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 HELP & FAQs

## Secondary English Teachers: Out from the Shadow of *Juken*

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*Over the course of a six-month period, two Japanese English teachers at the senior secondary level were interviewed and had their classes observed as part of this qualitative study. Attempting to uncover their diverse teaching contexts and cultures, teachers' personal histories appear to have a strong influence on how they conceptualize their multiple roles as teachers. Emerging from this study is a place of seeming contradiction and paradox where teachers must negotiate their many roles between educational ideals and workplace*

*realities. Teachers must balance their enormous extra-curricular responsibilities with their duties as English teachers. Curricular roles are shown to be under the continued influence and power of university entrance examination preparation and the commonly used teaching method of grammar-translation. The pressure to conform to this norm appears to be greatest for one participant more than the other. In the case of this particular study, it appears that recent Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) curricular reforms have been able to advance further at the academically lower level than at the highest level where university entrance examination pressure is at its highest. All participants hope that educational reform may more closely align their educational realities with their educational ideals. In order that all teachers might see the benefits of reform the content of entrance examinations must be changed to match the goals of curricular reform.*

Scholarship in the field of secondary English education in Japan has rightly focused on the great influence which *juken* (entrance examinations) has held on course curriculum and teaching methods (Amano, 1990; Brown, 1995; Hendrichson, 1989). Equally critical to any examination of the state of English education has been an exploration into the power which *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) wields over classroom practice and student learning (Gorsuch, 1998; Hino, 1988). Research in the area of teachers' roles in this context has been conducted using quantitative surveys exploring teacher beliefs about teaching methods, and teacher practices in the classroom (Browne and Wada,

1998; Gorsuch, 1998). However, there has been little in-depth, qualitative research conducted into the ways that secondary English teachers are able to define and act upon their roles within their particular educational contexts. This study examines how two teachers have come to define their roles as educators, and how they negotiate those roles within the realities of an imperfect educational system.

## Research questions

The following four questions were explored in order to uncover participants' experiences as educators:

1. What do these teacher-participants identify as their cultural and social roles as teachers of English?
2. In what ways do participants' respective work environments influence the curricular choices they are able to make?
3. In what way do participants' curricular and extra-curricular roles impact on their ability to do their work as they would like?
4. Given the various role restrictions that teachers cope with on a daily basis, what curricular reforms do the study participants believe are possible in English education, from the classroom level to the national level?

## Background

In order to place the individual teaching cultures and educational realities of teacher-participants within the larger educational context, it is necessary to explore three topics within the general literature of English education in Japan: *juken* (entrance examinations), *yakudoku* (grammar translation),

and Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) attempts at curricular reform.

The literature base on the topic of *juken* mainly emphasizes the power that examinations have had on affecting course content, and teaching methods used in secondary schools (Amano, 1990; Brown, 1995; Collins, 1989; Rohlen, 1983). Amano argues that, in fact, “the main purpose of secondary schooling is preparation for university entrance examinations” (p. xix). Actual learning outcomes in English language education are said to continue to reflect this general goal. Brown (1995), among others, has emphasized how English is taught and learned as a means to an end: gaining admittance to the best university possible. Contrary to the belief that English should be taught in order to help students increase their communicative competence in the language, Hendrichson (1989) contends that “English became a means of sorting students rather than a path to communication” (p. 121). Tanabe (1999) states that the content of university entrance examinations is said to have greater influence on classroom content and teaching practice than curricular guidelines set by MEXT.

As preparation for entrance examinations continues to be seen as the primary goal in English language education for many teachers, *yakudoku* is said to be the preferred method in achieving that end. Gorsuch (1998) argues that this symbiosis between the two creates a “...powerful emphasis [in] the meticulous standards for accuracy and an unfortunate tendency to focus on exceptions to the rules of grammar” (p. 6). Used for centuries in language study, *yakudoku*, often described as the Japanese equivalent of the grammar-translation method, is said to be “the method of teaching English in Japan” (Hino, 1988, p. 46). Emphasizing translation over grammar study, Gorsuch

describes the *yakudoku* classroom as centered on the word-for-word translation of English text into Japanese. Language instruction is almost always conducted in Japanese; oral and written English are not fostered in this learning environment.

*Yakudoku* continues to predominate in English language pedagogy, its proponents justifying its use as a necessary means to prepare students for all-important entrance examinations. Gorsuch (1998), among others, points out, however, that “what does not make sense is that most university exams don’t actually require students to translate...which is what *yakudoku* is all about” (p. 7). The method has been criticized on pedagogical grounds as well. Hino (1988) emphasizes *yakudoku*’s long-known problems in creating “a severe handicap for students, [in areas] like reading speed and development of other language skill areas” (p. 47). If the method has been shown to be both practically and pedagogically unsound, what can account for its longevity? Hino takes a sociological approach in a search for this answer. He argues that the *yakudoku* problem in language education is *sociological* rather than *pedagogical*. Once a pedagogical practice is accepted as a societal tradition, it becomes the educational norm. A teacher will not be accused of anything as long as s/he follows this norm. Hino observes that those who do not follow the norm face the prospect of being regarded as deviants. Only the most secure or confident can risk such an appellation.

MEXT began its latest educational reform measures in English education in the mid-1980’s. Koike & Tanaka (1995) argue that from that time, the Ministry began to officially support the communicative language orientation with its emphasis on developing the four basic skills in language and communicative

competence. The Ministry’s present Course of Study for Lower Secondary School clearly focuses on developing, “students’ basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking” (Monbusho, 2003, p. 1). The Course of Study for Upper Secondary School highlights the development of “students’ practical communication abilities...and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture and fostering positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages” (p. 5). Teachers are exhorted to “focus on language for use in authentic situation” (p. 4), using teaching strategies like role-playing, speeches, and discussion to practice everyday conversation (Monbusho, 1999).

The recent Ministry curricular guidelines shown above appear to oppose the *yakudoku* practices of the past. At the beginning of this current curricular reform effort, Hino (1988) emphasized the contradiction between educational reality, represented by *juken* and the *yakudoku*, with official progressiveness, represented by the new methods of communicative language teaching. A quantitative study conducted by Browne and Wada (1998) sought to discern the state of reform in senior secondary schools implemented after Ministry-led communicative language reforms in 1994. They found that English teachers at high-level academic schools continued to favor *yakudoku*-inspired teaching methods, and activities geared to exam preparation. They noted that while reforms had led to the creation of Oral Communication classes, implementation varied widely among schools; some high-level schools did not implement them, instead relying on previous teaching methods. They concluded that teachers in lower academic schools were, “more likely to experiment with communicative teaching techniques” (p. 105). Curricular policy and educational practice appear to differ between the types of school under examination.

## Study

This study cannot attempt to generalize about the practices of English education in Japan as a whole. Using ethnographic principles, it seeks to uncover how the two teachers involved in this study define their roles as educators, and how their individual work environments may influence those roles.

This paper simply presents the stories of two people in the hope that it will “recreate for the reader, their shared beliefs [and ] practices... ..to reconstruct the characteristics of their experience” (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 3).

Over the course of a six-month period, two English teachers working at senior secondary level in Seaside Prefecture were interviewed and had their classes observed as part of this qualitative study. In order to maintain participant anonymity, teacher names and the location of the study have been changed. Teacher-participants were selected on the basis of availability and willingness to join the study. It was hoped that participants working in diverse settings would provide an equally varied range of experiences for this study. Accordingly, representation varied with one teacher working at an academically high-level suburban high school, and the other teacher working at an academically low-medium level rural high school.

## Data collection

Interviews were conducted once a month at the teachers' schools. They lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. A semi-structured interview question technique was used, so the researcher could pursue the various topics which developed as interviews and class observations progressed. Class observations were conducted once every two months. Debriefing was held during interviews.

Interviews and observations were taped and transcribed by the researcher. At the beginning of the study, participants were given the choice of using English, Japanese, or both languages when participating. Both participants chose to use English. Participants were also asked to complete self-reports about the impact that the study had on them. This served to give them an opportunity to express their feelings about how the study was conducted.

After the researcher collated participant summaries, they were returned to participants and checked for accuracy. Triangulation was realized using corroborative interview data from each teacher-participant, as well as from the body of educational literature pertinent to the present study.

## Results

Ms. Sakai teaches at one of the highest-level public academic senior secondary schools in Seaside prefecture. She has taught for 13 years at three different schools of varying academic levels. She has been teaching at her present school for two years, and describes it as a very conservative place where the main purpose for teaching English is to prepare students for university entrance examinations. Students in this senior secondary school are highly motivated to learn English, both to help them speak with people from other countries, and to prepare for entrance examinations. Ninety percent of graduating students attend university; eighty percent write the '*sentaa shiken*' (the first test students write to gain entry into the highest level universities). A large minority of students from this school are admitted to high-level public and private post-secondary institutions.

Ms. Sakai describes the English education she received as typical of its time: English taught by the traditional grammar



translation method, for the purpose of writing entrance examinations. When she attended the top high school in her prefecture, one exceptional teacher used a different approach to teaching English, using language games as well as English music and poetry. This teacher inspired her to consider education as a career. She attended one of the top foreign-language universities in the Kansai region, where she studied linguistics and language pedagogy. Ms. Sakai believes that students can best learn English communicatively, using the language in real context in the classroom. She is active in a prefecture-wide English teachers' study group, and recently returned from a six-month Japan Ministry of Education sponsored study trip to Britain.

She believes that a good teacher is one who attempts to open her students' eyes to a new world. She would like to teach English in a way that would allow students to see that increasing their English proficiency could open up a wide variety of new and enriching cultural and social experiences. She is very critical of the conservative transmission-teaching model where students are expected to spend all of their time memorizing discrete pieces of information for the purpose of writing a test. She is not able to achieve her teaching goals at her present school, and feels pressured to teach as her colleagues teach.

The second participant in the study, Mr. Yamamoto, teaches at an academically low-medium level comprehensive senior high school in a rural town of Seaside prefecture. This senior secondary school is unique within Japan, in that most students can gain entrance to this school through an interview, rather than by the traditional high school entrance examination system. Mr. Yamamoto has taught for 15 years at three different schools. He has been at his present school for three years. He describes the

English teaching environment at his school as conservative and traditional. Most other teachers are said to emphasize grammar/translation techniques when teaching, despite the fact that fewer than forty percent of graduates go on to attend post-secondary training. This number includes entrants to trade schools, two year junior colleges and four year universities.

Mr. Yamamoto graduated from the top high school in his hometown, learning English in secondary school to prepare for entrance examinations. When he was a teenager he became interested in learning about foreign culture, and using English to achieve that end. He studied English on his own, listening to NHK radio lessons, and reading English books. After graduating from a national university he spent a few months in Britain. Like Ms. Sakai, Mr. Yamamoto believes that students can best learn English in an active manner, using the language rather than studying it. He is well-versed in the communicative language approach, but sees some level of direct grammar and vocabulary instruction as necessary. Mr. Yamamoto believes a good English teacher encourages students to use the language as a means of communication to explore new ways of thinking about the world. Mr. Yamamoto believes that, for the most part, he is able to fulfill his goals as a teacher at his present school.

## **Emergent themes**

As observations and interviews continued throughout the course of this study, and as observation and interview data were analyzed, a number of recurring themes began to emerge. Systemic realities influencing classroom teaching were shown to diverge, while similarities in the area of extra-curricular burdens emerged to equally affect teachers' abilities to teach.

### **English teaching realities**

Mr. Yamamoto and Ms. Sakai work in vastly different workplaces. The overwhelming power of *juken* and *yakudoku* is present, but to different degrees. The intensity of that power and its influence on individual work environments differs for each teacher-participant. Ms. Sakai's greatest challenge is the indirect power that her colleagues hold over her ability to choose how and what materials to teach. At monthly English department meetings of the same grade level, teachers meet to decide which material will be covered on grade-wide term examinations. She feels that, while preparation for entrance examinations is the greatest target for the teaching of English at her school, grade-wide testing becomes the monthly means of control over all teaching and learning. Ms. Sakai feels that she cannot make known her opposition to her colleagues' methods because there is no common ground to begin meaningful discussion; goals and purposes for teaching the language are too divergent. Ms. Sakai remains silently frustrated.

When Mr. Yamamoto began his teaching career, he faced the same experience as Ms. Sakai. At his present school he feels that he has the freedom to incorporate communicative teaching materials and strategies in his teaching. He attributes this freedom to the relatively small size of his school, relative lack of urgency to prepare students for university entrance examinations, increased confidence in his abilities as a teacher, and in his ability to negotiate with his colleagues. While his colleagues may not control him in the same way that Ms. Sakai feels controlled, he is equally critical of the conservative colleagues who continue to teach grammar/translation techniques to students who will not write entrance examinations. He also points out that those students who face the prospect of writing entrance examinations may not even face the test questions for which their teachers are preparing them.

### **Prominent non-teaching tasks**

This study began with a focus on uncovering teachers' beliefs about their roles as English teachers and how they carry out their jobs. Emerging from interviews, it became apparent that, although participants teach 15-18 classes in a week, the teaching of English appears to take up far less than half of all work-related responsibilities. Mr. Yamamoto estimated that his teaching responsibilities represent only 30% of the total amount of work that he does. Ms. Sakai and Mr. Yamamoto define themselves as English teachers who must take on many other roles, ranging from administration and school management duties, to student guidance and extra-curricular club activities. Most of these tasks cannot be refused or avoided. Ms. Sakai and Mr. Yamamoto are each responsible for the management of their respective school's timetable. Whenever a teacher is absent, they have to find someone to cover that teacher's classes. Mr. Yamamoto also heads his school's Career Education and International Education programs.

Surely the large amounts of time that teachers must spend on extra-curricular and management duties has some impact on their teaching of English, as Taira (1982) asserts. Teacher-participants said that they often relied on using grammar-translation when they did not have enough time to prepare lessons for class. Both reported throughout the duration of this study that there had been occasions when their other responsibilities became of more immediate concern than the teaching of English. Both Mr. Yamamoto and Ms. Sakai often felt overwhelmed by the many responsibilities they have in addition to teaching English.

### **Searching for balance**

Teacher/participants have learned to balance their often-overwhelming teaching and non-teaching responsibilities. Each

participant has developed coping strategies in dealing with the challenges that they face in their jobs. Ms. Sakai has no one to speak to about teaching at her school, but has developed an Internet-based study network of like-minded teachers. Mr. Yamamoto relies on the power of positive thinking to help him balance the diverse responsibilities and roles he plays as an educator.

### **Educational reform**

A variety of systemic and contextual constraints make it difficult for Ms. Sakai and Mr. Yamamoto to fulfill their educational roles as they would wish. These teachers appear to be relatively optimistic that reform in English education will help them come closer to achieving their goals as teachers. Both participants spoke positively about current MEXT curricular reform initiatives. Mr. Yamamoto spoke about the growing flexibility of the new course of study and its communicative goals. Optimism for the future is tempered with a dose of skepticism, however. Both teachers wonder whether the Ministry will provide increased financial support so that the implementation of communicative language curricular reforms can be realized.

Mr. Yamamoto and Ms. Sakai believe that, unless conservative teachers can be won over to the goals of reform, success will be limited, particularly at high-level academic schools. Just as Browne and Wada (1998) emphasize, teacher-participants reported that some academically high-level schools are subverting current reform, teaching reading and grammar classes in place of the designated oral communication classes which have been recently mandated by MEXT. Until more teachers share the same goals in English education, reform will be stymied. Ms. Sakai questions whether the conservative teachers she works with are willing, or able, to change. She

claims that they have too much to lose, both personally and professionally, to make any effort to embrace change.

Both teachers believe that, for reform to be successful, entrance examinations at all levels must be changed so that communicative curricular reform can be viewed as a classroom necessity. Neither teacher, however, spoke of the need to eliminate examinations for high school and university entrance. Each spoke of the need to rely less on arcane reading passages, and more on questions that emphasize communicative competence. These teachers spoke of the need for greater emphasis on listening tests, and on a speaking test component.

### **Conclusion**

Despite their different workplaces, Mr. Yamamoto and Ms. Sakai teach in the shadow of an educational system where the educational norm continues to be structured around entrance exam preparation using grammar-translation teaching methods. One of the greatest differences between their workplaces is how that norm is played out and how each teacher is able to respond to the pressure of conformity. It appears that this conformity is greatest where the educational stakes are highest--at the top of the academic hierarchy, where competition for university entrance is most competitive.

At the lowest level of the academic hierarchy, a confident Mr. Yamamoto has the freedom to both implement and advocate pedagogical change to his colleagues, based on MEXT curricular guidelines. Even at this level, the educational norm is ever-present; Mr. Yamamoto says that he works with colleagues who continue to teach as if preparing their students for university entrance examinations that they will not write,

using a teaching method which is pedagogically suspect. Mr. Yamamoto considers himself lucky. He has the freedom to challenge the norm, and can more easily negotiate between his educational ideals and workplace realities.

Conversely, at the top to the academic hierarchy, Ms. Sakai's ability to negotiate her role as an English teacher is limited. Despite her years of teaching experience and training, the need to conform appears inexorable. Ms. Sakai feels she has so little power to assert her role as an English teacher that she is unable to even speak about the possibility of lesson modification with her colleagues. Even as MEXT curricular reform is said to be taking place, Ms. Sakai's experience remains entirely under the shadow and control of the educational norm represented by *juken* and *yakudoku*.

This qualitative study cannot support broad generalizations made about English secondary education; its focus is on the experiences of two teachers from different ends of the educational spectrum. The findings of this study indicate that further research is necessary to discover where MEXT reforms might advance, and how teachers can be supported to help the progress of reform in their schools. Findings from this study, in conjunction with those in Browne and Wada (1998), indicate that reform may be advancing further at an academically low level than at a high level. If this is true, the benefits of reform are bypassing the very teachers and students they are most meant to empower. The experiences of Mr. Yamamoto and Ms. Sakai indicate that teachers at all levels must be supported in two areas: they need freedom to implement the curriculum changes, and time to focus on their primary responsibility of teaching. As the study participants have stated, a majority of teachers must be won over to the ideas represented by

communicative language reform, if it is to do more than simply pay lip-service to progressive educational methods.

Teacher-participants argue that reform of the content of English university entrance examinations must occur in tandem with curricular reform, so that more teachers can be won over to the implementation of reform in their classrooms. If examinations reflected communicative principles, they argue, the justification for using *yakudoku* alone could be softened, and will eventually be seen as but one method which teachers can use to help their students prepare for entrance examinations. Teachers might then have more freedom to implement communicative language methods. MEXT can propose reforms, design textbooks and curriculum, and exhort teachers to implement those reforms. But reform cannot be dictated in this manner; it will only occur when a majority of teachers believe that change in the classroom is truly beneficial to their students.

N.B. This paper represents a summary of a presentation given at the JALT 2003 Conference where the experiences of two teacher-participants were presented. The original study involved five teacher-participants. I hope to publish the entire study in the near future.



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