

## Situated evaluation of communicative language teaching in curriculum innovation

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### Introduction

Curriculum exists in two forms: the planned curriculum describes and prescribes idealized teaching practices, and the realized curriculum how the planned curriculum is implemented in actual classrooms. 'Situated cognition' (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave, 1997) emphasises the importance of the latter. It views learning as occurring in particular socially- and culturally-situated contexts, rather than in abstract, idealized, and decontextualized learning environments. It centralises the numerous factors that influence realizing the curriculum in the classroom, particularly teacher beliefs. Teachers are viewed not as mere robots who implement curriculum as prescribed, but as individuals who filter, digest, and implement the curriculum depending on their own beliefs and unique understanding of their environmental context (Borg, 1999; Freeman and Richards, 1996; Woods, 1996).

In Japan, a new communicative language teaching (CLT) curriculum (Monbusho, 1998) will be implemented in junior high schools English classrooms from April 2002 and in high schools classrooms from a year later. From a 'situated evaluation' perspective (Bruce and Rubin, 1992; Cervantes, 1993), this paper explores teachers' present understanding and implementation of CLT in their classrooms. The specific research questions are 1) What are teachers' definitions of CLT? 2) How have they actually been implementing CLT in their classrooms? and 3) How do they foresee their teaching situations changing under the new curriculum?

### Background

The new Monbusho curriculum (Monbusho, 1998) prioritises the development of communicative skills, such as understanding interlocutors' simple utterances and expressing opinions, over linguistic structures, such as knowledge of grammatical structures and vocabulary items. These linguistic structures should be incorporated into instruction, but with the goal of helping develop communicative skills. These communicative skills should apply to listening, speaking, writing and reading. The new curriculum gives greater importance to communicative skills for specific situational uses (i.e. shopping, telephone conversation) and some sociolinguistic functions (i.e. requesting, complaining).

### Participants and research procedures

This is a partial report of a two-year longitudinal study (starting March 2000), investigating a group of twelve Japanese junior and high school English teachers, whose teaching experience varies from six to twenty nine years. These teachers belong to a self-initiated teaching pedagogy study group of thirty teachers. They were interviewed in Japanese to elicit their beliefs, knowledge and understanding of CLT. Their classrooms were observed to evaluate how they implemented CLT. Of the twelve, eleven teach in public schools, and the other for a private school; eleven are female and one male. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed following grounded theory procedures to identify recurring and salient themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).



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### Results and discussion

#### Teachers' definitions of CLT

All teachers supported the importance of CLT and aspired to maximize its incorporation in their instruction. Most teachers defined CLT in broadly similar terms, and these were essentially consistent with the Monbusho curriculum. The teachers suggested that the basic goal of CLT is to be able to exchange messages in English without paying too much attention to details or linguistic forms. Their other comments included many concepts central to CLT, such as recognising the need for communication, self-expression and exchanging opinions in English, understanding English utterances, not worrying excessively about grammar, guessing from the context, and getting the gist. Most teachers agreed that CLT applies to all four skills.

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The main difference that emerged between teachers was the place and role of grammar, which Howatt summarises as two versions of CLT. The "strong version" emphasises language learning through communication, "using English to learn it" (1997, p. 279); this minimises the importance of grammar. On the other hand, the "weak version" emphasises understanding linguistic structures, both grammar and vocabulary, and that these should be integrated into communicative activities. This view represents the "learning to use English" approach (p. 279), and is also consistent with the notion of 'form-focused instruction' (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell, 1997; Norris and Ortega, 2000; Pica, 2000). The Monbusho curriculum is essentially consistent with the weak version, which prescribes an integration of communicative activities and structural instruction.

Although a few teachers supported the strong version, most teachers supported the weak version. As one representative teacher noted:

... before they reach a certain point, they need to know the basic sentences and expressions. In order to acquire them... they should be able to read and write. Then they can speak, but before speaking, they should be able to understand [grammar]. (Ms. Hanada<sup>1</sup>)

Therefore, the majority of teachers' understandings were actually consistent with the documented Monbusho curriculum.

#### Classroom implementation

The actual teaching practices teachers described were also more consistent with the weak than the strong version of CLT. Teachers' most frequently reported practice was to explain some grammatical features first, followed by some form of manipulative exercise, after which, through a communication task, students produced the grammatical pattern in a contextual situation. Teachers did report using other CLT activities as well. For example, the teacher demonstrates a skit first and then asks students to infer the function of a grammatical structure or greeting.

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However, CLT seemed to play a much smaller role in the classroom than the teacher interview excerpts had indicated. Though teachers knew many CLT activities, they did not spend much time actually doing them in class. In the classrooms observed, grammatical instruction was central and far more prominent than CLT. When asked to what extent they implement CLT, several teachers said that they spent 5 minutes out of 50 minutes doing CLT, and this does not even happen in every class.

The tension between grammar and CLT was also evident in interviews of classroom implementation. The importance of grammatical and semantic knowledge was commonly emphasized. This practice is understandable when so much emphasis is still placed on teachers to prepare students for grammar-oriented entrance examinations. Moreover, textbooks are usually written in a way that each chapter focuses on targeted grammatical features.



However, many teachers seemed more likely to do CLT activities when they team-taught with another teacher, either another Japanese teacher or a native speaking teacher. As Ms. Imasaki explained about her team-taught class:

I do a warm-up activity--bingo or that sort of thing. Then we talk about the weather and that kind of topic. Then I cover a little pronunciation, phonics. Then we demonstrate a conversation. For example, we did a telephone conversation the other day. Then we extracted simple phrases like "This is xx". "Can I speak to YY?" Then the students repeat them several times. Then they practice it several times. Then they do a role-play and write the conversation down on a piece of paper. Then they do the role-play in front of the class. This is the pattern I do every time.

This was the class she team-taught once a week and the goal of the class was oral communication. She stated that she could not have done this activity in her other regular classes when she teaches her class alone, because for this particular class, she was a guest teacher who did not have to worry about teaching grammar, and also did not have to worry about continuity from one class to another. She could continue this pattern throughout the year because of the unique teaching situation.

Ms Imasaki's experience is consistent with what I observed in other classrooms; class time with a Japanese teacher teaching alone is usually allocated to teacher-fronted grammar lessons, including explanation of grammatical features, translation, and pencil-paper drills. CLT was mainly implemented through team-teaching, as when two teachers are present the instructional procedures drastically changes from regular English instruction. Instruction is mainly carried out in English, and adopts different communicative activities such as information-gap and game activities, question and answer role-plays and dramas. However, most schools allocated relatively little time for team-teaching, although this varied depending on the school.

#### *Difficulties in implementation*

The most significant difficulty teachers outlined was classroom management, which is more complex for CLT activities. Teachers needed to ensure that students understood activity procedures, followed instructions, and demonstrated the exercise's outcome explicitly. Teachers were not confident that they could do this effectively. For example, one teacher noted that if she used pair work or group work, students' might chat in Japanese. This teacher did not want to deal with classroom management issues, so she tended to allocate her CLT time to just pencil and paper listening exercises.

Another CLT cost was time. Teachers dealt with many administrative and non-academic responsibilities. One teacher said that before-class preparation for team-teaching with an AIT (assistant language teacher) was time consuming, as it included thinking about different activities, or preparing materials such as large game sheets or cards. Moreover, these teaching materials were not often recycled.

Teachers also noted that CLT activities required considerable class time. Teachers felt that they were expected to progress through the curriculum at a very rigid pace. At one school, I observed a teacher who needed to catch up for mid-term and final term tests. Towards the exam, this teacher used some of the team-teaching class periods for grammar lessons, by asking the AIT not to come to class. This struggle with time will probably continue in the new curriculum, as Ms. Hanada commented:

We will need to teach almost the same amount of materials in 3 hours a week, instead of 4. The core vocabulary items are bold-faced in textbooks and students need to learn them. The number of these core vocabulary items gets smaller [in the new curriculum], but these are inadequate for students to understand or say even something simple. So each textbook includes other vocabulary items, which are not bold-faced. We need to teach them, too. English teachers at our schools are planning to ask our principal for extra class period from "thematic instruction" [sougou gakushuu] so that we can teach what we need to teach.

The main dilemma for teachers was between allocating time for grammar instruction, and CLT. While believing in the importance of CLT and implementing it in team-teaching classes, they needed to prepare their students for entrance examinations. These twin pressures tend to lead to dichotomous English education in classrooms. Mr. Fujimoto reported:



At the moment, I think English teachers in Japan, especially in high schools, are forced to wear two pairs of shoes. One is for the entrance exam... At the same time, we need to teach English for communication. I find it difficult. But for my wish, I think English is a means of communication. I would like to achieve it.

Ms. Omoto expressed a similar concern:

So oral communication is for fun, and the other is for studying for the test. So students wonder why there is a class for communication ...but I hope they think English for entrance exams and for communication are not separate. Ultimately it is the same thing. So I want them to think that if it is not correctly communicated, it won't be understood.

Teachers are clearly struggling to see how best they should integrate the teaching of linguistic structures and communicative activities, but inevitably prioritise teaching linguistic structures.

### General discussion and conclusions

All the teachers in this study claimed they incorporated CLT in their teaching, but to differing degrees, depending on their teaching environment. Situated evaluation theorists recognise that curriculum implementation is not uniformly realized across various teaching situations. A documented curriculum takes a unique shape and color as it is introduced to each school by each classroom teacher. Each teacher holds her or his own beliefs, they work with different students and colleagues in different school climate, needing to satisfy many demands beyond classroom teaching. These situated factors have to be extensively examined in order to gain a good understanding how the curriculum is actually implemented.

Integration of grammar instruction and CLT seems to be the biggest challenge for these teachers. They are concerned that students perceive CLT as being just for fun, with little educational benefits, whereas other English classes are serious ones for test preparation. Although the written curriculum emphasizes the importance of CLT as the major goal, it is marginalised in practice to a "side-show" (Howatt, 1997, p. 279). Teachers in the study hoped to integrate grammar instruction and CLT, but they do not seem to have found satisfactory solutions to integrate and interweave these two aspects as smoothly as the documented curriculum states as a goal. The challenge of smooth integration of grammar instruction and CLT reflects what Richards and Rogers (1986) claim, that often CLT is left for the situated interpretation of teachers, and cannot be prescribed explicitly in literature:

Communicative Language Teaching is best considered an approach rather than a method. Thus although a reasonable degree of theoretical consistency can be discerned at the levels of language and learning theory, at the levels of design and procedure there is much greater room for individual interpretation and variation than most methods permit. (p.83)

Their classroom context tends to force teachers to compromise by adopting the weak version of CLT, the version that Howatt argues has become the most common classroom language practice in ELT classrooms around the world (Howatt, 1987).

The difficulty in implementing CLT has been documented in many studies, such as Li (1999) and Sato and Kleinsasser (1999). Interview and observational data of the current study further revealed that implementing CLT in the Japanese context is also far from a simple task and it brings many difficulties and restrictions such as time, disciplinary issues, relationship with their colleagues and meeting students' needs. One notable finding, however, is that the realization of CLT is considerably altered when two teachers are present. The context of having two teachers present, especially if one is a native speaker, makes CLT more salient for both for teachers and students. It also makes it easier for teachers to create a unique atmosphere, departing from their regular English classrooms.

As Elbaz-Luwisch (1997) claims, teacher research frequently portrays exceptionally good or special teaching environments, which depicts implementation of documented curriculum smoothly and which leads a misrepresented image of what regular teachers do in their classrooms. In order to gain insights from actual classrooms, more research necessary which describes teachers as a "real size" who try to make the best of their teaching contexts.



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Note: All names used are pseudonyms.