English Education in Japan to Meet Curriculum Policy

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In this report, English education in Japan is discussed. In order to write about this broad topic on Japanese English education, first a historical background of English curriculum policy related to various changes made by the Ministry of Education in Japan (hereafter referred to as MEXT) is given. Second, contemporary learning theories, complementary teaching methods and activities connected to MEXT's English policy changes are addressed. In this discussion, the growing popularity of active learning as an important approach to classroom interactions is included. The aim of this report is to help Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) in their teacher development and learners to meet the changing demands and challenges of teaching and learning English in the 21st century.

Historical context of MEXT English Policies

In the national curriculum for secondary education (junior and senior high school), the first Course of Study Guidelines for foreign language teaching was released in 1947. The guidelines suggested that teaching and learning a foreign language should be done with habit information as the ultimate goal. The primary focus was on listening and speaking skills and it was advisable to accurately imitate utterances. This approach to teaching and learning was supported by a learning approach called behaviorism that was popular at the time. More will be said about this approach later.

A Focus on Grammar

In the 1950s, there were changes in the guidelines that began to focus more on the importance of grammar rules and language structures. Although the focus on speaking and listening skills still remained an important aim, the focus on grammar created less opportunities for learners to develop those skills. By the 1960's MEXT introduced the grammar translation method, which is often called *yakudoku*. This method of teaching still exists in many English language classrooms throughout Japan. In *yakudoku*, students are presented texts in English: in junior high conversational texts; in senior high readings about topics.

Students are asked to translate the texts into Japanese and focus on grammar points. In many cases, the criticism is that this approach focuses much more on the structures in the texts than on any meaningful understanding about the content. This is a limitation of Grammar Translation method or *yakudoku*.

I believe that spending much time on *yakudoku* method is not needed because it is an outdated approach that historically was useful, but is no longer required as much as before. For example, during the Meiji period *yakudoku* could play an important role when Japan was opening up to get ideas from western countries that were going through a highly productive industrial revolution. At that time what was needed was translating modern ideas in science, medicine, engineering, etc. that required skills to read foreign texts and translate the ideas into uses in Japan. Communication skills were not the focus as only an elite few would go abroad or read the texts to translate into Japanese. However, in these past decades, fortunately, Japan has grown into a major economy, and with that Japanese people, not only the elite, cross borders at a rapid pace at all ages for work, study, and vacation. Nowadays, communication skills in English as an international language are very important.

Consequently, since the 1960s there have been changes in English education (see Figure 1). Along with Japan's social and economic development, MEXT's guidelines started to focus on communicative ability to comprehend the foreign language as opposed to grammar-driven curricula. In 1970s and 80s, MEXT guidelines began to emphasize a stronger recognition of communicative purposes of language learning. (MEXT, 1977, 1978). Since 1989, MEXT has taken a strong interest in the effects of globalization, and this has influenced MEXT's perspective on Japanese education. In 2003, English was considered the primary international language, therefore, communicative skills in English were thought to be essential for learners. MEXT started to require English language teachers to basically conduct 'all English' classes instead of in Japanese.

Several major revisions were also made in the new Course of Study Guidelines for schools from spring 2012. One noticeable change was that the importance of balance in the teaching of the four skills was clearly stressed (MEXT, 2008a) as can be seen from the overall objective "to develop students' basic communication

abilities such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing"(MEXT, 2008a, p.1) In addition, MEXT (2008b) mentioned classroom activities for practicing communication was not merely to increase grammar teaching, which indicated that the purpose of foreign language education was to foster communicative ability.
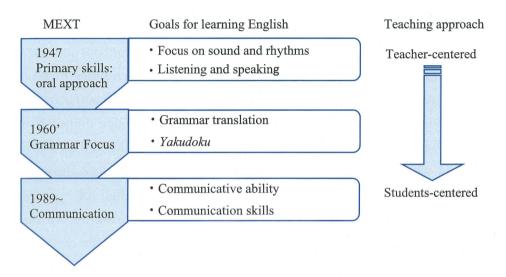
MEXT	Goals for learning English	Teaching approach
1947 Primary skills: oral approach	• Focus on sound and rhythms • Listening and speaking	Teacher-centered
1960' Grammar Focus	• Grammar translation • *Yakudoku*	
1989~ Communication	• Communicative ability • Communication skills	Students-centered

Figure 1. Evolution of MEXT English guidelines overall goal

These recent changes of MEXT above apparently show that the movement from teacher-centered teaching, in which students are passive participants, to student-centered teaching and learning, in which students are active. These changes also meant teachers needed to change and acquire suitable or more contemporary learning theories and teaching methods, which lead to different types of active learning activities.

Contemporary Learning Approaches to Meet MEXT's Policy Goals

Over 60 years ago, the learning theory of behaviorism was popular. The word itself explains the approach. Behaviorism is built on the idea stemming from experimenting with animals that behaviors can be trained to produce the desired effect or result. In the case of humans, a famous child developmental psychologist, B.F. Skinner found that through stimulus and response, verbal behavior can be trained through habit formation. However, a limitation of a behaviorism approach in the classroom is that humans are much more capable of going beyond stimulus

and response training. A famous linguistic researcher, Noam Chomsky challenged Skinner when he wrote that unlike animals, we are born with language ability and we can produce many more complex sentences than limited patterns that we imitate in the classroom. Therefore, in the 21st century, the idea of a behaviorist approach has become less popular in the classroom although it still exists throughout the world because it is easy to use and easy to train teachers even though the approach has limitations.

A more contemporary learning approach that is appropriate for active learning in the classroom, where students are given opportunities to go beyond repeating and translating ideas of others, is called social constructivism. In social constructivism too, the words explain the concept. The idea comes from Lev Vygotsky, who found that learners need opportunities to build on their learning by interacting with others. His famous idea is that learning develops through social interactions. He believed that language plays an important dual role; one as a tool to express our thoughts; two as means to stimulate our thinking. Through the medium of language as a tool in social interaction, we learn. In the classroom, this means teachers need to use teaching methods that lead to activities for learners where they can collaborate to develop and communicate their ideas to each other.

Complementary Teaching Methods

To see how learning theories are used in the classroom, we can look at teaching methods that use the theories. One method is called audio-lingualism (AL), which is supported by behaviorism. In AL learners focus on producing vocabulary and grammatical patterns (like *Yakudoku*) through repetition drills. Correct habit formation is important and errors need to be corrected immediately. Learners are passive participants as they repeat words, phrases or sentences after the teacher or speakers on recordings. The content does not have to be meaningful to the learners' lives. Instead, the focus of meaning is on producing the correct repeated text. On the other hand, communicative language teaching (CLT) focuses on having students create and produce content that is more relative to their daily lives. Moreover, students are given opportunities to talk with each other to express their ideas and errors are seen as being part of the natural process of learning that actually helps learners to develop their communicative abilities. CLT is supported by social constructivism. Table 1 is a comparison chart of AL and CLT.

Table1. *A comparative model of ALM and CLT* (adapted from Finocchiaro &Brumfit , 1983, in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, pp156-157).

	Principles of AL	Principles of CLT
1	Attends to structures and form more than meaning.	Meaning is paramount.
2	Demands memorization of structure-based dialogues.	Dialogues, if used, center around communicative function and are not normally memorized.
4	Language leaning is learning structures, sounds, or words.	Language learning is learning to communicate
5	Communicative activities only come after a long process of rigid drill and exercises.	Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning.
6	The target linguistic system will be learned through overt teaching of the patterns of the system.	The target linguistic system will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate.
7	The teacher controls the learners and prevents them from doing anything that conflicts with the theory.	Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language.
8	"Language is a habit" so errors must be prevented at all cost.	Language is created by the individual, often through trial and error.
9	Accuracy, in terms of formal correctness, is a primary goal.	Fluency and acceptable language is the primary goal: Accuracy judged not in the abstract in context.
10	Students are expected to interact with the language system, embodied in machines or controlled materials.	Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work, or in their writings
11	The teacher is expected to specify the language that students are to use	The teacher cannot know exactly what language the students will use.
12	Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in the structure of the language.	Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language.

The above chart shows that many features of AL using behaviorism theory to focus on language structures through memorization and drills are similar to traditional teaching methods used in Japanese English classes. On the other hand, CLT can be connected to social constructivism because of the social focus of learning through interactive activities in pair/group work, allowing the learners "to struggle" so that they are given opportunities to construct or build on their own development in the target language. The emphasis on CLT is also on fluency and meaning and it is student-centered as there is less control by the teacher. When you look at the descriptions of CLT we can see its collaborative nature, such as information gap, activities that require student social interaction. These activities allow the learners to struggle to construct and express meaning and have relevance to social constructivism and active learning

Active Learning in the classroom:
Teacher's role, Students' role and a Jigsaw Activity

Active learning means what it says. The focus is on getting the students to actively participate in activities. Under active learning, the roles and activities in a classroom change. The teacher's role is to provide less teacher fronted instruction. There is an expression that the teacher needs to move from being a 'sage on the stage' to a 'guide on the side'. The role of a teacher is to be a facilitator. The students' role is to be active and responsible participants in activities. Active means they should try to come up with ideas and ways to express those ideas in English. Responsible means that because there is less control of the teacher, they have to take responsibility to take part in collaborative activities through active participation. The role of the teacher is to first as a sage on the stage, set up activities, provide needed vocabulary and content help, and then as a guide on the side go around and interact with students who are working collaboratively in pairs and groups to give them appropriate guidance during the activities.

There are many types of activities supported by social constructivism and CLT that get students to actively and collaborative participate. In this report, jigsaw activity will be briefly explained. A jigsaw activity is designed to give students opportunities to actively participate. Students work collaboratively to solve a problem or challenge of a task. They are first put into home groups where they are given roles such as parts of a story or content of a topic. Then, they move out of the home groups to their assigned working groups: A,B,C,D. Each working group has the same role and the students discuss or work on understanding their part. Then, they come back to their home groups and report on their part (piece of the puzzle) of the content. A jigsaw activity brings together the learning theory of social constructivism and the teaching method of CLT and collaborative learning. It allows the students to come up with their own understandings of the content and express it in their own ways. They also have to be responsible as the other members in the home groups, waiting to hear from them about their part to complete the task. In short, a jigsaw activity is an example of bringing active learning to the classroom.

Concluding remarks

This report is on English education in Japan. By providing an historical view of the curriculum policy changes implemented by MEXT, an argument was made

for why more contemporary collaborative learning teaching methods, such as CLT supported by social constructivism are suitable. This claim was made in comparison to teaching supported by behaviorism. Active learning was discussed because it is a 'hot' topic these days in Japanese education. Prince (2004) writes that in teacher centered classrooms during lectures students' attention level is not so long. Learning of the first 10 minutes of lecture was 70 percent, and 20 percent in last 10 minutes. Therefore, thinking about active learning, don't you think teachers should include some social constructivist, collaborative CLT supported interactive activities with students at the time when their attention is ready to wander?

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