

The Shift from Yakudoku to Communicative Language Teaching: Empowering Students with a Diversity of English Classes

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Abstract

Traditionally, English classes taught in Japanese schools have followed the *yakudoku* method (Gorsuch, 1998; Nishino, 2008; Rutson-Griffiths, 2012). In this method, English sentences are translated into Japanese word-for-word, and then reordered in accordance with Japanese grammar. This limits the use for students to practice speaking English with the exception of repeating words for pronunciation purposes.

However, since 1989, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has attempted to execute a strategy using the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach as outlined in *The Course of Study*. These goals include “fostering learner motivation as well as developing receptive and productive language abilities in the four skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)” (Sakui, 2004). CLT is defined as an approach to the teaching of a second language, which aims to develop communicative competence (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992).

Using ethnography and focus groups, this empirical study investigates how Aoya Senior High School implements CLT into a variety of English courses that students are able to choose from. Not only do these courses align with MEXT’s goal of “cultivating English communication abilities in Japanese people,” but also supports Dornyei’s “L2 Motivational Self-System” (Ryan, 2008; Suzuki, 2011). The implications of this study show that by giving students a plethora of course options, they are able to choose a class they are interested and comfortable taking. This allows students to excel at their own pace while ultimately leading towards the main goal of developing communicative English competence.

Keywords: CLT, ESL, Motivation, TESOL, *yakudoku*

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Introduction and Literature Review

Soon after the conclusion of World War II, the Japanese government put a strong emphasis on English language learning. They have released a series of guidelines known as *The Course of Study*, which has been done through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan (MEXT). Provided in each release are goals and curriculum for Japanese teachers of English (JTE) to bestow upon their students. Many regard *The Course of Study* series to be the standard for which Japanese students are expected to learn English by their completion of elementary, junior, and senior high school (Tahira, 2012).

The first *Course of Study* was released in 1947. Outlined in this document were four main points: (1) habit formation was the ultimate goal in learning a foreign language, (2) listening and speaking were the primary skills, (3) it was advisable to accurately imitate utterances, and (4) students should get used to English focusing on its sounds and rhythms without using textbooks for the first six weeks (MEXT, 1947). Unfortunately, the interpretation of these guidelines by JTEs align with a traditional style of Japanese teaching known as the *yakudoku* method. Using this method, students would translate English sentences into Japanese word-for-word. After the words were translated, the sentences would be modified in accordance to Japanese grammar. By using this method, the students were not able to practice English with the exception of repeating words for pronunciation purposes (Gorsuch, 1998; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Rutson-Griffiths, 2012).

However, in the 1980s, Japan was looking towards internationalization. With this in mind, MEXT implemented an English education reform. One of the policies stemming from this reform was the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, which started in 1987. The program was aimed to attract recent college graduates to help out with teaching English in the classroom. This is called team teaching. Team teaching is where a JTE would teach an English class with a native English speaker also known as an assistant language teacher (ALT). The role of the ALT is to provide practical communicative interaction with the students while helping JTEs teach English in the classroom (Nishino, 2008; JET Program USA, 2015).

Aligning with the implementation of ALTs in Japanese English classes, the 1989 release of *The Course of Study*, MEXT introduced a new approach to help improve English communication skills to students. This method was called communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT is defined as an approach to the teaching of a second language, which aims to develop communicative competence (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992). With CLT as the new preferred method of teaching English to elementary, junior, and high school students, MEXT's main goal of foreign language education was to "develop practical communication abilities" (Yoshida, 2003; Nishio, 2008; Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). However, in the early years of the JET Program, many JTEs used their ALTs to be human tape recorders or "the experience of being in the classroom only to read out loud conversations and example sentences from the textbook" (Ruston-Griffiths, 2012). In many ways, JTEs were sticking to the traditional *yakudoku* method despite what was outlined in the 1989 *Course of Study*.

Gradually, JTEs were more aware of utilizing and maximizing the use of the ALT in the classroom. They understood that by using ALTs in the classroom, it would be a key component to achieving the goal of practical communicative abilities in Japanese students. ALTs were able to bring a different teaching perspective that was foreign to JTEs. Some of the activities included: role-playing exercises, game activities, and international media clips including music videos, television shows, and movies (A. Tajino & Y. Tajino, 2000).

More specifically, these goals were: “fostering learner motivation as well as developing receptive and productive language abilities in the four skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)” (Sakui, 2004). The key words in the goals were “learner motivation,” especially since the Japanese government requires all students at elementary, junior, and high schools to take English. As Francis Shiobara (2013) writes, “because of the compulsory nature of [English courses], students tend to have low motivation to study English” (4). This is the case for Aoya High School where I am in my second year as the ALT at the school. Unknowingly by the school and administrators, in order to change the nature of this low motivation to study English for Japanese students, Aoya High School implemented Zoltán Dörnyei’s Second Language (L2) Motivational Self System.

The model consists of three approaches: (1) Ideal L2 Self, (2) Ought-to L2 Self, and (3) L2 Learning Experience. First, the Ideal L2 Self is described as individuals who are highly motivated to learn a new language; these students want to take more challenging classes because they want to get better at English. Second, the Ought-to L2 Self are individuals who feel pressured to succeed; these students feel as if they are obligated and responsible for doing well on assignments and tests. Finally, L2 Learning Experience individuals rely on previous knowledge and acquisition for learning (Ryan, 2008; Suzuki, 2011).

Aoya High School utilized Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System by offering nine different types of English classes: English Expression, English Communication, English Conversation, Basic English, Practical English, English Listening, English Understanding, Intercultural Communicative Understanding (ICU), and Current Events. Some of these courses are compulsory to abide by Japanese law, but entering the second year of high school, students are able to choose what type of English classes they want to take, including English elective courses.

This research looks to address the issue of English language learning at Aoya High School by examining the nine different types of English classes. It will specifically focus on the motivational levels of students particularly addressing Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System. This research will look to answer the following research questions:

1. How has the plethora of English courses offered at Aoya High School helped, if at all, L2 Japanese learners when it comes to learning English?
2. What are the students’ attitude towards learning English because of the variety of English courses offered?

Methodology

Ethnography

The first method I used for collecting data was ethnography. According to Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley (1994), ethnography puts “a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test a hypothesis about them and has a tendency to work primarily with ‘unstructured’ data” (p. 248). In my case, I was exploring how students’ motivational levels change with how English was being taught to them along with the variety of methods and materials presented to them.

Focus Group

The second method I used was using focus groups. According to Sue Wilkinson (2004), “a focus group is an informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic” (p. 3). For the purposes of my research, the focus groups were used with two third-year classes. I asked them what they thought about their English elective courses and how it compared to the compulsory courses.

Data analysis

I used a grounded theory approach for both research methods. Glaser and Strauss created grounded theory in 1967 where the researcher is at the forefront of using grounded theory. According to Steve Chin (2013):

The grounded theory approach develops practical theory by means of note taking, coding (identifying key points from notes), “memoing” (developing theory from coding), and the sorting of data collected via observations, interviews, and the reading of literature related to the research situation. (Chin, 2013).

The overall objective for using grounded theory in this study was to see the affect the variety of English courses had on multiple students. Through the grounded theory process, I was able to collect enough data to help answer my research questions.

Limitations

There were several limitations, which may have hindered the results or the analysis of the data. In terms of ethnography, I was not allowed to focus on every student in every class. Therefore, I focused on students where I noticed a significant progress in their English abilities, especially if they took English elective courses. Time was also a limitation because some of my third year students ended up graduating before I could fully see their maturation with the English language. Therefore, I focused research on the first and second year students (currently second and third year students) because I knew I could observed them the following year.

In terms of the focus group, one limitation was having the JTE translate what I was saying to the students and vice versa. Some of the words and phrases were probably lost in translation. Also, since there were at least five people per class per focus group, some of the students could have been too shy to voice their opinions in front of many people. Perhaps, an interview with the JTE as the translator would have been a better method for data collection in that case.

Results

As stated earlier, I am in my second year working as an ALT as part of the JET Program at Aoya High School. It is located in the eastern region of Tottori prefecture. I am one of ten ALTs working at a high school on the JET Program on the eastern side of the prefecture. Speaking to the other nine ALTs working in my region, they were shocked when I mentioned the variety of English classes being taught at my school. When speaking to one of my JTE's, he said, "Aoya High School is [known to be] a lower academic school. [In order] to attract students, the school [created] many different course options [not offered] at other higher academic schools," Sakamoto Sensei¹. In this section, I will describe and examine the different English classes offered at Aoya High School. I will provide extensive ethnographic analysis especially with the classes in which I have taught the students for more than one year in order to elaborate on their progress. I will also provide some of the student's testimonials from the focus group sessions.

English Expression

English Expression is a compulsory class that every student at Aoya High School must take (first, second, and third year students). This course focuses on grammar and syntax. It is a class that is mainly taught only by JTEs. In the few lessons I was able to team teach with the JTE, I tried to make learning grammar more enjoyable for the students. Unfortunately, this course is taught using the *yakudoku* method and I have not been able to help out with any of these classes.

English Communication

This is another compulsory course that students in the first, second, and third year must take. It is the main class that I help out with for the first year students and it is designed to feature CLT between the JTE and the ALT. The main objective for this class, specifically with the first year students is to help them communicate in English specifically focusing on listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each week, I am in charge with making my own curriculum based on topics in the text book or of cultural relevance with making activities focusing on listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

One activity that has worked really well was "show and tell." The most recent show and tell activity featured students' role models. This assignment was implemented over two class periods. During the first class period, I went over the assignment and the grading rubric.

¹ Name has been changed to protect the identity of the teacher. Going forward, all names will be pseudonyms to protect the identity of the students.

The students were judged on a five-point scale based on five categories: projection (volume), fluidity (speed), pronunciation (clarity), eye contact, and a picture or drawing of their role models. After I went over the grading rubric, I gave them an example show and tell using my role model, Jeremy Lin. When I finished presenting, I asked a few students of their assessment of my show and tell and why they gave me certain scores for each category. The purpose of this was to see if they understood the grading criteria. Next, the students were given a sheet of paper, which asked questions about their role models. A few of the questions were: who is your role models, what does he or she do, and how long has he or she been your role model? Then, the students were given time to write down their answers. After they finished their speeches, the students would find a partner and practice rehearsing their show and tell speeches. Their homework assignment was to practice their show and tell speech along with finding or drawing a picture of their role models.

In the next class, the students presented their show and tell speeches. The other students were asked to take notes of each students' role model so they were not sleeping or busy talking with their friends. This was a very good activity because it encompassed the four critical areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. I was pleasantly surprised with two students in particular; a student in class one and a student in class two. In class two Ikeda-kun (kun is used to describe a boy) who usually sleeps in class and does not like to participate in any activities, filled out the entire worksheet. He talked about his role model, Ichiro Suzuki and how Suzuki is an inspiration for him on the baseball field. In class three, Yamane-san (san is used to describe a girl) who is very good at English completed the worksheet without any problem. However, she is usually very shy and quiet. However, when it was her turn to present, she gave arguably the best speech of the entire first year students. She was very confident talking about her role model, Taylor Swift. I had no idea Yamane-san had a really strong voice until she gave her speech; I could hear her from the back of the room. She was also one of a few students that actually made eye contact with the audience. I highlighted these two students because since we had the show and tell lesson, they have both excelled in with subsequent lessons (volunteering to speak and encouraging other students to participate) and showed an improvement with their test scores.

English Conversation

During the 2014-2015 school year, I was able to teach English Conversation as an elective course to the first year students. This course mainly focused on getting the students to communicate with one another in more of a pair work setting. There were a wide range of topics ranging from arranging schedules, telling and receiving directions on a map, traveling abroad, ordering at a restaurant, and going shopping. I noticed that the students who were in the English Conversation course were genuinely motivated to learn and speak English. These were also the students whom were very active in the English Communication class.

In the 2015-2016 school year, I am teaching this course again to the first year students, but also to the third year students. It is quite challenging getting the third year students to be motivated for this English elective course since it meets for two class periods, back-to-back. At the beginning of the year, I had the students write down what they hoped to learn in the course along with activities they wanted to do.

All but two of the eleven registered students wanted to do a cooking activity. I told them if I saw effort from them during the textbook and extra worksheet lessons that I prepared, then we could have a cooking class. Many of the students showed a lot of effort with the exception of three girls (Takimura-san, Ibuki-san, and Oka-san).

After a month into the school year, since the other students showed a lot of enthusiasm, I introduced the cooking lesson. During one class, I had the students find recipes of food they wanted to cook for the class. I stated the only way we could do this cooking assignment is if they wrote the ingredients and instructions in English along with teaching me how to make the food using easy English. All the students agreed. In the second half of the class, the students voted on making cupcakes, shrimp and *kimchi yaki* (stir-fried balls), and dessert *yaki* using pancake batter.

The following week, we had the cooking class. My JTE bought all the ingredients and we asked who would be the leaders of the three cooking stations. To my surprise, Takimura-san, Ibuki-san, and Oka-san were the three students whom stepped up to take on a leadership role for each of the three groups. Takimura-san was in charge of the dessert *yaki*, Ibuki-san was the leader for the shrimp and *kimchi yaki* group, and Oka-san was the person in charge of making cupcakes. While rotating between the three groups, Takimura-san, Ibuki-san, and Oka-san made sure to approach me and give me specific instruction on how to create their specific food item. I was surprised with how enthusiastic these three girls were at cooking and communicating how to cook their respective dishes to me using English. Although, the students digressed following the cooking assignment, it gave me hope to see that these girls were actually paying attention in our English Conversation classes; they just needed to be motivated by doing something they loved for them to start using English.

Following the cooking lesson, I had a focus group with the third year students and asked why they took this class. Here are a few responses from the students: Ibuki-san stated, "I [took] this class because [I thought] it [would be] fun." Yamawaku-kun explain, "I wanted something different." Finally, Takimura-san replied, "I need to practice English [for my job]." Following this question, I asked the students to raise their hands if they enjoyed this class over the traditional English grammar class. All eleven students raised their hands. Finally, I asked the students what they thought of English after taking this class. Kawamoto-san said, "I [didn't] like English before, but now I like [it]."

Basic English and Practical English

Basic English is a course that is offered to second year students. It focuses on reading, writing, and daily conversation. It is mainly taken by second year students whom do not have a good grasp of the English language. This is essentially a review course from the first year. Practical English is a lower level course for third year students. It is a course that focuses on teaching practical English phrases and sentences. It is similar to the Basic English course taught to second year students. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to help out with either of these classes.

English Listening

The English Listening class was designed as an elective course. During the 2014-2015 school year, I taught this course to third year students. Currently, in the 2015-2016 school year, I am teaching this course to second year students. The course meets only once a week for two straight periods. Because of the elongated nature of this class, I have broken up the course into two sections. One period is doing textbook work and the other period focuses on “fun” activities.

Working with the third year students was more of a challenge because many of them took the course because they thought it was an “easy” class without any tests. The first time teaching this class was very rough. We tried to do multiple repeating and listening exercises as a warm-up to the class followed by textbook work for the rest of the period. Many of the third year students tended to doze off or talk with their friends during the class. After the first week, I approached my JTE and decided to change the nature of the class. To entice the students to learn, my JTE and I would prepare listening games for the second half of the class. These games were only to be played if the students worked hard and paid attention in the beginning of the class.

During the third class (second time seeing them), I saw an immediate response from Takimori-kun and Mameda-kun. These were two of the boys that talked to each other in the first class (in Japanese). However, at the beginning of class, when I said we would be playing a game towards the latter half of the class if we could get through all the textbook work, the students’ attitudes changed immensely. We got through the third class without any interruptions. After a ten minute break, we had the fourth class.

I decided to introduce Battleship to the students. This was a great game to start with the students: they were able to practice vocabulary using numbers and letters, listen to the coordinates that were given, and work with their teammates to figure out where the ships were located. Since the one textbook, one “fun” class worked, we continued this method in subsequent lessons. Some other games we played were: various card games, scrabble, matching, and pyramid.

During the 2015-2016 school year, the listening class was offered to the second year students. I had the opportunity to teach all six of these students in their first year, so I knew their English abilities and tendencies. Since the course was offered the same way (two back-to-back classes), I decided to keep the same method of the course; the first class would be textbook work and the second class would be the more “fun” class. At the beginning of the course, the students stated they wanted to watch movies during their “fun” classes. I thought this was a great idea, especially for a listening class.

The first month of class, we watched Alice in Wonderland. We watched the movie in English with Japanese subtitles. The students had to take notes because they would have to reenact their favorite scenes. I was pleasantly surprised with the ability of three girls: Tsujimoto-san, Hosoda-san, and Yamamoto-san because these were three of the quieter girls I had during their first year. The only time they would speak, was when they were talking to their friends in Japanese. However, this changed in their second year. They were a lot more outgoing and were eager to participate in acting

out their favorite Alice in Wonderland scenes. Tsujimoto-san's favorite scene was when Alice first went down the rabbit's hole and had food/drinks which made her larger or smaller. Hosoda-san's favorite scene was when the queen was yelling, "off with her head," to her guards. Finally, Yamamoto-san's favorite scene was the Mad Hatter's tea party scene. Each girl had a lot of emotion and fun acting out their favorite Alice in Wonderland scenes, while using key English phrases they jotted down from the movie.

English Understanding

English Understanding is a lower level elective course for third year students. It focuses on very basic English points and includes lots of games, videos, practical scenes, easy English newspaper and manga excerpts along with relevant listening activities.

I frequently help out as a guest teacher for this class as it is not a course I am originally assigned to. The first class I helped out in was a very dry class, which focused on grammar. From working with previous third year classes, I knew their motivation was quite low since many of them already found out what they would be doing after high school and very few of them needed to use English. With this in mind, I suggested we turn the English grammar point in to a competition by seeing which team could complete the worksheet the quickest. This really helped motivate many of the male students in particular.

Other classes which were very successful involved the use of an activity that made the students move around or incorporated more interesting approaches to teaching such as giving them an intriguing scene from Doraemon (a manga) while having both the English and Japanese written on this comic strip. After going over both texts, students would break up into groups and act out the scenes. Rakuyama-kun was particularly active when implementing the manga lesson. I have caught him multiple times using his cell phone in class while the JTE was explaining a grammar point. However, by forcing him to actively participate in the manga scene, he put his phone away and had a good time acting out the scene in English with his classmates.

Intercultural Communicative Understanding (ICU)

The Intercultural Communicative Understanding class is a course that offers deep world cultural understanding. This course is designed for students to choose a country and make their own curriculum. In the 2014-2015 school year, I was first introduced to this class from my JTE. The JTE would choose a topic and the students would choose a country from the world and talk about this topic. Some topic examples were: food, music, and festivals. In the 2015-2016 school year, I wanted to take this class a step further.

Instead of choosing specific topics, I wanted the students to choose a specific country and do a detailed report of their country. The countries chosen were: Korea, the United States of America (by three people), and Australia. The first project, the students needed to physically demonstrate or show something associated with their country. Since this class meets twice a week, I gave the students two months to choose a country, do research on the country, and prepare a detailed lesson.

The main criteria was to think of something innovative and interactive. Kawamoto-san chose Korea and decided to teach us how to make *bulgogi*. Yamawaku-ku infused Japanese and American culture by teaching us how to make California rolls. Kitajima-san made cupcakes to show us one of the many American desserts. Sakai-san brought in clothing and showed us pictures of clothing dressed and made in the United States. Finally, Tamura-san talked about how Australia celebrates Easter and showed us an Easter tradition by having us paint Easter eggs.

I also did a focus group with this class. I asked them similar questions to the third year English conversation students and got the same responses of how they really liked English elective classes because it was more enjoyable. In addition, I asked them what they thought about making their own curriculum. Kawamoto-san said she liked the freedom to teach her classmates. Yamawaku-kun noted that he liked the opportunity to engage his classmates and by being in charge. Tamura-san explained that she liked being taught by someone other than a teacher. Overall, I got great responses on empowering students to teach and learn English through their own curriculum.

Current Events

Current Events is an elective course only offered to third year students. I only got to teach this class once as a special lesson since it regularly conflicts with the ICU course. In the one class I taught, I decided to use the website: www.newslevels.com. This is a site that tells current events using three different levels of English. The third level is the most difficult as it is the actual news story. The first and second levels are broken down using simpler English vocabulary.

I wanted to choose an interesting story that would appeal to the students, so I ended up choosing, "Pandas in Washington." It was a story about twin pandas born at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington. First, I showed the third level video because there were actual pictures with text. This would help the students grasp what the story was about. Then, I proceeded to go over the first and second level videos. It was during these videos where I asked the students questions and we discussed the more difficult vocabulary. I really like this site because it offers definitions of the difficult words in all the videos.

This class is particularly useful because it engages students with interesting stories happening throughout the world. It is also a good class to use practical English will learning something outside of a textbook.

Overview

Overall, there are many layers to this research. However, there were a couple of major themes that emerged from observing, teaching, and talking with students from the variety of English courses.

It appears that the overwhelming majority of students preferred the English classes where they could be active or have some input in what was being taught. Many of the students really enjoyed the English classes, especially the elective courses (144 out of 176 students over two years). Personally, I am very happy with the growth of many of the students when it comes to English acquisition. I found that many of the students that take English elective courses thrive in my classes probably because they have a high motivation for learning English. However, even with students who do not take English elective courses, I found they tend to speak more English if I can make English appealing to their interests and talk to them on a more personal level.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivation for learning English from L2 Japanese high school students by looking at the variety of English courses offered at Aoya High School. I believe using CLT is a better method than the *yakudoku* method. Many students' whom have slept in class or were quiet during class opened up during a team-teaching lesson. Additionally, when students chose an English elective course, many of them developed a strong sense of English by creating their own curriculum/projects to teach to the rest of the class.

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