

Teaching English Through English: First Steps

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This article describes the approach adopted by a group of Kanto-based private secondary schools to implement the MEXT directive that English teaching should be principally conducted in English “transforming classes into real communication scenes” (MEXT, 2009, p. 7). The writer was appointed to a post that allows him to observe and advise the Japanese English teachers throughout this group. Some suggestions for improving their teaching, that had proved to be practical in a small number of cases, are highlighted and discussed.

Introduction

From April 2015, I was appointed as the “English Development Coordinator” for a group of five private junior and senior high schools in the Kanto area. Since 1998, I had worked in both teaching and managerial roles in this group. The goal I was given was to help to improve the English teaching. I was expected to observe all lessons taught by both full and part-time English teachers for the first year. The observations had the twin goals of providing some initial feedback to the teachers and to help me gain an overview of the current situation. Following my assessment of the latter, I was to make suggestions for the general improvement of the English program with an emphasis on teaching English in English.

The group consists of three senior high schools and two junior high schools. Although belonging to the same group, they are very different. Two schools have a good academic reputation with an emphasis on science, hereafter referred to as the “academic” schools. A further two schools, have a broad range of student ability, hereafter referred to as the “standard” schools. The last school has a reputation for sport, hereafter referred to as the sports orientated school. Statistics for the five schools can be seen in Table A below.

Table A: School Profile for 2015/16

	No. of Students	No. of FT Japanese English Teachers	No. of PT Japanese English Teachers	No. of Native English Speaker Teachers
1. Academic SHS	300	5	0	3
2. Academic JHS	300	4	0	4
3. Standard SHS	1100	6	14	4
4. Standard JHS	80	2	4	4
5. Sports-orientated SHS	1500	9	19	8

Despite their diversity, the schools have a common English program. First, STEP Eiken examinations are compulsory for all students up to and including Level Two. Second, all students have at least weekly communicative English lessons from native English speakers. Third, all students can study abroad for two weeks in junior high and a month in senior high. Furthermore, the academic school is the head of the group supervising some of the work of the other schools, for example checking and editing internal tests and entrance examinations and selecting textbooks. Within each subject in each school the teaching follows a strict pacing schedule and standard pattern. Lastly, all schools use the same textbooks. Overall, there is strong central control and weak autonomy for individual teachers.

Overview of Previous Research

In 1994, the Japanese Ministry of Education published guidelines emphasizing the importance of developing students’ communicative ability in English. This was followed by studies that looked at its application (Browne and Wada 1998) and in

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particular the continued use of the “Grammar Translation” method that seemed to go against these guidelines (Gorsuch 1998). The “Grammar Translation” method is referred to as *yakudoku*, for those readers outside Japan.

Gorsuch (1998) mentions eight practices associated with *yakudoku*. First, teaching focusses on the translation of English texts into Japanese. Second, the text books used are difficult for the students to use without support with the lessons resembling intensive reading classes. Japanese is the language of classroom instruction. In addition, students are not asked to produce English and teachers demand conformity in the students’ work with the classes being teacher centered. Finally, there is frequent student assessment, (p23-26).

Impediments to changing the above eight practices include an emphasis on examination orientated English (Sato and Kleinsasser 2004, p.808) in general and university entrance examinations in particular (Gorsuch 2001, p.3). Also, inadequate preservice teacher training (Browne and Wada 1998, p.100) and in-service teacher training (Gorsuch 2001, p.5). In addition, there is a need to keep pace with colleagues, manage large numbers of students and other school tasks which leads teachers to adopt the least risky and the most time efficient teaching method they are familiar with, namely *yakudoku* (Sato and Kleinsasser 2004, p.808).

However, some teachers, who are teaching in English, have moved towards the communicative practices that promote the communication of content by students. In other words, using English and not just studying it (Yamaoka 2010, p.65). Saito (2015) explores some reasons teachers make this transition (p.10-11). However, Tsukamoto and Tsujioka, in their 2013 survey of the use of English by public senior high school teachers in Osaka and Fukuoka, show how little English is still used in the classroom. They found no teacher that used English for most of their class in contrast to 90% who said they used English for less than half the class or seldom (p.314). Furthermore, once the use of English is looked at in detail it is clear most is only used for greetings, warm up activities and classroom instructions (p.315).

Method

“Yes, English in English is important but, since I retire in five years, I can escape doing anything about it.” I heard many variations on this theme during my initial school visits. It was a brush off from overworked teachers juggling the demands of school life. However, after confirming that my observations were “compulsory”, they complied with my request to observe them.

Many teachers were apprehensive at being observed, so I attempted to reassure them. First, I showed them the assessment criteria along with the report form and a small number asked for some clarification. Second, after the teachers were familiar with their students, I asked them to nominate a class for observation. Third, on the observation day, I usually remained at back of the room, seated and out of view of the students. After the class, I produced a report within a few days and gave it to the teacher, clarifying any points I thought might need it. The teacher read it and then we arranged to discuss it later. I attempted to make the process stress-free and efficient. In the report, I tried to include practical ways that the particular lesson could be improved. Between May 2015 and February 2016, I did a total of sixty-three such observations.

Summary of Observations

Overwhelmingly the teachers used *yakudoku*. A small number apologized for this in advance, but most stated it was the only realistic way to teach the expected material at the pace required. Only six out of sixty-three lessons could be said to contain real communication in English. These are summarized in the table below.

Table B: An Overview of the Six Teachers who used English and their Lessons

	Gender of Teacher	Employment Status	Age of Teacher	HR Teacher is English Teacher	School Type	Class Level	Communicative Content	<i>Yakudoku</i> Method Used
L. 1	Male	FT	50s	Yes (Head of English Dept.)	Standard SHS	High	Yes - theme ‘International Space Station’	Yes
L. 2	Female	PT	60s	Yes	Standard SHS	High	Yes - theme ‘Nuclear Energy’	Yes
L. 3	Female	PT	50s	No - Head of Year	Standard SHS	High	Yes - theme ‘Direction Giving’	No
L. 4	Female	PT	60s	No - Social Studies	Sports Orientated SHS	Middle	Yes - theme ‘Cleopatra’	Yes
L. 5	Female	FT	30s	No - Head of Year	Sports Orientated SHS	High	No	Partially
L. 6	Female	FT	30s	Yes	Sports Orientated SHS	Middle	Yes - theme ‘The World Cup’	Partially

Comparing my observations with Gorsuch's eight instructional practices of *yakudoku* (1998, p.23-16), most of the lessons I observed focused on Japanese to English translation. The senior high students used the Crown "English Communication" textbook series, but this was supplemented with worksheets which turned their use into intensive reading. This is because the students could only understand the textbook with support from the teacher. At the end of one lesson at the "standard" school, I was asked to come to the front of the room and comment on the text. I stated that I believed many native English speakers could not easily read it. After the lesson, I asked about the choice of textbook and was told that it was too difficult but impressed the parents. Most of the teachers started the lesson with an English greeting and many went on from that to ask about the date, the weather or the day's schedule in English. However, English was rarely used after that point. Apart from the six classes summarized in Table B, students rarely produced any English, whether spoken or written. Teachers were controlling about what was acceptable as a correct answer and the testing regime was rigorous with daily, weekly and monthly tests. The tests and lessons were in the same style, with gap fills, word order exercises and similar closed activities. This style of instruction closely follows Gorsuch's outline for a school reliant on the *yakudoku* system.

Overall, 90% of lessons were *yakudoku*, which seems a higher rate than found in the 1980s. Gorsuch (1998) mentions 70% to 80% of university and high school teachers using *yakudoku* (p7). However, this survey includes university and high school teachers. It would be interesting to know the percentage for those working in private high schools since Gorsuch (2001) states that such teachers were more approving of the *yakudoku* method than any others (p.13).

So what made the six lessons that made greater use of English different? The teachers seem to have nothing in common as they were of all ages, employment status and levels of experience. (See Table B.) The classes were equally mixed. There were four "Reader" classes, in which the students studied themed texts and answered comprehension questions. One "Grammar" lesson, in which the teacher was only explaining the grammar points required for that week. Lastly, one "English Communication" lesson, in which the teacher had students doing communicative task-based activities. "Reader" classes might lend themselves to greater use of English. As Yamaoka (2010) found, students are more likely to use English communicatively when they have something beyond English grammar or vocabulary to discuss. The overwhelming view was that it was not possible to teach grammar in English as it was difficult enough in Japanese. The "English Conversation" class was communicative but this class was the only one of its type at any of the five schools. Its existence caused some surprise when I mentioned it at the academic school as it was an unapproved innovation due to the initiative of the head of the English department at the standard school. Interestingly, he was also the teacher of Lesson One in the Table B above. It seems he was sufficiently motivated and able to use more English in his classroom and in a position to enable others to do so.

Of the six lessons, only two were entirely in English. Lesson One was a reader class by the head of the English department for that school. He stated that he often conducted lessons this way. However, he apologized for the false image I was getting, as in the previous lesson the vocabulary needed had been covered in Japanese. On the other hand, it was obvious that what I saw was not rare from the ease with which the students used English.

Lesson Two was another "Reader" class that was about 70% in English, with the first ten minutes being a quick review of the vocabulary needed. In other words, the same process as described above but within one teaching period. It is worth noting that the homeroom teacher for this class is also an English teacher. However, both of these classes were not communicative but *yakudoku* in nature. The innovation was that grammar translation was being done in English.

Lesson Three was an "English Conversation" lesson with the highest level class in the school. This teacher later stated that she never used Japanese to teach. The whole lesson included a fast and fluent use of English with many and varied forms of interaction. The teacher was formally trained in 2011 to teach younger pre-literate children. This resonates with Saito's (2015) discovery that further training voluntarily undertaken by the teacher helps to facilitate more communicative use of English in the classroom.

All teachers thought that teaching in English was not possible with lower level students. However, in Lesson Four, one teacher did the best she could with a mid-level "Reader" class by making exclusive use of English for classroom instructions. Again this use of English had been established as the usual pattern.

Lessons Five and Six were mostly conducted in Japanese but the teachers set up communicative activities in order for the students to more freely practice English. Again, one of these classes was a "Reader" class, one class had an English teacher for their homeroom teacher and the other was the highest level class in the school.

Conclusions from Initial General Observations

A tentative conclusion from these six lessons is that greater use of English is most likely in the following cases:

1. The homeroom teacher for a class is convinced of the importance of English, as shown by three of the six classes having English teachers as their homeroom teacher.
2. The class teacher is consistent in using English in the classroom so that it becomes expected by the students.
3. It is a more academically-able class. Four out of six classes were either highest level in the school or close to it.

4. There must be something to communicate, as in the three “Reader” classes, which contained texts about space exploration, nuclear energy or a new park in Tokyo Bay. The students were asked their opinions about the topics and real communication took could take place.

In January 2016, the heads of the English departments at the schools were asked to prepare action plans to develop and encourage the teaching of English in English. As a move towards this I suggested guidelines based on my observations above, namely that:

1. Classroom management and instructions to be done in English for all groups at all levels.
2. All grammar teaching to be done in Japanese for all groups at all levels.
3. Reader classes to make as much use of English as possible.
4. The above does not imply that all lessons should be or aim to be communicative – if needed, using the *yakudoku* method in English is a viable method to achieve certain goals.

The above suggestions do not meet the MEXT goal. In fact, most teachers are not even attempting this minimal standard. However, these suggestions are viable, as six teachers have shown. In addition, my suggestions mirror earlier research which found teachers were using English for classroom instruction and warm up exercises about 70% of the time, for vocabulary teaching about 30%, and though for grammar teaching, hardly ever (Tsukamoto & Tsujioka 2013, p.315). My suggestions are realistic first steps.

Future Developments

Certain of the impediments to the greater use of English in the classroom are unlikely to disappear soon. The need to keep classes moving through course material at the same pace and the need of teachers to manage large classes is not going to change. Neither is the nature and quality of teachers’ preservice training. However, my role is an attempt by the schools to meet the needs of teachers for in-service training and support.

There are reasons to be optimistic about the future due to external pressure on the schools. The greatest external pressure would appear to be a change in the external exams that the students take. As mentioned above, STEP Eiken examinations are compulsory for all students. Until recently, Levels 4 and 5 had no speaking test and Level 2 had no free writing section. This will change in 2016 (STEP Eiken 2015). As a result, the Japanese teaching staff will be under pressure to devise ways to prepare all students for these new more communicative tests and not just the more able students taking the higher level tests. This will become more important if lower level universities meet their need to ensure their entrance requirements by asking students to have passed Level 4 or 5 Eiken. A similar pressure may work for higher level students sitting the revised Level 2 writing paper. This external pressure could benefit all the students at all the schools regardless of age or academic ability and help weaken the dependence on *yakudoku* that I observed.

In relation to the sports-orientated school only there is another external pressure. From April 1st 2016, a nearby city will start a revised English curriculum called “Global Studies”. This runs from the first year of elementary school to the third year of junior high school. It is a communicative English course making heavy use of ALTs and only contains skills-based assessment. For example, assessment of the students’ ability to use the past simple is to be done by the teacher observing the students discussing which of them had just had the best winter vacation (Semens 2015). These schools feed a lot of students into the sports-orientated school. Their previous experience might influence the nature of English teaching over the coming years because they will have had more exposure to a variety of teaching styles beyond *yakudoku*.

My instructions for the 2016/17 academic year include more intensive mentoring of selected individual teachers with me observing every class they teach on their schedule. This will involve some follow up on the earlier observations done in 2015/16. However, one observation of one lesson is only a snapshot of that teacher’s work. It does not facilitate understanding of a teacher’s overall work. By observing all their classes, I hope to understand these teachers in depth and to be able to agree a more comprehensive set of improvement targets with them. For those teachers observed there will be a follow up observation in the next term, to see what progress has been made. In my next paper, I plan to describe how effective my role has been over the academic year 2016/17.

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