

**No Japanese! English Only!?-Theoretical Inquiry into Communicative Approach**

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## Introduction

In 2001, Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology compiled a report on ways to improve English teaching in Japanese schools. Following the issuance of the report, MEXT has released various reports and action plans related to English teaching. One of them was a plan to establish English Language High Schools where teaching English would be prioritized and MEXT has decided to fund these schools designated as Super English High School. In 2002, the action plan to cultivate English speakers in Japan was released with the view to increasing the number of Japanese people proficient in English.

Following such trends in English teaching, MEXT has been encouraging professionals in this field to review the traditional practice and place more emphasis on cultivating the communicative ability of Japanese people.

Japanese English teaching has been under constant criticism for producing student who cannot handle simple conversations after studying for six years in both junior and high school. Such a criticism is often placed against the traditional grammar translation method where students are only required to provide translations of the text without much verbal practice. Such was the situation in Japan that the so called communicative approach was widely welcomed as a remedy for the inefficient Japanese approach. Nowadays books with the title “communicative” are everywhere to be found. However, it is questionable if everyone agrees on the definition of this communicative approach and its implication for classroom context. There seems to be certain myths surrounding this new approach stemming from accepting this new approach without much criticism.

One of the myths is the idea that communicative approach is a new way of teaching and that it has a set of teaching ideas and concrete teaching items to be taught. Another is the myth is that in communicative approach, emphasis should not be placed on grammar teaching at all. The biggest myth of all is the idea that in communicative approach, the first language of the students should not be utilized in the classroom and that is detrimental to the development of competence in English to use the mother tongue of the students. In this paper, I would take a look at these myths from the perspective of applied linguistics and try to delineate where such myths have come from.

## Changes in English Teaching in Japan

In the report MEXT issued in 2003, “Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities”, it has released new guidelines on how to improve English teaching in Japan. In this report, MEXT set a goal to be reached by Japanese students learning English in Japan.

### Goals]

#### *English language abilities required for all Japanese nationals*

***“On graduating from junior high school and senior high school, graduates can communicate in English”***

- On graduation from a junior high school, students can conduct basic communication with regard to areas such as greetings, responses, or topics relating to daily life. (English-language abilities for graduates should be the third level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) on average.)
- On graduation from a senior high school, students can conduct normal communication with regard to topics, for example, relating to daily life. (English-language abilities for graduates should be the second level or the pre-second level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) on average.)

#### *English language skills required for specialized fields or for those active in international society*

***“On graduating from university, graduates can use English in their work”***

- Each university should establish attainment targets from the viewpoint of fostering personnel who can use English in their work.

In the report, however, MEXT has not mentioned any reason why English should be learned to the extent that the students would be able to speak English well. Is it for domestic purposes that students need to learn English? Or is it for international purposes? In this sense, this report is too abstract and short on the details. In a similar goal set for English teaching in Korea, the followings are set as the goal.

### Goals]

Recognizing the fact that English has acquired the status of international lingua franca, we would develop the basic communication skills of students.

- 1) To be able to use modern English
- 2) To help the students understand the international affairs and foreign cultures
- 3) To develop students' linguistic skills with the view to developing our nation's

culture and national prosperity

In the guideline set by Korean Education Ministry, the purpose of teaching English is clearly stated. The purpose is both domestic and international. In this regard, MEXT's report seems to be lacking in setting the broader picture.

In the report, MEXT has made some suggestions on improving English teaching, such as increasing the number of classes where majority of the class is taught using only English. Whether teaching only in English is the most appropriate way in Japanese EFL setting will be discussed later.

MEXT has also promoted Super English Language High School Program, in which the ministry would designate 100 schools nationwide to fund for special programs that place emphasis on teaching English.

In 2002, numerous elementary schools in Japan started to provide English as part of Integrated Study in which lessons in English are one of various options. MEXT encourages such classes as enhancing students' international understanding. However, "because of the infancy stage of these lessons and the lack of official guidelines, elementary schools are at loss what to do, from lesson planning to curriculum design." (Takagaki, 2003)

On improving the quality of teachers, in the same report, MEXT suggests that all the English teachers should pass at least STEP-pre-first level or score 550 in TOFEL (PBT), and 730 in TOEIC. It also makes suggestions that *a native* English speaker should teach at each school at least once a week. The definition of a native speaker is not offered and it is a questionable expression given the wide spread use of English in the world. Another suggestion is to utilize proficient English speakers in the local community. On this, MEXT seems to be treating this issue as if to say those who can speak English can teach just like other qualified teachers. Equating proficiency in English and competence in teaching seems to be a wild decision. Behind such wordings in the report lies the myth that being able to teach means being able to speak English and that learning English from native speakers only in English is the best choice for the students. Such myths are behind misleading interpretations of communicative teaching approach.

### Defining Approach and Method

Before venturing into finding out what the current fad about Communicative Approach really is, we need to have a clear understanding of the terminologies used.

In this chapter, I would like to delineate the difference between Approach and Method. In Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics methodology and approach is defined as follows.

**Methodology:** the study of practices and procedures used in teaching, and the principles and beliefs that underlie them

**Approach:** Different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learned

As it can be inferred from the definition, approach is a belief and philosophy about how languages are learned and they are not set of items about how to teach and what to teach. An example of an approach would be “Language is a set of rules and syntax and learning them is what language acquisition means.” Based on such an approach methodology would be developed.

Methodology consists of three factors, approach, design and procedure. Approach is the philosophy on language learning. Design is the actual syllabus and curriculum, and it includes the items to be taught according to the approach. If the approach is grammar based, the design could be grammar based syllabus consisting of various items to be learned. Procedure is the actual ways to achieve the goal set in the syllabus. If the goal is the acquisition of grammar, the procedure might include many pattern practices.

### Defining Communicative Approach

As it has become clear in the last chapter, communicative approach is not a set of ways of teaching and items to be taught. Communicative approach is a philosophy and a belief about language acquisition. So asking how to teach in communicative approach is not appropriate. It is not a methodology so it is without such how-to items.

Communicative approach defined by Nunan is as follows.

- 1) Interaction is carried out in the target language.
- 2) The materials are authentic and meaningful.
- 3) Emphasis placed on process rather than product
- 4) Personalized topic: relevant to students' interests
- 5) Activated outside the classroom

Nunan (1991)

#### 6) Classes should be taught in English?

Carrying out interaction in the target language does not imply that students are simply repeating the teachers and practicing verbally. I have seen some teachers who say that s/he is using communicative approach and is making the students just repeat after the cassette player. Interaction means meaningful transaction is being carried out in the classroom and the meaning is being negotiated among the students. Simple tasks such as listening to the partner for instruction on the map and finding out the destination can be called communicative.

Authenticity of materials implies that the materials are produced for the purpose of getting some messages across. Materials produced artificially for teaching are not authentic. For example, the tasks such as requiring students to practice negatives with such sentences like "I am not a boy." is not authentic, considering the fact that such an utterance wouldn't be used in real context.

Emphasis is placed on process in communicative approach. Process is how the learners have learned before reaching the final goal. Placing emphasis on process credits students with the efforts they made in learning and of course how much the students have participated in class.

Personalized topics mean that the materials to be used are relevant to the interests of students, trying to get elementary school students to read books written by Chomsky is not relevant. Elementary school children would be more into singing and dancing.

The last item is activation of the target language outside the class. The implication is that the target language should be used as much as possible not only in classrooms but outside for real interaction. This will be an issue I will take up in the next chapter and see if it is completely applicable to our EFL setting.

As we have seen, in the definition of communicative approach, we have not seen any item that prohibits the use of students' mother language. There seems to be a widespread assumption that teaching communicatively means not using Japanese. This is a mystery to be critically looked at.

#### EFL and ESL

In the previous chapter's discussion on communicative approach, Nunan has designated activation of the target language as a crucial part of the approach. This assumption does not really suit the situation in countries like Japan, where English is not used outside the classroom and there seems to be little need to do so. What is it about activation of the target language we need to critically look at?

The first point to be made before going into the detailed discussion is that the

English teaching model Nunan had in mind is different from that of ours. Most of the current books on English teaching are based on countries where the students are learning English as a way to settle into a new country. Such a situation where the purpose of teaching English is mainstreaming the students as soon as possible after immigration is called English as a second foreign language setting. English of course is the main mean of communication outside the classroom. Such a situation has its implication for education.

One of the characteristics of ESL is that the target language is used outside the classroom and the students in the classroom come from multi-linguistic, multicultural backgrounds. The motivation for learning is more intrinsic rather than extrinsic. Students are motivated to learn not because what they can with English but because it is necessary and they want to be able to communicate in English in a new country. In such a situation, the implication for teaching is that teaching in English only is maybe the only way because of lack of teachers who share the students' linguistic backgrounds. It is the cheapest and the most efficient way if not the best. The teachers are monolingual and the teachers have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In such a setting teaching only in English is not only cheaper and more efficient but inevitable result of financial difficulties. The use of English has nothing to do with pedagogical reasons but rather to do with logistical reasons.

Let's take a look at the characteristics of EFL settings. EFL settings are those countries like Japan, where the target language is taught but it is not necessarily used as the main language for communication. The main difference between EFL and ESL is the quantity of English the learners are exposed to. The teacher shares more or less the same culture of students and speaks the same language. The classroom is more or less homogeneous. Students' motivation is driven more by their desire to pass entrance exams rather than the intrinsic need to be able to speak the target language. In such a situation is what is applicable to ESL also applicable to EFL? With less exposure to the target language, the students may be at a disadvantage, but is teaching only in English really the best way? Will exposure to incomprehensible input help students acquire features of English? Learning Arabic in Arabic only seems to me like trying to reach the moon on a bicycle... The key to the problem should be not the quantity but quality of exposure along with flexible use of Japanese when necessary. If the input is comprehensive, it will surely be helpful to the learners and use of Japanese in class would not doubt be of help. Especially teaching complex grammatical concept can be aided by some use of Japanese instructions.

In the next chapter, we will take a look at why the use of mother tongue is so

abhorred by those who claim to teach communicatively and try to come up with some reasons behind the myth. Translating English to Japanese, explaining grammar in Japanese, using Japanese in class. Are they all so bad to be called Axis of Evils in the war against mother tongue?

#### History of English Teaching-Learned or Innate?

In this chapter, we will explore the questions raised in the previous chapter. Where does the idea of rejecting the mother tongue come from? One of the academic schools that developed great interests in the issue of acquisition of language is behaviorist psychologists. “The behavioristic approach focuses on the immediately perceptible aspects of linguistic behavior-the publicly observable responses and the relationships or associations between those responses and events in the world around them.” (Brown, 1994) One of the best-known psychologists who have attempted to explain the mystery of language is B.F. Skinner. In 1957, he published “Verbal Behavior”. In the book he explained that acquisition of language is basically the same as other human behaviors. His main point of idea was that human beings are conditioned into learning the language after receiving simple stimuli. When a baby says, “Milk”, the mother gives the milk thus the item is learned. By such reinforcement and habit formation, children learn to speak by imitating parents. This idea had a profound impact on language pedagogy.

One of the products of such behavioristic thought is audio-lingual method. In this method, it is assumed that since learners learn to speak by imitating, repeating the target language and memorizing was emphasized. Since the American occupational army has utilized this method in teaching Japanese to soldiers it is also called army method. During the area when this method was popular, many school saw the rise in LL rooms.

Due to the influence of behaviorism even in the field of linguistics, many researches have been based on behavioristic approach. The first was the assumption that because language is basically a habit formation, the more difference between L1 and L2, the more difficulty the students will face. Behaviorist tradition saw the rise in error analysis which sought to predict the kind of errors the learners might make based on the learners’ L1. In the process of error analysis, linguistic transfer was considered as one of the triggers for the learners’ mistakes. This is based on the idea that learners L1 interferes with the target language. This was the reason behind avoiding the learners’ mother tongue at any cost. In this tradition mother tongue was seen as something that could be detrimental to the development of L2.

The position of behaviorist did not go without its share of criticism. The strongest opposition to behaviorist model came from Noam Chomsky in his "Review on Skinner's Verbal Behavior". (1959) Chomsky claimed in "Aspect of Theory of Syntax" (1965) that there exist innate properties of language that could explain the acquisition of language by children. Chomsky criticized Skinner on the ground that if children were just merely imitating their parents, why wouldn't they produce exactly the same utterances? Children produce sentences that have never been heard before. The inputs by parents are degenerate, sometimes ungrammatical and ill-formed, but why do the children learn to make grammatical sentences? Creativity of language cannot be explained by behaviorism. Chomsky formulated the hypothesis that there could be Universal Grammar that underlies the acquisition of language regardless of linguistic backgrounds. From such hypothesis child language came to be seen not as a primitive linguistic system but as a rule-governed system that is in the process of developing. After the natives approach advocated by people like Chomsky received attention, L2 teaching also began to change as well.

The assumption was that if all of us are equipped with LAD, maybe L1 and L2 learning is not so different but maybe similar. Such an assumption led to researches on acquisition order of linguistic items. Do L1 learners and L2 learners learn language in a set order? Current researches on this seem to indicate that there seems to be similarity between L1 and L2 acquisition order. For example, progressive is found to be learned before past tense. This indicates that the route of learning seems to be similar between L1 and L2. How about the rate of learning? Rate of learning refers to the speed with which learners acquire the language. Do children learn much faster than adults? We simply assume that children are better learners but given the amount of time they are exposed to the target language and the level of their ability to express themselves, are they really better than adults? When we take into account the cognitive aspect of adult learners, adult learners are capable of complex cognitive tasks. They are also capable of expressing complex ideas, all this are some of the reasons why some linguists have questioned the widespread assumption that children are better learners than adults.

As we have seen, L1 learning and L2 learning came to be seen as a similar process rather than a separate process of learning two different systems. Researches on interlanguage is one example, this term coined by Selinker (1972) implies that the learners are forming their self-contained linguistic systems. Just as the children's language is seen as rule-governed, the learners' language came to be seen as being in the process of development. Following such researches, L1 learning and L2 learning

came to be based on common underlying system.

Since Chomsky has come up with the idea of Universal Grammar and Language Acquisition Device, learning language came to be seen as species-specific instinct. If so wouldn't learning English come natural to everyone? Why do we suffer to learn the language? Why don't we painlessly learn to speak as children seem to do? This is where the neurological considerations come in. Researchers like Bickerton (1981) made strong arguments in favor of so called critical period hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that beyond certain age, learning to acquire a language won't come naturally. It suggests that in this point, L1 learning and L2 learning is different. L1 learning is triggered by LAD but L2 learning triggers more cognitively complex mechanism such as problem solving. Evidence in favor of such idea comes mainly from medical fields. Children who sustain brain damage after accidents to their brain before the age of 13 tend to recover their ability to manipulate their language, however when their brain is damaged after 13, after their puberty, the odds against them. Such evidence supports critical hypothesis theory. However, what we need to bear in mind is that although such features like pronunciation is acquired better by children, pronunciation is not the only way to measure the success in language learning. There are many successful adult learners who have very strong accents but still are capable of producing complex sentences that are not inferior to those of native speakers. What allows adult learners to master complex syntactical features? Surely it is an amazing fact that adult learners learn to make complex sentences after explicit learning. The ability of adults to produce complex sentences must stem from their complex cognitive ability and this is something that should not be ignored. If their complex cognitive ability is supported by their L1, there might be a way to utilize L1 for L2 learning.

#### Language Acquisition from a Cognitive Perspective

In the previous chapter, we have briefly looked at the cognitive advantage that adults have over children. When the behaviorist ideas had much influence, it was assumed that two languages have two thinking systems. It was not assumed that what is learned in one language transfers to the other. Such was the reasoning behind rejecting mother tongue as being detrimental to L2 development. In the United States, early in the history of bilingual education, the immigrants' mother tongues were regarded as something that interferes on their process to learn English and some even went so far as to say that being bilingual would result in lower intellectual ability. Canadian researcher on bilingual education, James Cummins have offered a model of human cognition. Behaviorist model is described as SUP model, separate underlying

proficiency, which assumes that knowledge in one language is different from that of another. On the other hand, Cummins' model is called common underlying proficiency. This model assumes that concepts learned in one language would transfer to another because, underlying two different language systems is a common cognitive mechanism.

What kind of implication does this have on English teaching? SUP model infers that teaching in English and Japanese is not an efficient way because knowledge in these two systems contradicts each other. There is a limit to this teaching style based on such assumptions. Teaching only in the target language would be difficult if the ideas to be conveyed are complex. Teaching only in the target language may be possible if the ideas to be conveyed are simple and concrete such as those that have to do with here-and-now concepts. If we accept the CUP model, we can easily explain complex concepts in the mother tongue assuming that the knowledge would transfer to L2. In practice, explaining complex grammatical concepts in Japanese would be far more efficient than trying to explain that in English. Tapping into the learners' knowledge of their L1 would be helpful in explaining the grammar of L2.

Concepts easy to handle such as here-and-now can be handled in the target language easily. Such context-embedded skills are called BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) by Cummins and these should be handled in the target language but those that require more complex thinking that are context independent are called CALPS (Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency Skills). Those should require assistance in Japanese and it would be of great help to the learners since the common underlying knowledge would easily transfer.

### Sociolinguistic Perspective

In this chapter we would look at the myth of teaching only in English from a sociolinguistic perspective. One of the reasons given for insisting on teaching only in English is that in order to be successful learners, the shortest way is to listen to perfect English and perfect speakers. Thus, the worshipping of native speakers starts. What does it mean to be a native speaker of a language anyways? What is the perfect model that we are talking about? Are there such perfect speakers of any language? Do all the speakers of a language share the same competence to be labeled native speakers? Is a two year old American girl a native speaker? How about a professor of linguistics teaching at a Japanese college? Who is the perfect speaker?

Canal and Swain (1980) have offered a model of being competent in a language. Grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, discourse

competence are considered as the pillars of being competent in a language. Is there ever any person who has perfected these constructs? It is of course clear from common sense that not all the speakers share the same competence. If that is the case, what is this model or the goal we are talking about, is it ever reachable?

With the increasing number of people who speak English as a mother language or as a second foreign language, who are the models of English learners? Whose standard are we learning? Crystal (1997) in his book listed the number of countries where English is used predominantly in many social functions. The so called standard is getting so blurred. Is there much sense in saying that both teachers and students should be like native speakers and that being like native speakers is the ultimate goal? Is teaching only in English and hoping that someday they will attain native-status the best way?

This argument might seem to imply that Englishes in the world would fissure as a whole and lead to mutually incomprehensible systems and that there should not be a "standard". However, English speakers around the world must feel that they share some kind of standard in the language they speak one way or another. What is this standard? Australian English, American English, Nigerian English..? Is there a clear line? The issue of standard is also an issue of membership. The membership seems to be closely related to the speakers' identities. The issue is more political rather than linguistic. If the speaker feels that his membership is British English, he will say he speaks British. If he feels that he shares his heritage with speakers from other cultural backgrounds as well, he might say he shares the membership with people who speak other Englishes. In short although there seems to be perceived differences between so called Englishes, the differences are more political rather than linguistic and the real differences are minor. On linguistic terms, those Englishes share established grammar that is more or less similar. This more or less stable grammatical heritage does not need to be regarded as an imposition of colonialists but rather as knowledge of language that can be *accessible, negotiable and flexible* during the process of interactions among people from different backgrounds. Varieties of Englishes do not need to be perceived as separate entities but they should be regarded as variations with common but also different heritages. In this sense teaching grammar should not be lightly ignored. If this is the case, not only explicit grammar instruction but also exposure to different styles of Englishes is helpful. The use of Japanese for that purpose is not at all detrimental to the purpose.

## English and Japan

In the previous chapter, I have raised questions about the so called model speakers and the diversification of English language. Where does that leave us regarding the goal of English education in Japan? According to MEXT's report, the only goal is that all the Japanese people would be able to have basic skills in English. But to what extent and why? Are we setting BICS level as our national goal or CALPS level? MEXT seems to be confounding both of them. Is it ever possible to set these totally different concepts as the national goal? With the increased number of English speakers around the world, we need to set a new goal for our English education. Simply following the evasive model speaker and hoping that Japanese people would be able to speak English with tourists is not enough. What we need also are people who can handle CALPS level English. For this purpose, we need a clear vision for Japan. What kind of country do we want to become? Where will the place of English be? How do we achieve that goal?

The majority of foreigners coming into Japan are not from so called inner circles but from outer circles. English is increasingly becoming a mean for communicating our culture, technology, and knowledge rather than an end in itself. With so many sectors in Japan both public and private emphasizing *kokusaika*, internationalization of Japan, it is not enough to restrict the use of English only for communication with those from inner circles and restrict the use of English only for streets-level interactions. With the diversification of the use of English, we need to have a long term vision for Japan. Will Japan keep its profile of conservative exclusive nation? It is not only an issue of English education but it has to do with this country's identity. Will English be a tool to broaden our perspectives? Or do we leave English just as an end in itself? Yosida (2002) provides us with examples of gold fish in a fishbowl and those in open sea. Goldfish that have been raised in a fishbowl are required to go out into the open seas, they will need to adapt to the new environment and learn to be tolerant of other fish. Just like those gold fish, we are expected to venture outside Japan not only linguistically but also intellectually. What should be discussed is not only how well students should speak English but also why they need English and what we would like to convey. We need to discuss the underlying cognitive proficiency we discussed. English and Japanese are only the means to express what is underlying them. We would need to interact with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Students should be exposed to variety of Englishes and different values after they have reached certain proficiency level. Emphasis on teaching English better is important.

We should do everything to better the quality of our instruction but unquestioned emphasis on teaching only English only in English based on assumption that there is a monolithic perfect model and that we could reach that goal by increasing the quantity of English only is not the best solution. What is needed is a critical and eclectic approach to teaching.

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