

A Theoretical Evaluation of English Communication Objectives Set for Japanese Senior High School Students

Raymond LEVY

レイモンド レヴィ :

日本の高校生に設定した英語コミュニケーションの目標に対する理論的評価

鳥取短期大学研究紀要 第69号 抜刷

2014年6月

A Theoretical Evaluation of English Communication Objectives Set for Japanese Senior High School Students

Raymond LEVY

レイモンド レヴィ：日本の高校生に設定した英語コミュニケーションの目標に対する理論的評価

National education is continually revising and updating curriculums for English education across all academic levels, often with ideological objectives that do not adequately reflect the current pragmatic and social situations facing students. Senior high school courses in particular combine objectives and plans of execution that are not always compatible. This paper reviews course objectives from a theoretical standpoint and offers suggestions to interweave theory with practical application methods to ensure senior high school students improve their fluency with understanding and productively using English.

Keywords : senior high school, curriculum, instruction methods, motivation

Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been continually seeking reform and improvement for its English education programs in all levels. From reforms introduced in 1999¹⁾ to a recent call by some jurisdictions to increase their numbers of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), various proposals and goals have been put forward aimed at increasing communicative competence. At present, there is a particular impetus acting upon the nation to increase the English ability of its youth ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Even before the games' announcement, a need to improve language competence and fluency had been recognized by educators, students, and policy makers for some time. The implementation of reforms, however, is fraught with difficulties resulting from the cultural

and social climate into which they are being introduced.

Fluid communication and linguistic activities are among the proposals drafted in MEXT's latest reform plan for senior high school released in early 2014²⁾. Laudable goals though they may be, they run somewhat in contrast with the reality that faces senior high school students during their three years at that level and beyond. Most secondary level educators teach English – especially in the second and third years of senior high school – exclusively in a preparing manner to get students ready for university entrance examinations. The admission policies for post-secondary education institutions is ultimately left up to the schools themselves, and indeed a standardized test is an effective way to handle large volumes of applications in a timely fashion, however testing grammatical rules that call for a single answer ignores the fluid and variable nature of language. In turn, this system causes

English to be marginalized as a subject to be dissected and memorized, rather than explored as a means of personal and professional intercommunication. The problem-response nature of learning English in high schools keeps students from taking chances³⁾ and runs contrary to the MEXT policies of encouraging active communication and expression.

In this article, I will discuss several theories that influence students' language understanding and achievement. I will consider how some national secondary-level English communication strategy policies may and may not adequately reflect the reality faced by students and teachers, and evaluate ways in which these policies can adopt some of the theoretical concepts. Concepts will include the role of student motivation, mediums of instruction that assist students in their language acquisition, and strategies stemming from the theory of Strategic Competence.

Senior High School English Curriculum

To begin with, a brief summary of the current senior high school foreign language education policies as they pertain to English will be stated to provide context. MEXT is the federal ministry responsible for national education administration. MEXT establishes the criteria for courses and their requirements, including curriculum guidelines that specify materials used in instruction (e.g. textbooks)⁴⁾. At the upper secondary level, school courses are classified into three categories: general, specialized and integrated courses. MEXT defines general courses as those providing "mainly general education suited to the needs of both those who wish to advance to higher education and those who are

going to get a job but have chosen no specific vocational area," specialized courses as "mainly intended to provide vocational or other specialized education for those students who have chosen a particular vocational area as their future career," and integrated courses as "offering a wide variety of subject areas and subjects from both the general and the specialized courses, in order to adequately satisfy students' diverse interests, abilities and aptitudes, future career plans, etc."⁵⁾

Among the 10 groups of general education courses is Foreign Language, with the stated objective of "deepening understanding related to language and culture, increasing active communication, and understanding the intention of information and other parties as well as cultivating the ability of practical communication to express students' own thoughts, all through foreign language⁶⁾." The courses mandated to be taught are: Oral Communication I, Oral Communication II, English I, English II, Reading, and Writing. MEXT allows for other languages to be taught in lieu of English, provided they follow the same objectives and content laid out for the six previous courses. In practice, most schools concentrate on English as it is language most often tested in post-secondary entrance examinations.

In addition, English is offered as a branch within the specialized courses, and is comprised of the following courses: Comprehensive English, English Understanding, English Expression, Cross-cultural Understanding, Life English, Current English, and Computer/Language Learning Exercises.

Specific objectives, contents, and management vary from class to class, however common features are found among the courses: fostering attitudes and behaviors that promote active

communication, understanding information delivered by a source or speaker, expressing ideas and opinions, and a development of skills learned from junior high school. Other common themes will occur among consecutive classes (OCI & OCII, English I & English II) and interdependent classes (Reading & Writing), however the aforementioned features are consistently found among all course descriptions. Furthermore, all classes have grammatical goals, though the specific grammatical points will vary from class to class.

When drafting curriculums, educators are caught between two seemingly unbridgeable extremes: wanting to apply their personal knowledge and ideas to individualize lessons, and crafting syllabuses that closely match other teachers and schools' own to ensure their students have as level a playing field for subsequent exam preparation as other students. Nevertheless, there are several theories and factors that educators can bear in mind and incorporate into classrooms when considering how to conduct their courses.

Motivational Factors

Motivation in the context of Japanese ESL/EFL education has received a significant amount of attention from government and academic researchers⁷⁾. Deci and Ryan⁸⁾ proposed a *self-determination theory*, using terms like *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation to describe two complementary aspects of learner motivation. To what extent was overall motivation attributed to the learner (personal experience, goals, etc.) and to factors outside of the learner (environment, education tools, social influences, etc.) became worthwhile avenues for research.

As mentioned above, the entrance-exam-centered environment of Japan is an external factor that can translate into an intrinsic motivational factor for the learner. Most senior high school students have had not only the experience of rigorously preparing for high school entrance examinations, but also constant testing and evaluation throughout the three years they are in high school. Hall Vogel⁹⁾ notes that the pressures of such frequent testing can be so intense that it can lead to school absenteeism and societal withdrawal. For many students, this system can become internalized into a thought process of treating school subjects as exercises in memorization and recitation – language included.

The implementation of language instruction is ultimately left to the discretion of the schools. Many classes – especially those outside of Oral Communication I and II – are structured in a fact-retention manner that at times conflicts with the MEXT policy of encouraging active communication. Indeed, it reinforces the idea that English is something to be practiced in a question-appropriate response manner rather than as a method of communication. In so doing, a learner's intrinsic motivation can fall if they see English only as something used for testing and not as something that can be used for personal and social development.

Zhang and Zhang¹⁰⁾ conducted a study comparing the motivation for learning English between senior high school students from China and Japan. They found that while students from both countries had similar factors affecting their self-confidence when it comes to English, “motivation intensity affects Chinese students' English scores, while Japanese students are influenced by desire to learn English and English

class anxiety.”¹¹⁾ In other words, most Chinese students possessed a motivation to study English, though its intensity varied from student to student, while a desire to learn English was not present in all Japanese students, and among those where it was, there was apprehension stemming from the environment in which they were learning. The study does not go in to detail about specific factors in each category, but this does lend support to the idea that the classroom environment plays a role in student motivation.

While an environment of focusing primarily on grammar retention can have negative influences on motivation, there are also positive extrinsic factors at play. Uenishi¹²⁾ studied predictors and metacognitive factors in senior high school and university students’ speaking abilities. It was found that grammatical ability did have a positive statistical significance in university students’ speaking predictors. On the other hand, the same aspect had a negative significance for high school students. Uenishi concluded that, “even though the high school learners grasped certain grammatical items, caring too much about their grammar and peers seemed to have propensity to create difficulties in oral production.” The implications of this are two-fold: while grammatical competence is significant, it should not be given the primary focus of importance when encouraging communication, and said communication must be nurtured in an environment where learners are free to experiment and make mistakes.

Mediums for Instruction

The textbook plays a significant extrinsic motivational role in the classroom environment. Although their implementation and use will vary

from class to class, they are an important tool not only for instruction and practice in the class, but also self-study and review outside the classroom. A good textbook can function as a teacher in itself on the students’ own time when an actual instructor is not present. Its importance and effectiveness in English learning cannot be overstated. Nakamura, Ozasa, Sakamoto, and Watanabe¹³⁾ considered a quantitative evaluation of the effectiveness of English textbooks for senior high school students from the perspectives of both teachers and students. They found that most students tend to value ‘grammar exercises’ highly, furthering the idea of students intrinsically valuing learning for the sake of grammatical understanding, and by extension, testing purposes. Furthermore, teachers placed more value on the “descriptive” and “literary content” than students, indicating that instructors seem to find value in teaching English in the context as a communicative and expressive tool. Therefore, while many teachers may wish to teach English in this manner – one that coincides with the MEXT policies of expressing opinion and ideas – they may find themselves at odds with the exam-centered environment that their students find themselves in.

Regardless of to what extent a textbook is used, the teacher is perhaps the most significant extrinsic motivating factor in the day-to-day lives of high school students. Not only do they convey the grammatical and pragmatic uses of the language, but their direct and indirect actions can shape students’ motivation and outlook on the role that English plays in their lives. Kojima Takahashi¹⁴⁾ examined the ideal second / foreign language (L2) self that university students thought of themselves as and as aspiring to.

Although the study's sample comes from post-secondary students, the implications therefrom can be applied to other age groups. Concerning teachers, two significant trends were identified: students most valued teachers helping them to understand the role of grammatical knowledge in L2 communication and being able to practice L2 communication with their teachers; and teachers acting as role models had a positive impact on individual motivation. Students yearned for the chance to practice the language that they were learning, rather than simply absorbing facts from their teacher. In addition, many students were encouraged by teachers' personal stories of adversity and success with learning English. These are compatible with MEXT's policy for creating an active communication environment where students can share opinions and ideas in a nurturing environment.

Strategic Competence & Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Competence can be thought of as the ability to understand and convey ideas, thoughts, and opinions to and from others. It is a theory that has gained traction in the 1980s and has been since subdivided and further examined in several smaller components. One of these is known as 'Strategic Competence', which, in terms of English, was defined by Tatsukawa¹⁵⁾ as "the ability to use the target language (English) so as (1) to maintain communication and repair communication breakdown when it occurs and (2) to avoid the possibility of communication breakdown." This is restated using different words in many MEXT senior high school English course curriculums as meaning the ability to understand information delivered by a source, and expressing

ideas and opinions. Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell¹⁶⁾ show a visualization of the theory as seen in Figure 1.

Tatsukawa looked at the Strategic Competence variations found between senior high school and college students. It was found that students at both levels were lacking in strategies for comprehension checks. In other words, they did not verify or confirm the information they received from another party regardless of whether or not they understood what they were told. Tatsukawa says that "these findings may tell us that a more active attitude toward getting involved in speech events as participants is necessary." Students must think of their communication not as question-and-response, but idea exchange, and be given more chances to practice conveying and checking information.

Brown¹⁷⁾ furthers this idea of execution and confirmation in Communicative Competence with the idea of Communicative Language Teaching, or CLT. The goal of CLT is to demonstrate the interdependence between communication and language¹⁸⁾. Students must be able to convey and understand ideas as well as have the linguistic competency to do so.

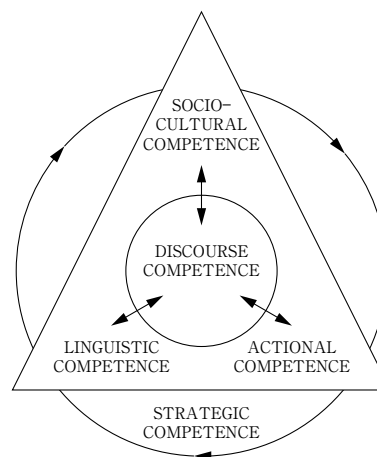


Figure 1. Schematic Representation of Communicative Competence

He argues that in order to increase student aptitude and motivation for studying English, several communication strategies should be implemented: giving students individual goals that they can strive towards, introducing non-exam-related activities into the classroom, such as television programs, movies, and music, and emphasizing student participation rather than performance. The idea is to create a positive and safe environment for the student to take charge of their own learning, provide fun and instructional avenues for them to explore that learning, and encouraging students to take chances and experiment without a fear of failure to themselves or in front of their peers.

Continuing these ideas within the CLT framework advocated is the concept of task-based learning (TBL) advocated by Stroud¹⁹⁾. TBL is a system of charging students with being equal and active participants in their collective learning process²⁰⁾. Given the social and cultural contexts of a Japanese high school classroom, it is not surprising that difficulties will arise without a teacher to give direction and instruction (ex. Lack of attention, use of mother tongue, etc.), implementing such a system at the same time as giving attention to students' motivation can bring about a resolution of these and other issues. Stroud found that through focusing attention and reinforcing personal satisfaction, the number of obstacles inherent to the concept fell and the motivation of students increased.

Conclusion

The concepts introduced above are ideologically compatible with the overriding objectives set out by MEXT for their high school English classes –

active communication, understanding information delivered by a source or speaker, expressing ideas and opinions, and a development of skills learned from previous grades. Motivation is another way of expressing the word 'active' – that is to say, if a student is positively and proactively sharing or considering an idea, they are performing the role of an active player in communication. Creating an environment that emboldens them to expand their comfort zones and reinforces their motivation is fostering of idea and opinion exchange. The appropriate selection of a textbook together with instruction and encouragement from a relatable role model as a teacher are crucial to the pedagogical progression of students' foundational knowledge. Other objectives introduced by MEXT – grammatical understanding, for example – are also taken into account within the Strategic Competence paradigm of Linguistic Competence playing an integral role in Communicative Competence.

Notwithstanding the volume of studies and literature available to education policy makers, the culture in which the policy is implemented must be respected. The entrance exam system has existed for decades and shows no sign of significant reform in the immediate future. Paul Underwood, a professor at Toyo Eiwa University who has completed several studies on education policy in Japan, expressed the reluctance of curriculum change: "It's all about getting into university. How can you convince schools to adopt a more communicative approach that might potentially reduce the numbers getting into universities? Why bother changing?" He further states that acceptance to the best universities is the shared goal of students, teachers, schools and parents²¹⁾. It cannot be expected that the system

for administering entrance to secondary and post-secondary education be abandoned or significantly modified in short order owing to the incredible amount of political, social, and financial capital necessary for such an undertaking. Rather, the concepts and ideas presented here are meant to illustrate that review and reflection of existing systems in the scope of established theoretical frameworks can facilitate gradual policy transitions with immediate or near-immediate benefits for students.

If some of these ideas and others can be introduced in the first one or two years of senior high school, the possibly exists for such an introduction to translate into better results for the third year and subsequent study afterwards, especially if students come to the realization that English itself is a communicative method and the test that they so thoroughly prepare for is simply a test – to get through and put behind them.

References

- 1) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Senior High School Government Curriculum Guidelines. Chapter 2 Subject 8 Foreign Languages [Online], (1999). Available: http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/cs/1320179.htm Accessed: [16/01/2014]
- 2) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization. [Online], (2014). Available: http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/_icsFiles/afiedfile/2014/01/23/1343591_1.pdf Accessed: [31/03/2014]
- 3) Martin, A., The “katakana effect” and teaching English in Japan. *English Today*, 20/1, (2004), pp. 50–55.
- 4) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Senior High School Government Curriculum Guidelines. Chapter 1 General Provisions (2003). [Online] Available: http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/cs/1320224.htm Accessed: [16/01/2014]
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Senior High School Government Curriculum Guidelines. Chapter 2 Subject 8 Foreign Languages [Online], (2003^b). Available: http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/cs/1320334.htm Accessed: [16/01/2014]
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Senior High School Government Curriculum Guidelines. Chapter 3 Subject 13 English [Online], (2003^c). Available: http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/cs/1320692.htm Accessed: [16/01/2014]
- 7) Takagi, A., The Effects of Language Instruction at an Early Stage on Junior High School, High School, and University Students' Motivation towards Learning English. *ARELE: Annual Review of English Language Education in Japan*, 14, (2003), pp. 81–90.
Ogane, E., & Sakamoto, M. SEM: Relationship among EFL motivation and proficiency factors. *Temple University of Japan Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*, 14, (1999).
Yashima, T. Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *Modern Language Journal*, 86, (2002), pp. 54–66.
- 8) Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M., *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior*. New York: Plenum, (1985).
- 9) Hall Vogel, S., Japanese Society under Stress. *Asian Survey*, 52/4, (2012), pp. 687–713.
- 10) Zhang, X., Zhang, S., High School Students'

- English learning Motivation: A Cross-National Comparison between China and Japan. *ARELE: Annual Review of English Language Education in Japan*, 15, (2004), pp. 61-70.
- 11) Ibid., p. 69.
 - 12) Uenishi, K., A Study of Factors Contributing to English Speaking Proficiency: Comparing Japanese High School and University Students' Speaking Factors. *ARELE: Annual Review of English Language Education in Japan*, 15, (2004), pp. 119-128.
 - 13) Nakamura, Y., Ozasa, T., Sakamoto, M., Watanabe, K., A Comparative Survey of the Teacher/Student Perceptions of High School English Textbooks. *ARELE: Annual Review of English Language Education in Japan*, 13, (2002), pp. 191-197.
 - 14) Takahashi, C.K., Ideal L2 self and university English learners: An interview study. *The Language Teacher*, 37/6, (2013), pp. 3-8.
 - 15) Tatsukawa, K., Assessing the Strategic Competence of EFL Learners: A Comparison Between Japanese High School and College Students. *ARELE: Annual Review of English Language Education in Japan*, 18, (2007), pp. 181-190.
 - 16) Celce-Murcia, M., Dörnyei, Z., & Thurrell, S., Communicative competence: A pedagogically motivated model with content specifications. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 6/2, 5-35, (1995). Translated into Basque: *HIZPIDE*, 41, (1998), pp. 59-89.
 - 17) Brown, J.D., Initiation, preservation, and retrospection: The role of CLT in the L2 motivational process. *The Language Teacher*, 37/1, (2013), pp. 15-20.
 - 18) Richards, J.C., & Rodgers, T.S., *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press, (2001).
 - 19) Stroud, R., Task-based learning challenges in high schools: What makes students accept or reject tasks? *The Language Teacher*, 37/2, (2013), pp. 21-28.
 - 20) Tanaka, T., Communicative language teaching and its cultural appropriateness in Japan. *The Literary Association, Doshisha University*, 84, (2009), pp. 107-123.
 - 21) Clavel, T., English fluency hopes rest on an education overhaul. The Japan Times [Online], (2014). Available: <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2014/01/05/issues/english-fluency-hopes-rest-on-an-education-overhaul/#.U0pGJlf-qbQ> Accessed: [31/03/2014].