

Unit 1-1 Introduction to English Language Education in Japan

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1.0

This section presents one feature of the current situation of English Language Education in Japan, referring to the Course of Study initiated by the Japanese government and actual methods used by educators in classrooms. Following discussion of the concept of the Course of Study, one of the attempts to develop students' "communicative competence" is described.

1.1 Course of Study and Classrooms

English Language Education in Japan has placed great emphasis on grammar for a long time. It was not until the last half of the 1980s when the Japanese government began to take action on English education with regards to the internationalization of Japan. It was initiated by the theoretical and practical transition of second language acquisition (SLA) in foreign countries and by the globalization throughout the world. Within the scope of the new Course of Study in 1988, boards of education and schools started to work on a new English teaching style to enable students to acquire communicative competence, which was advanced by Hymes (1972 and 1974) and Canale and Swain (1980a and 1980b). Following the key concept of the Course of Study, "practical" communicative competence has been emphasized since the recent 1998 revision: Nagasawa (2003). Having placed too much stress on grammar for a long time, the English education system in Japan is now on the way to being reformed.

Boards of education have led various attempts to develop students' practical

communicative competence, such as the introduction of English to some elementary schools and the foundation of "Super English High Schools": *The Japan Times* (2002). On the other hand, changes in the classrooms of most of the general public schools are gradual. High schools, particularly some excellent, high level schools, are still placing major stress on English grammar for the purpose of success in college entrance examinations, considering the earning of high marks to be of primary importance. The practice of using listening tests in the Common Entrance Examinations, scheduled to be inducted in a few years, may cause a radical reform of the method of studying English in the classrooms of high schools.

Meanwhile, junior high schools have more opportunities for developing students' communicative competence, in view of the fact that 1) contents of study made for beginners of English are uncomplicated, thus, they readily correspond with oral practice, 2) first and second grade students of junior high schools are more eager to speak English than senior high school students, and 3) public high school entrance examinations of English have been shifting from grammatically based tests to practically based ones. In so far as personal experience as a teacher in a junior high school, not only communicative competence, but also overall English ability can be developed through practical, oral-based teaching. The students who were taught English by means of English, which is, as of yet, uncommon in classrooms, were able to make high scores in written tests. Additionally, those who were not required to make an exact translation from English to Japanese, sentence by sentence, could read English considerably faster with better comprehension.

Teaching grammar to learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) is inescapable, and rather indispensable. The problem with placing excessive stress on grammar is that learners use more time for memorizing grammatical rules and

vocabularies and for interpreting English texts than for oral interactions. Not being capable of communicating in English, even after a long period of studying, or not being able to keep up with the method of teaching, many learners give up studying English and/or avoid English altogether. Nonetheless, in recent years, communicating in English has become a requirement due to the globalization of the world and its use of English as a lingua franca. It is too late to start trying to communicate in English when an EFL learner has become an adult; usually, substantial difficulties in pronunciations and intonations arise making it extremely challenging to ever communicate effectively. It is imperative for teachers to focus on developing the communication skills of the students, since learning comes more easily at a younger age.

One attempt to reach this goal is being carried out by a cooperative effort between a board of education and the schools in its jurisdiction that are working together for the purpose of developing students' communicative competence. It is called the "Interactive English Forum" and it is presented in the next section.

1.2 Interactive English Forum

Due to the shift in emphasis of the Course of Study in Japan, boards of education and schools are seeking better means to improve students' communicative competence. A concrete example of this effort is an "Interactive English Forum" (Forum), which has been conducted since 1999 by the Ibaraki Prefectural Board of Education. The "Speech Contest," held annually up until 1998, was discontinued since memorizing and reciting a speech is only one-way communication. In its place, this pioneering approach aiming at the students' oral interactions was put into practice. The prefecture has also been shifting its high school entrance

examinations of English from more grammatical-based to more practical-based ones. One of the purposes of the Forum is "to develop students' communicative competence placing emphasis on interaction in English as an international language": Ibaraki Prefectural Board of Education (1999).

Two second grade students and two third grade students from each of the 234 schools in the prefecture, 468 students per grade, participate in the first level of the Forum held by city or by county, called "County and City Forum." About 40% (180 students) of those participants proceed to the second level of the Forum that involves five districts, called "District Forum." Twenty percent of the participants of the District Forums, 36 students in all, are selected to participate in the final level for the prefecture, called the "Prefecture Forum."

All the third grade students have studied English for nearly two and a half years - the second grade students for one and a half years - by the time of the Forum, which is held just before and during summer vacation. Students who have studied abroad more than 6 months cannot participate in the Forum. Students are not asked whether or not they studied English at private English schools, like cram schools, as elementary school students.

The students participating in the Forum are divided into groups consisting of three members, or four in rare cases; the number of participants is determined by random selection. A few minutes prior to the interaction, the students are given a topic that will be discussed for five minutes in front of a panel of judges. Prior to the free conversation in the group, each student is given 30 seconds of self-introduction to avoid taking too much time for introductions in the conversation. Only three topics - "family", "friends," and "school" - are used at the County and City Forums, as well as at the first round of District Forums; hence, students are able

to practice what to talk about in advance, to some extent. Nonetheless, students are required to maintain interaction with others at the Forum, so if a student changes the topic suddenly because of prior practice, the judges are to deduct some points. Topics for the second round at the District Forums and all rounds of the Prefecture Forums are chosen from the words in the students' junior high school English textbooks such as "useful," "holiday," and so forth. This requires students to carry out more realistic conversations than students at the lower level are able to do.

The participants are not always the top-ranked students, but in many cases are those students who are fond of interacting with people. The impressions given by most of the students regarding the Forum are that it was an enjoyable experience and friendships were formed with many other students from different schools. This is different from the participants of the Speech Contest who, it is said, could acquire confidence in English, but did not take pleasure in the Contest nor in the practicing process. Those students who enjoy speaking in English often achieve excellent progress while practicing for the Forum, and even during the Forum. Most of the participants of the Forum received better grades in English class after the Forum, even though reading or writing wasn't practiced at all.

The participants ranked higher by the judges proceed to the next level Forum. However, many of the participants and teachers regard the ranking as controversial with the thought that the interactions should not be graded. After observing the interactions, the judges mark the participants in accordance with the judging criteria. The decision for the number of judges is entrusted to each of the Forums conducted by the different jurisdictions. An example panel is: one assistant language teacher (ALT) and one Japanese teacher of English (JTE) judge per grade for the first and the second rounds, then all judges adjudicating the final round for

both the second and third graders. The jurisdictions choose ALTs who work in that locale, and JTEs are most often supervisors of the board of education or high school teachers in the locale who are proficient in English.

The judging sheet has three main criteria: see Appendix 1 for details.

1) Intelligibility of Expressions (10 points)

e.g. the degree to which the participant is able to get the meaning across to the listener

2) Cooperativeness/Friendliness (10 points)

e.g. 1 provided topics/adapted well to the flow of conversation/rescued conversation from a lull

e.g. 2 asked pertinent questions/made pertinent comments

e.g. 3 interacted with others in a balanced way

e.g. 4 appeared to enjoy interaction

e.g. 5 was not afraid of making small mistakes

3) Appropriateness of Expressions (10 points)

e.g. 1 used appropriate vocabulary and expressions

e.g. 2 spoke fluently

e.g. 3 used only English

It is impractical to mark three or four students at a time based on the criteria since judges only have approximately one minute between two consecutive interactions. The performance of each group takes nearly seven minutes; that is, three students have a 30-second self-introduction respectively and a five-minute conversation as a group. During the shift from one group to the next, judges are to

mark all of the students in the group, negotiating with each other, and then submit the judging sheet before the next group begins. The judges are required to grade approximately 20 to 30 groups in a day. Through personal experience as a judge and an organizer, giving objective, discrete-point evaluation to every student is strenuous. As a result, in reality, the evaluation tends to be holistic, and global.

While teaching English to students and observing interactions by the students in the Forums, some questions have arisen. What kind of ability enables the students to be proficient in English? What kinds of “communicative competence” does the Course of Study expect junior high school students to possess? Are there any specific areas that teachers can teach students to improve communicative competence?

This was the starting point of the present study; however, it became apparent that this aim was too broad, and it would be impossible to research all the areas in detail. Though this kind of pioneering activity has not become popular among junior high schools or high schools yet, the study of the Forum should show some pedagogical implications for better teaching.

To summarize a practical activity called the “Interactive English Forum” has been carried out for developing junior high school students’ “communicative competence” along the lines of the Course of Study. The purpose of the current study is to evaluate the students' oral interaction skills in terms of communicative competence. The following section discusses the background of this research.

Acknowledgement

This is a part of MA thesis written by Junko Negishi (2004) supervised by Michiko Nakano and presented here to give our readers a clear understanding of English Language Education in Japan.