

# Problems with the Implementation of Communicative English Teaching in Japan; Focusing on the Situation of English Teachers in a High School

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**Abstract:** In Japan, “the School Curriculum Guideline” for the high school English stated that communicative English skill should be put a greater focus to prepare students who can participate actively in the globalized world. In actual classes, however, teachers tend to put more focus on developing students’ grammatical and reading skills. This paper aims to clarify the factors which contribute to the difference of focus by conducting a case study in one public high school. This study pinpoints two factors which prevent teachers from implementing communicative English teaching: one is a problem in the educational system in Japan and the other is the teacher’s environment.

**Keywords:** High School English, Communicative English Teaching, Teacher’s Environment

## Background

According to the latest “School Curriculum Guideline” in Japan which published by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2008, the goal of high school English education is to develop students’ English communication skills. The communication skills here are defined as 1) the skill to understand the language and its culture, 2) the skill to communicate with others actively and 3) the skill to convey one’s ideas and understand others’ ideas properly. In addition, teachers must teach the classes in English to expose students to spoken English. The survey done by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2010) showed, however, that teachers do not teach in English in approximately 80 percent classes but oral communication classes. Also Nakai (2010) pointed out that there are still not so many teachers who put focus on teaching communication English in classes. In this paper, we will discuss the problems which prevent high school teachers from implementing communicative English teaching as a case study.

## Purpose

This paper aims to clarify the situation, including the procedure in classes and the environment of English teachers in one Japanese high school to identify the problems when teachers practice communicative English lessons in their classes.

## Method

We conducted a semi-structured interview with two English teachers in High School A, a public high school in Osaka, Japan. In this paper, we will call the two teachers Teacher A and Teacher B. The information gained by the interviews were coded and sorted into three elements: concept of classes, beliefs and teacher’s environment.

In addition to the interviews, we observed the classes of the two teachers. When observing, we kept journals of the class conditions, such as the procedure of the classes, teacher’s techniques and students’ behavior. The information gained by observing classes were coordinated from three perspectives: materials, teachings and ingenuity. After capturing the features by observing two teachers’ classes, we interpreted the basis of their classroom practice through an interview.

The table below is the brief introduction of the two teachers.

	Sex/Age	Grade	Subject	Teaching Method
A	Male/40s~50s	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Reading	Conventionalized English teaching
B	Male/30s	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Reading	Communicative English teaching

## Results and Discussion

This is the result of observation and interview.

	Sort	Teacher A	Teacher B
Class Observation	Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- A grammar workbook and a reading workbook.</li><li>- Handouts of hints.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- A textbook and worksheets.</li></ul>
	Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- First students work on grammar or reading problems.</li><li>- During the work, students can talk with others.</li><li>- After work, teacher writes</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Students often read aloud and answer teacher’s questions.</li><li>- Teacher gives direction in English all the time.</li><li>- A blackboard is not used so</li></ul>

		solutions on a blackboard and students take notes.	often and students refer to handouts.
	Ingenuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The class atmosphere is relaxed.</li> <li>- Students can refer handouts when they face tough problems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To gain students' attention, teacher show background materials by an iPad or a projector.</li> <li>- By giving seals and taking it into grades, foster students' utterances.</li> </ul>
Interview	Concept of classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- By treating hot topics, gain students' attention.</li> <li>- Decide the materials used in classes by negotiating with other English teachers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In addition to reading and understanding the textbook, train pronunciation and conversation in classes.</li> <li>- To attract students, use audiovisual materials in classes.</li> <li>- No English-Japanese translation.</li> </ul>
	Belief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Even if "the School Curriculum Guideline" has changed, train grammar and reading skills should be kept.</li> <li>- When considering entrance examination for university, communicative English skill is should not be targeted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Want students to attain skills to understand English without translating it into Japanese.</li> <li>- To attract students to the contents of the texts, spare time and energy to introduction parts.</li> <li>- Want students to aquire the new knowledge through English texts.</li> </ul>
	Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Often communicate with other English teachers to negotiate the contents and speed of classes and to divide tasks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Because of the original teaching method, it is difficult to cooperate with other teachers and do all tasks by own.</li> </ul>

By analyzing and comparing the two teacher's classes and interviews, two external factors which prevented teachers from practicing communicative English teaching were identified.

#### 1) Problems of the Educational System

In Japan, "the School Curriculum Guideline" states that the English skill that should be put greater focus in high schools is *communication skills*. The entrance examinations for university, however, tend to assess students' grammatical and reading skills the most. In such situations, the beliefs for teaching English of each teacher diverse, and the beliefs have great effects on their teaching. Teacher A and Teacher B shows the contrasting beliefs and teaching methods in this study.

#### 2) Problems of the Teachers' Environment

Teachers of the same grade and subject often report on progress and divide tasks. There appears to be a norm that teachers treat the agreed and shared contents among teachers in their individual classes. Therefore, if one teacher does not obtain agreements of other teachers when proposing a new teaching method, it cannot be conducted or even if it is conducted, the teacher cannot receive cooperation from others and may be isolated.

Teacher A, who put importance on cooperation and informal talks among teachers, reflects the ideas from other teachers in his classes. On the other hand, Teacher B stated that he cannot obtain other teachers' agreements in not teaching English-Japanese translation. If the teaching focusing on grammar and reading which Teacher A, who put importance on the cooperation among teachers, practices is the majority, then the communicative teaching which teacher B practices would be the minority. Thus, although Teacher A shares his tasks to create classes with other teachers, Teacher B does the work by himself.

The 2 factors stated above show that now in Japanese high school, English teaching is focused on grammar and reading, targeting entrance examination for university, and there is less tendency of putting importance on communicative English skill. Moreover, it indicates that it is quite difficult to practice the new teaching method such as communicative English teaching without obtaining the agreements of other teachers, because teachers cooperate with each other to develop their classes. Therefore, even if the curriculum has been modified, teachers keep teaching using the conventional methods.

### Future Direction

In this study, the observation of classes before the interview supplementarily helped when understanding teachers' ideas and beliefs through the interviews. The information we obtain through this case study, however, is only a part of the school situation. In order to shift the conventional teaching method to the new one which promotes students autonomy and communication, it is necessary to determine the situation in the school in detail in the first phase. Thus, for the future direction, more informal talks with the 2 teachers are needed, with further observation and interview of other English teachers in High School A.

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