

# **The Need for a Qualitative Change in the Teaching of English in Japan in the 21st Century**

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Second Language Teaching: Reading, Writing and Discourse, June 25, 1999

## **Introduction**

The teaching of foreign languages in Japan has been a topic of concern for many years. The Japanese study foreign languages--especially English--for three years in junior high school, another three years in senior high school, and in the case of many people, at least another two years in university. Yet, when the results of the TOEFL are published by ETS every two years, we hear only sighs from across the country--not once, until the results of the computer-based TOEFL were published in 1999, had the Japanese average surpassed the 500 mark. Worse still, in terms of ranking in comparison with other Asian countries, the Japanese now find themselves almost at the bottom of the list, just two points above North Korea--even in the results of the new computer-based TOEFL (Cf. Educational Testing Service, 1998).

One of the primary reasons that have been given for this dismal situation is the entrance examination-oriented teaching of foreign languages. Although there is evidence to the contrary (cf. Watanabe, 1997), there is little doubt that entrance examinations do have a strong influence on the way foreign languages are taught in Japan. In the present Study Guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Education, there are three Oral Communication subjects listed (A,B & C) from which students must choose at least one. Oral Communication A is basically a conversation course with emphasis on speaking activities, Oral Communication B is a listening comprehension course, and Oral Communication C is a course requiring the students to perform higher level cognitive tasks in English, such as giving speeches, conducting discussions and performing debates (Ministry of Education, 1992). However, there are many entrance examination-oriented high schools where Oral Communication C is adopted only to be changed to what has become a term of ridicule, Oral Communication G--where G stands for grammar, in preparation for college entrance examinations.

## **The Curriculum Council Report**

In the summer of 1998, the Curriculum Council, an advisory committee of the Ministry of Education, released its final report, in which was emphasized two key concepts for the betterment of education in Japan. They were 'yutori' (having the time and space to relax) and 'ikiru chikara' (the zest for living). The term 'yutori,' when applied to the educational situation in Japan, could be better interpreted as 'pressure-free' education, where not only the physical aspects of time and space but also, and more importantly, the psychological aspect of being freed from the pressure of studying for the sake of passing examinations is implied.

The implication is that many Japanese children have lost the zest for living due to the

pressures imposed upon them by the examination-oriented educational environment. The vicious cycle of a child failing in his studies, forming a negative image of himself, failing further in his studies, forming an even more negative image of himself, etc. (cf. Bailey, 1983), is believed to be a major cause of the child losing his 'strength' to live--to find meaning in his life.<sup>1</sup>

To put an end to this vicious cycle, the report recommends several concrete remedies, among which are the following:

### ***1. Implementation of a five-day school week***

At the present time, all public schools are being run under the system of five days a week plus Saturday morning classes every other week. However, the recommendation presses for a complete implementation of the five-day school week from the year 2002.

### ***2. Reduction in number of classroom contact hours --up to 30% per subject***

To give the students more 'yutori' in their lives, the report suggests a 30% reduction in the number of classroom contact hours for all regular subjects.

### ***3. Back to basics***

The children not only have little time to find meaning in their lives, but they are made to study too many things, thus making it difficult for many children to fully acquire the content of the subjects they are studying. Therefore, the report recommends the concentration of teaching on the most essential content materials for each subject.

### ***4. Introduction of a 'Period for Integrated Studies'***

The report also recommends the creation of a more integrated 'experiential' course treating such real-life problems as international understanding, environmental issues, information society, and social welfare issues. It is hoped that these topics will be conducted not simply by reading textbooks, but by actually getting the children to take part in various activities, experiencing and thinking about their causes and remedies.

## **Foreseeable Problems with the Recommendations**

Although the recommendations of the Curriculum Council are in effect adopted by the Ministry of Education as the basis of its educational policy, there are important issues which must be considered before they can be accepted whole-heartedly by the educational world.

The first problem that comes to mind is: will the reduction in classroom contact hours have a positive or negative effect on ultimate level of learning?

I have asked many junior and senior high school English teachers who have attended my workshops whether or not they felt that they presently have enough time to teach everything that they would like to teach. Although less than I had expected, the majority feel that they do not.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, cf. Central Council for Education, 1998.

With the implementation of the new curriculum regular English classes in junior high school will be reduced from the present four hours a week to three hours a week. In senior high schools, the number of classes will be reduced from the present five or six hours a week to four or five hours a week. If many teachers feel even now that the number of English classes is less than sufficient, what will happen when the number of hours is further reduced?

The second problem is: with the realization of the new curriculum, will 'pressure-free' education really be realized? In other words, will simply reducing the number of classroom contact hours in the regular schools bring about 'pressure-free' education and provide an opportunity for the children to find meaning in their lives?

In the summer of 1999, newspapers reported that the Ministry of Education had acknowledged the contributions of private after-school institutions and prep schools in the education of our children. It went even further by proposing to subsidize half the tuition of children who will be studying English in 'model' programs to be instituted in these private after-school institutions on Saturday mornings--when children will no longer be going to the regular schools (Asahi Newspaper, Aug. 30, 1999). Although these private institutions have heretofore been targets of criticism for having instigated the overheated competitive educational society which the ministry is now trying to get rid of, they have, de facto, played a huge role in the academic training of Japanese children. Now, the ministry is formally acknowledging their contribution.

Although this news came as a welcome step in the direction of a more open educational policy by the Ministry of Education, it poses a problem when examined in the light of the new reforms considered for regular schools. It opens the door for children to officially declare the importance of going to 'juku,' or after-school institutions, and prep school. In fact, recently a major prep school for elementary school children aiming to get into top level private junior high schools released an advertisement in Tokyo subways in which they show a mathematics problem with the note "from the year 2002 a lot of learning content will no longer be taught (in the regular schools)." The implied message is, of course: come to us, and we will teach you everything you need (that your schools won't teach you) to get into the best junior high schools. Will children simply compensate for loss in school-centered learning by attending 'jukus' and prep schools? If so, will there really be 'pressure-free' education? And what will be the role of the regular schools?

The final problem is: will teachers be able to make the necessary changes to meet the challenges brought about by the reforms? The reforms were recommended because people felt that the present educational system is not working. If teachers are not prepared to change their philosophy, their ways of teaching and educating the children, what will become of our schools?

### **Key words in the New Study Guidelines**

In order to try to find an answer to the final problem above, let us first look at the ideas presented by the Ministry of Education to see what the government thinks about the goals and aims of foreign language education in Japan.

The Study Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 1999) are written for the purpose of realizing

the ideals presented in the Curriculum Council Report. Separate guidelines are created for each subject, and our focus will be on the English course guidelines written for junior and senior high schools.

The following are the main objectives which the guidelines aim to accomplish:

**1. *Foster positive attitude to communicate***

This objective was first introduced in the present guidelines (Ministry of Education, 1992) and was intended to 'motivate' the students to want to communicate in English. However, after ten years, it has still not really taken root. The introduction of thousands of foreign assistant teachers into the Japanese school system has exerted a positive influence on the students in that they have been given the opportunity to come in contact with people who speak a different language and come from a different cultural background. However, the students' level of English, in general, has not improved by much, at least by TOEFL standards. Hence, the importance of again emphasizing the need to motivate the students to want to communicate in English.

**2. *Develop practical ability to communicate***

The new study guidelines has added this objective in order to make the motivational objective more concrete by emphasizing the need to get our students to actually communicate in English. In the new guidelines, for the first time, there is a list of so-called practical situations in which English should be practiced, as well as a list of language functions (e.g. requests, asking for information, etc.) which should be learned in order to acquire English as a practical tool for communication. The situations and functions are to be considered when textbook writers and publishers come out with new textbooks based on the new guidelines. They are also to be considered by the teachers themselves when they teach English in the classroom.

**3. *Deepen understanding for languages and cultures***

The need to emphasize the understanding of foreign languages and cultures, as well as international understanding as an aim in learning English is nothing new (cf. Yoshida, 1999). People have been emphasizing it for thirty years, and yet, it can never be overemphasized. As the world becomes smaller, the more need there is for people of different languages and cultures to understand each other.

**4. *Integrated treatment of skills***

Finally, although this is not mentioned in the item noting the aims of foreign language education, it is mentioned as an important premise for how foreign languages should be taught. The idea is that foreign languages should be taught using all the four skill areas; that listening cannot be separated from speaking, nor reading from writing. What students hear and say in a 'here-and-now' context, must also be written and read for the purpose of displaced communication. Communication in our modern world is conducted not simply by means of sounds. It is conducted also, and very often even more so, through the medium of writing.

The above aims presented in the study guidelines might be 'ideal.' However, the emphasis it places on the development of communicative proficiency is something that can no longer be ignored as being 'idealistic.' The problems expected as the result of the implementation of the reforms mentioned in the Curriculum Council Report must be met and challenged, and the direction that has been given to do this, is through the realization of the ideals mentioned in the study guidelines--by changing the mentality of the teachers as to the purpose and aims of foreign language teaching in Japan.

### **A Look at Two Major Models of Teaching Foreign Languages**

It was mentioned earlier that when asked if they had sufficient time to teach all that they thought was necessary for their students, the majority of the teachers answered that they did not. However, in a few more years, the number of classroom contact hours will be reduced. How will these teachers cope with the situation of less contact hours if they think that even now, they do not have enough time to teach everything they think their students need?

Back to basics. Maybe schools are trying to teach too much. If the number of items taught is reduced, and only the most essential materials retained, then the problem of 'not enough time' might be solved. But will it solve the quality of education? If 'jukus' and prep schools keep providing the children with what will no longer be taught in the regular schools, then--for good or for bad--there will be children as well as parents who will depend on the 'jukus' and prep schools, and not the regular schools, for their children's education.

The only way out of this nightmare for the regular school teacher is to find a better way to educate the children in lesser time and with fewer 'mandatory' teaching materials, and yet, produce better results than they are producing at the present time. The White Paper on Education (1999) recently released by the Ministry of Education stresses the point that although the quantity of the materials to be taught may be reduced, this will not bring about a lowering in the academic ability of the students. It goes on to make the point that with the reduction in the quantity of the materials, students will be given more opportunities to think on their own and will be able to discover the 'zest for living' emphasized in the Curriculum Council Report.

This, then, means that teachers will be required to make qualitative changes in their methods as well as philosophy of education. As far as the teaching of English is concerned, although many teachers have been blaming the entrance examination system as the reason for not being able to change their traditional ways of teaching to the more communicative way, there are changes being made at the university level. For example, Yomiuri On-Line (Sept. 20, 1999) reports that the University Entrance Examination Center is now seriously considering the long overdue inclusion of a listening comprehension segment in the nation-wide university entrance examinations in the not-too-far future. Although this is only a start, it is felt that this will provide an impetus for high schools to begin incorporating more communicative methods in their teaching of English.

### ***The Teacher-centered Approach***

At this point we will look more closely at a traditional approach to the teaching of English--especially in Japanese senior high schools--which is the most widely adhered to approach in Japanese high schools at the present time.<sup>2</sup>

In this approach, the teacher is the one in control--not only of the materials for learning, but also for how the materials are to be learned. Through repetition, reading out loud, explanations in grammar, translation exercises, answering display questions (cf. Long & Sato (1983) for a discussion on display and referential question forms) and pattern practice, the teacher's objective is the students' learning of the forms and rules of the language. The meanings conveyed by the forms are usually of secondary concern.

Along with the forms and rules of the language, each of the four skills is usually treated separately as targets of learning, as can often be seen in classes focusing on listening comprehension--where the emphasis is on the teaching of listening skills and on the 'objective' comprehension of the meaning--again a display activity--rather than on the listener's own interpretation of the content of what the student has listened to.

One further point to be mentioned is that because the emphasis is on the forms, rules and skills, the final assessment is usually biased in the direction of accuracy. Despite the fact that some teachers do include referential--genuine communication--activities in their classes, it is usually the case that when test time comes, the assessment is based on the accurate recognition and reproduction of the forms, rules and skills.

It should be noted that as long as teachers adhere to this approach the teaching of English, the reduction in classroom contact hours will definitely pose a big problem. How can they teach all that needs to be taught within the reduced number of hours they will have--especially when many teachers feel that even now they do not have enough time to do so? At the same time, if even with the amount of materials students are required to learn now, the level of English--granted the result of the TOEFL is an accurate measure of English proficiency--is far from sufficient, then what will become of the Japanese English learner's ability when the amount of teaching materials is cut?

A qualitative change in the approach to the teaching of English must be considered if we are to realize the ideals and fulfill the objectives laid out by the Ministry of Education for English education in the coming century.

### ***The Learner-centered Approach***

In contrast to the teacher-centered approach described above, the learner-centered approach assumes that the learner is not only the recipient but also an active contributor to the learning process. As Nunan (1991) and others note, in this approach, English is learned through the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, for our present purpose, although dividing language teaching approaches into just two types was thought to be sufficient, others use more detailed divisions depending on their research objectives; e.g. Long & Robinson, 1998, Richards & Rodgers, 1986.

process of interaction<sup>3</sup>, through the use of authentic materials and personalized experiences. What is important is not necessarily the product--language form and language skills--but the process of learning the language through meaningful interaction and communication. Furthermore, it is more important to motivate the students to become active and autonomous learners (Aoki, 1996) capable of learning on their own by activating their knowledge and interests outside the classroom than to relegate them to the position of passive recipients of language materials provided solely by the teacher.

In this approach, students are considered to be providers of their own learning through authentic and meaningful interaction. They are not passive 'containers' which teachers must fill with linguistic knowledge, but they are generators of their own learning materials. They learn language forms and rules, not because somebody else thinks they are important for them but because they themselves experience the need for them in order to express their desires and opinions. As Clark (1983) mentions for children acquiring their first language, and as Krashen (1982) implies for learners of a second language, communicative motivation is considered to be the essential motivating force in the learning of a language. If students feel the need to communicate, they will learn the language form necessary to overcome this need. In other words, in this approach the emphasis is not on the direct learning of language form or rule itself, but on acquiring the best possible way to express meaning.

The so-called four skills are also not in themselves the targets of learning, but the necessary tools to express and understand meaning. We can practice the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, and yet, without genuine communicative situations in which the use of these skills is essential in solving real problems, we would not really acquire them. On the other hand, no matter how little we might have practiced these skills formally, their necessity in the actual communicative situation will force us to understand the language and to express ourselves.

We can rephrase the above by stressing the importance of the efforts of the learner to communicate with other people--by trying to understand and by trying to express himself. In order to do so, however, we must also acknowledge the fact that neither a complete and perfect knowledge of language form nor a native-like proficiency in the four skills is a prerequisite. Learner language, or interlanguage (cf. Selinker, 1972; Corder, 1981), is a necessary kind of language that all learners acquire. No one acquires language forms or skills perfectly from the very beginning. Yet, in many language classes, there tends to be too much emphasis placed on accuracy of form and perfection in language skills. For the Japanese, the distinction, both in perception and production, between /r/ and /l/ is something that cannot be acquired from the very beginning. In fact, Lobo & Yoshida (1982, 1985) have shown that, at least in perception, the distinction can be made in a meaningful context much earlier than in a decontextualized phonetic context. In fact, it might never really be possible for Japanese to acquire the ability to distinguish between /r/ and /l/ in a decontextualized phonetic context. Yet, he might be able to make all the necessary distinctions wherever it is needed in a meaningful communicative context.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. also Long & Robinson (1998) on the role of interaction in the learning process.

The acknowledgement of this learner language is essential in any learner-centered approach to language learning. If we want our students to communicate in English, then we must accept their 'My English' (Tanaka, 1997)--which is the students' version of learner language. If the individual student's 'My English' is not communicable, then the need to communicate will become an impetus for the student to change his individual 'My English' to a more commonly understood 'Our English.' Students learn to communicate through communication; they learn the linguistic means to do so also through communication. (Figure 1)

The attainment of native-like knowledge of and ability in the foreign language is not the beginning but the ultimate goal (albeit ideal) of a gradual process of language learning.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have discussed the problems underlying the direction in which English education in Japan is headed in the coming century. Although there are practical problems that have to be solved, the basic ideals and tenets presented by the Ministry of Education are reachable goals, if teachers agree to change their ways of teaching from the traditional teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach. Human beings cannot live isolated from each other. One of the most basic needs we have is to understand and to be understood by the people around us. As Clark and others imply, our cognition as well as linguistic ability grow through communication. The teaching of foreign languages also should be geared towards the fulfilling of this basic need to communicate.

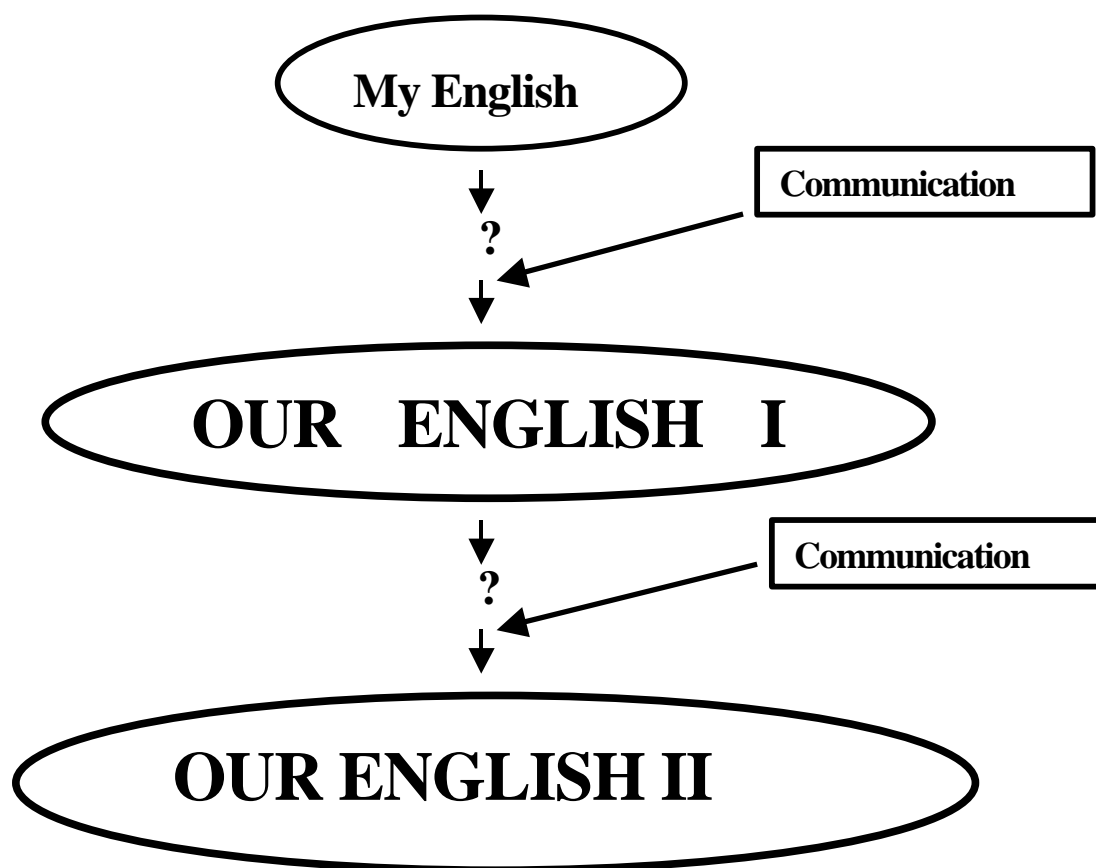
If this basic need is met, then reductions in classroom contact hours will have minimal effect on our students because they will be motivated to use English both in and out of the classroom. There is English all around us. We do not have to be in the classroom to be exposed to it. If we can motivate our students to find meaning in the English that surrounds them, they will be motivated to learn it.

The 'zest for living' can only be attained by our children if they are able to 'find meaning' in what they are doing. Simply 'understanding' the structure of English is no guarantee that the students will be motivated to use it. It is only through learner-initiated communication that they can become autonomous learners capable of learning English on their own, for their own personal objectives.

A qualitative change in the teaching of English in Japan from the teacher-centered to the learner-centered approach is probably the only solution there is to the problems we face in meeting the demands of the new educational system in Japan for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



**Figure 1 The development of learner language through communication**



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