas, the reader is directed to Breen and Candlin (1980), Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Widdowson (1979), and Wilkins (1976). For some criticism, see Swan, 1985.]. But, it may be useful to state that one of the reasons for the confusion with the term is its reference to a wide range of ideas associated with the approach, such as teaching language as *communication*, developing the '*communicative* competence' of students, and encouraging students to *communicate* in the classroom, in the target language, with each other and with the teacher.

Another reason for the overuse of the term 'communicative' may be due to the very nature of this approach to teaching. Richards and Rodgers (1986) classify Communicative Language Teaching as an "approach" based on solid, consistent theories of language and language learning, but without a specific form of curriculum design or a clear set of teaching procedures to be followed. This flexibility and openness to individual interpretation and adaptation differentiates it from "methods" which are characterized as having a particular type of syllabus, specific objectives, teaching activities and procedures.

One other aspect of the Communicative Approach which is of importance to its implementation in Japan is that, according to Howatt (1984), and as

acknowledged by other writers (e. g. Holliday, 1994 ; Nunan, 1988), it has a strong and a weak version. Howatt claims that the 'weak' version focuses on 'learning to use' language, or in other words, endeavoring to provide students with opportunities to use language for communication in the classroom. He argues that it puts more importance on '*communicative performance*'. The 'strong' version, on the other hand, focuses on 'using language to learn' it, as it is considered that we learn language through communication. It thus puts more emphasis on '*communicative competence*'. The 'weak' version has been dominant, and has come to be considered the communicative 'method' and identified with the oral skills, learner-centered, English-only assertions, mentioned above. A typical example of what is expected to happen in the classroom is the information-gap type exercise.

A solid and consistent theory of language and language learning should be applicable to any situation. At this level of theory, an 'approach' should be flexible enough to be able to be adapted appropriately to an existing situation, whether EFL or ESL, with native-speaking or non-native-speaking teachers, with small or large class sizes, and to meet the specific needs of the social context. It is at the level of curriculum design and procedure, however, that problems or conflict may arise due to the particular needs and characteristics of the society. It is this area that needs to be clarified and carefully monitored, in the evaluation of the implementation of a methodology, curriculum or guidelines.

Holliday (1994) argues that the 'strong' version of the Communicative Approach is more flexible and culture-sensitive than the 'weak' version. Another way of looking at it is that at the level of 'approach' the 'strong' version can be applied with care to fit the specific situation, whilst the 'weak' version, corresponds to the level of 'method' with specific techniques,

activities and procedures identified with it. This difference will be explained in more detail in the next section, which focuses on the appropriateness of the Communicative Approach to Japanese junior and senior high schools.

The Communicative Approach in Japan

The present adoption of the Communicative Approach in Japan has resulted, at the level of procedure and design, it seems to me, in the practice of the 'weak' version. In the new syllabus' Aural / Oral classes for senior high schools, as well as the Speaking and Listening components of the junior high schools' courses, the focus in the classroom is on students' use of English communicating with each other and with the teacher. This conforms to Holliday's (1994) description of the 'weak' version in practice. This 'weak' version, which has developed strong identification with specific activities, procedures and prescriptions of what constitutes a 'good' lesson, has been elaborated into a 'method' which precludes consideration of specific situations with specific needs. Before being embraced by Mombusho and many teachers in Japan, this 'method' had, more or less, evolved in ESL situations, with small size classes, and adult learners with more specific needs. The appropriateness of these procedures to the Japanese education system, with its inherent pressures and contradictions, needs to be questioned.

Most people involved in the education system in Japan would agree that these changes in English language teaching in Japan have definitely had some positive effects. Obvious examples are more balance in the language skills, more variety in lessons, - of activities, materials, and content - and more student confidence in face-to-face, and Aural / Oral, language use. However, we do need to look at the actual limitations of the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the present application of the Communicative Approach. Many teachers find it difficult to get students to speak English only, to initiate

communication, and to practice functional activities in pairs or groups in large classes where the teacher cannot supervise all students. The assumptions that these activities or principles are appropriate need to be questioned. Ellis (1991), taking the situation in Japanese high schools and colleges, as well as the general use of English in society, into consideration, suggests that in teaching English for communicative competence in Japan it may be more realistic to aim for knowledge of the language instead of control or automatic use. This may seem to be siding with the Grammar-Translation camp, but two major points put him somewhere in the middle of the two camps. One is that he is writing about the Aural / Oral skills, and the other is that his 'knowledge' includes not merely linguistic knowledge, but also sociolinguistic knowledge. His argument recognizes students needs, in terms of important knowledge which is necessary for communicative competence, as well as the limitations of the schools and colleges within the Japanese education system. His proposal also seems to embrace the 'strong' version of the communicative approach, as described more fully in the following paragraph. The importance of teaching *knowledge* about language use in society in all skill areas is one step that needs to be taken. Ellis seems to welcome the increase in aural / oral classes and focuses on them. The communicative approach also needs to be applied appropriately to the other skills.

The importance of reading, not only for entrance examinations, but also for students' further academic career, occupation, and social life, has to be recognized. The narrow focus on increasing the amount of dialogues in textbooks, or increasing aural / oral activities to increase the 'communicativeness' of the reading class tends to ignore two basic facts. One is that, as Halliday (1985) writes, "reading / writing and listening / speaking are different ways of learning *because they are different ways of knowing.*" (p.97) (The emphasis is Halliday's). The other is that individual silent

reading, translation, discussion in the native language about the meaning, are all activities which help the reader *communicate* with the text. This 'communication with the text', a feature of the 'strong' version of the Communicative approach, is ignored by both sides in the stalemate of methodologies. On the one hand, 'weak' communicative method proponents focus on aural / oral activities, English-only, activities. On the other hand, Grammar-Translation practitioners argue that students demand and need the translation and explanation of all the details and want the correct meaning, focusing on vocabulary and grammar points at the word or phrase level. Students in both types of classes often miss out on important 'communicative' meaning, such as the writer's intention. I would like to suggest here that adopting the 'strong' version of the communicative approach is an appropriate way of building Japanese students' communicative competence in all the skill areas. It also allows teachers to apply their individual strengths, whether it be oral fluency, extensive knowledge of grammar, or any area of applied linguistics. According to Holliday (1994), in the strong version "the focus is on learning about how language works in discourse. . . as an input to new language production." (1994 : 171).

My argument so far is not that new, 'communicative' activities should not be introduced, but that the 'weak' version of the communicative approach, with which these activities are identified, should not be allowed to limit the extent of communicative methodology. Other activities designed to be flexible and free from the present dogma should be recognized for being 'communicative'. This is not merely a call for tolerance, though it may indeed be lacking. It's an argument for both sides to recognize the limitations of their present positions. The 'communicative' side has to recognize the students' needs to communicate with the text in deeper ways that may call for the native language; the traditional side, the shortcomings of a method

which may have outlived its usefulness. A 'strong' version of the Communicative Approach, with its solid theories of language, language learning, and communication, also has the flexibility to allow students to demand different 'communicative' classes from their teachers. It is a fact of life that students expect different things from different teachers. Part of this is based on habit, or what the teacher has trained them to expect. But there is also the fact that the native English-speaker, and the native, English-as-a-second-language speaker, have different strengths and weaknesses, and experiences, among other things, and these can strongly affect student expectations and demands.

Holliday also stresses the importance of communication between all those involved in the education system. In the Japanese context, one very important group is the designers of the entrance examinations. For anything more than limited success in reform or change, this group needs to adopt a similar approach to English language education as high schools, teachers of English, whether of Oral Communication or Reading, Japanese or non-Japanese, and Mombusho. By increased testing of what is actually taught in schools, they will be providing positive backwash for teachers and students.

The idea of the 'strong' communicative approach focusing on communication between student and text will be developed in the next section. For a variety of reasons, some mentioned above regarding the importance of reading in the EFL situation and for the entrance examinations in Japan, the focus will be on the skill of Reading. The relative importance of this skill cannot be stressed enough, especially with the increase in international communication which is being carried over the 'Internet' and via e-mail, the vast majority of which is in English.

The Communicative Teaching of Reading

The teaching of reading using communicative activities has been promoted successfully for quite some time now. Jigsaw reading and other ‘information-gap’ activities, pair-work and group work involving ‘cloze’ and other exercises, are all being carried out in classrooms even in Grammar-Translation dominated Japan. Ideas from recent research in the process of reading and learning to read, both as a first language, and as a foreign or second language, have also influenced reading classes. Pre-reading activities intended to activate students’ background knowledge or schema, comprehension questions aimed to encourage prediction and guessing of words from context, are included in textbooks and used by many teachers. The idea that reading is a “psycholinguistic guessing game” (Goodman, 1967) involving top-down skills such as those mentioned in the previous sentence, as well as ‘bottom-up’ skills of decoding printed letters, words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and discourse, is not unknown. (For a thorough account of these theories and present practice, see Barnett, 1989). However, I would like to argue that for various reasons, the teaching of reading in Japan has reached a point where a wider approach needs to be taken. This wider approach can be seen from several aspects; as the ‘strong’ interpretation of the communicative approach; as including the ‘sociolinguistic’ aspect of reading along with the psycholinguistic; as a new model of literacy; or as a design which prepares students to read critically, and evaluatively.

Several writers have called for changes in the way reading is taught. For example, in Japan, Hones and Law (1989) argue for a move away from “analytic” reading, involving translation and comprehension of ‘the’ correct information, towards “synthetic” reading which focuses on students gaining a critical comprehension of the text through the use of “approach”,

“understanding”, and “use” exercises. They provide examples of the kinds of exercises which develop this “negotiation” of meaning between the students and the text. Wallace (1992) is another writer who promotes the teaching of critical reading and provides the theory and practice to support her ideas. Relating the two processes of reading and writing, Leki (1993) argues that, in order to bring practice into line with recent theory and research in these processes, we need to allow students to interact meaningfully with the texts that we assign them to read. She calls much of the teaching of reading in a foreign language “Reading for no real reason” or “reading practice.” (p. 13). Regarding the testing of reading, Hill and Parry (1994b) strongly criticize traditional testing of reading comprehension for ignoring the social dimension of literacy. Spolsky (1994) goes further, posing the question, ‘Can understanding be measured?’ His answer is a resounding ‘No’. What these writers share is the view of reading as having a social nature, with a sociolinguistic aspect, and with the reader ‘negotiating’ or ‘re-creating’ a new meaning from the text.

Changing the way we view literacy, and applying these new ideas to the classroom is challenging enough. Applying these ideas to external, independent examinations, which as Hill and Parry (1994a and 1994b) are very aware of, for the sake of objectivity and fairness, aim to test reading as an isolated skill, out of its social context, will be an enormous task. It will involve a great deal of communication between all parties, and requires the widespread recognition of the importance of adopting this view of literacy for the English language education of students. An important point here is that this will involve not only English language educators, but educators at all levels and in subject areas in which the English language literacy of students is important. In many cases, lecturers in academic subjects involving the use of English texts, not only Literature, but also Economics, Politics, and areas

where English sources are of importance, may already be involved in developing activities and tests recognizing the needs of their students and the nature of academic literacy. Language teachers, except for those teaching content-classes or in content-based, task-based programs, are often involved purely in the teaching of reading as a means of improving reading skills or general language skills. If groups of those professors and educators could help to change the nature of university entrance examinations, the effect this would have on the teaching of reading in junior and senior high schools would be immense. Some ideas that would need to be discussed include the inclusion of a writing component, including some short-answer type questions, which may be answered in English or Japanese, and the inclusion of inferential and experiential type questions, which allow the students to bring their own ideas and experiences to the reading text. It is acknowledged that these may involve radical changes to the present examination format at some universities, which may resist them. Communication between groups of educators at all levels may not bring about solutions to all problems but will help to clarify the actual English language communicative needs of students in the future academic, social and occupational aspects of their lives.

Summary

I have tried to argue for the adoption of a wider interpretation of the Communicative Approach presently spreading gradually throughout schools in Japan. This involves reassessing our ideas of appropriate 'communicative' activities for students, and accepting that reading is still relatively the most important language skill for Japanese students. Recognizing some aspects of the Japanese education system, and the importance of university entrance examinations, it is suggested that changes in the way English reading comprehension is tested would have a strong washback effect on the teaching of reading in schools. This would be for the benefit of all those involved.

A 'strong' communicative approach applied at all levels of English language education and across the skills would necessitate the cooperation of all involved.

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