

The Vicious Triangle: CLT, Native Speakers, and “English-Only” Classrooms

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The vicious triangle is a pervasive discourse structure within Japanese ELT, in which native English-speaking educators, immersive “English-only” classrooms, and newer, more student-centred teaching approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT) are conflated to form a single, unified triad. In this paper I define these elements as commonly understood and present a critical discourse analysis of key policy documents, media reports, and previously unpublished qualitative data to explore how the links along each side of the triangle are construed as axiomatic and the separate elements reified as a mutually dependent group. The vicious triangle is shown to centre on and exacerbate widespread pedagogical misunderstanding of CLT and so limit educators and damage students’ learning. These impacts are highlighted and suggestions for mitigation are offered.

日本の英語教育においては、英語ネイティブスピーカーの教員、英語のみの教室、CLTのような生徒中心の教育的アプローチの3つが一体となった「負の三角形」の談話構造が普及している。本論文では、これらの要素が共通認識されたものと定義し、公的教育機関のガイドライン、メディアレポート、過去の未出版の質的データの批判的談話分析を提示する。最初に三者のうち二者のつながりが自然形成された過程を調査し、後に三要素すべてがどのように相互依存のグループを具象化したかについて論じる。「負の三角形」の中心にすることで、CLTの教育的誤解の広がりが悪化し、制限が与えられ、生徒の学びも妨げられている。この「負の三角形」の影響に重点を置き、緩和法を提案する。

The vicious triangle is a pervasive discourse structure within Japanese ELT connecting native English-speaking (NES) educators, immersive “English-only” classrooms, and newer, more student-centred teaching approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT). These discourses are likely familiar to foreign language teachers working in Japan, but their prevalence obscures how they support and reinforce each other to form

a deeper, less apparent structure. In this paper I will draw on critical discourse analyses of key policy documents, media reports, and questionnaire and interview data to contend that this underlying discourse structure—the vicious triangle—works against transformation in the ELT profession, limiting educators and ultimately damaging students’ learning. The focus is on Japanese senior high schools (SHSs), but I argue that this discourse influences other educational levels. I begin by defining the parts of the vicious triangle. The data are then discussed to demonstrate the links along each side of the triangle. The impacts of the triangle as a whole are then addressed, and suggestions for mitigation are offered.

The Vicious Triangle

The vicious triangle is present in public discourse on ELT in Japan, drawing from and perpetuating attitudes at both the policy level and in the classroom. Figure 1 illustrates the triangle, showing how the distinct elements of English-only classrooms, NES educators, and CLT are positioned within a single, mutually dependent triad. This triad reifies an axiomatic dependence of the elements upon each other: It is understood that all three must be present for any one to work, and in the absence of any one, the other two are considered at best suboptimal and at worst simply unviable.

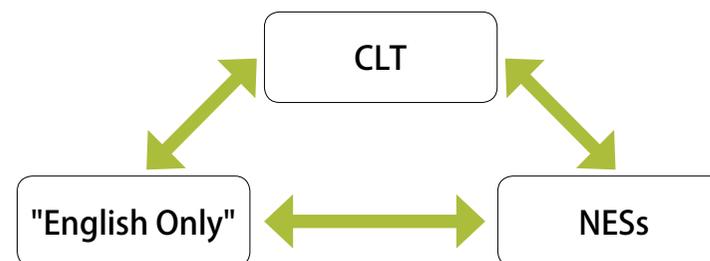


Figure 1. The vicious triangle. CLT = communicative language teaching; NESs = native English speakers.

Defining the Elements

The three elements of the triangle are defined as follows. These definitions are basic and intended to capture ground-level, common sense understandings held by educational stakeholders rather than more academic critiques. Although these elements influence classroom practice individually, and so deserve more detailed discussion, space prohibits doing so here. The focus of this paper is on the model as a whole and describing the links between its individual elements as opposed to the elements themselves.

“English-Only” Classrooms

An English-only classroom is a classroom in which only English is used. As is explored below, however, the focus within the discourse is generally on the language use of teachers; the language used by students is much less reliably mandated (see e.g., Hashimoto, 2013, p. 26).

Native English Speakers

A vital body of literature exists critiquing the NES concept (see e.g., Doerr, 2009; Houghton & Rivers, 2013). In working practice in Japan, however, native speakerness is inextricably tied to nationality. A native English speaker is someone from Phillipson’s (1992) core or Kachru’s (1990) inner circle: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and so forth (Kubota & Okuda, 2016). Culture, ethnicity, and race all influence this discourse, but a key quality of NESs is their perceived English fluency.

Communicative Language Teaching

Scholarly definitions of CLT draw upon Hymes’s concept of communicative competence (1972) and subsequent refinements by Canale and Swain (1980) among others, but are frequently vague. It is, for example, not unusual to encounter statements claiming CLT is “best considered an approach rather than a method” (Richards & Rogers, 1986, p. 83) or similar, which, for teachers under pressure to deliver results in the classroom, just replaces one slightly amorphous abstract noun with another.

Understanding of CLT in the Japanese classroom is often unclear, leading to conflation with other newer approaches and buzzwords such as *task-based teaching* or *active learning*. Because the official push for communication in Japanese English classrooms started in the late 1980s (Stewart, 2009), this confusion means CLT has become something of an umbrella term for progressive TEFL approaches introduced to Japan over the last

few decades. These approaches are united in an emphasis on student-centred learning and are, not incorrectly, seen as reactions to the teacher-focused status quo. There is a general lack of detailed pedagogical understanding, which contributes to these approaches being principally understood not for what they are but for what they are not, that is, not grammar-translation. The discourse is thus binary, dividing Japanese EFL pedagogy into grammar-translation and *everything else*. Thus, CLT has come to refer to a large and poorly understood grab bag of newer approaches defined principally by their (perceived) lack of explicit grammar tuition. This results in CLT and related approaches often being seen as not merely reactions to, but active rejections of prevailing classroom practice.

This conceptualisation is evident in the data from a questionnaire on the attitudes of Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) towards CLT, which was conducted in a municipal SHS in western Japan in which I worked in 2014. This was a triangulated study consisting of a 12-item questionnaire of all 14 of the school’s JTEs, followed by classroom observations and semistructured follow-up interviews of the four 2nd-year teachers. All questions and responses were in English due to my role as participant researcher; to have conducted them in Japanese could have exacerbated the concerns about relative linguistic competence discussed below. The questionnaire contained mostly open-ended items focusing on teachers’ reactions to and understandings of the communicative aims of the then recently implemented course of study (see below).

In response to the 11th item, “What kind of training have you had on CLT?” Ms Ando (all names are pseudonyms) responded, “I have never had such kinds of training. I do not understand what communicative language teaching actually means. I do not think conventional methods are useless.” Ms Ando’s claim regarding the lack of CLT training supports accusations of inadequate institutional preparation made elsewhere (e.g., Sato, 2002; Underwood, 2012). More interestingly, her final sentence appears to be a *non sequitur*; the question was about CLT training received, not efficacy of standard practice. At the time of the study I had worked with Ms Ando for several years and felt we had a good relationship, yet a NES enquiring about CLT was seemingly sufficient to provoke a defence of “conventional methods.” I argue that it is a fairly common, even understandable, manifestation of how the discourse of the vicious triangle produces detrimental effects.

Communicative Language Teaching and English-Only Classrooms

The Japanese high school course of study (CoS), effectively the national curriculum, is updated roughly once every decade, and since the 1980s the guidelines for foreign language have espoused increasingly communicative approaches. The most recent CoS came into effect in 2013, having been first published in 2009 to give educators (including

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not only JTEs but also groups such as textbook publishers and teacher trainers) time to react to and in theory implement the required changes. The passage that arguably caused the greatest consternation among JTEs stated, “Classes, in principle, should be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English, transforming classes into real communication scenes” (MEXT, 2009, p. 3).

The principle that classes should be conducted in English was widely taken to mean entirely in English: a complete shift from most JTEs’ existing practice. Regarding the vicious triangle, however, the final clause is most significant, claiming as it does that by being conducted in English, classes will be transformed into “real communication scenes.” This a logical *non sequitur* far exceeding that of Ms Ando, not least for the insinuation that communication in which people are dissuaded from using their shared first language is somehow more real than the alternative. More pertinently, the language in which a lesson is given is only one element in a teacher’s pedagogical approach, and simply delivering a class in the target language is not sufficient to transform it into CLT. A lecture in English is still a lecture.

In suggesting otherwise, the CoS perpetuates a discourse in which the English fluency of educators is conflated with their ability to teach communicatively, a discourse reinforced by practice. During a follow-up interview as part of the study in which Ms Ando participated, Mr. Kitagawa recounted his last mandatory training session. This had occurred 5 years prior and, although billed as focusing on CLT, Mr. Kitagawa suggested it was entirely concerned with improving participants’ English:

During summer vacation, all of the English teachers . . . for 5 days we were trained to speak English during class as much as possible, by native speakers . . . we Japanese teachers were divided into some groups, and [practiced] speaking English, discussions, and presentations. Like students!

This conflation of English ability and teaching skills is also displayed in a phenomenon perhaps only too familiar to educators with extensive experience in Japan: periodic bouts of semiritualised self-flagellation within the Japanese English education commentariat in which it is asserted that Japanese teachers of English cannot speak English—or at least cannot speak it well enough. This phenomenon comes close to the form of a ritual in that its expression follows a fairly routine pattern and is an expression of cultural beliefs (e.g., Bell, 2009), and is self-flagellating in that those offering the criticism are often themselves involved in English education in Japan. A solution to JTEs’ apparent English inadequacy is often suggested in the form of requiring them to reach benchmark scores on common English tests such as Eiken or TOEIC: “Gearing up for those exams . . . will eventually help increase teachers’ proficiency in the language as well as improve the

quality of their classes” (Shizuoka University professor Tomohiko Shirahata, quoted in “Advanced Eiken levels,” 2015).

Here it is once more assumed that by getting better at using English, JTEs will simultaneously get better at teaching it. Both Eiken and TOEIC market themselves as proficiency tests, but the suggestion that they can be “geared up for” positions them instead as means to measure achievement, illustrating how a type of cognitive dissonance experienced by many JTEs (Sakui, 2004) takes root. Those who diagnose the weaknesses of Japan’s English education frequently claim an excessive fixation by JTEs on teaching test-focused English (e.g., “Disappointing levels,” 2015), which could, apparently, be fixed if JTEs focused on taking more tests in English.

Although it is of course necessary to have a solid command of any subject before teaching it, having spent over a decade working in more than 30 Japanese public schools, I find the claim that most JTEs lack sufficient English to conduct effective CLT to be, at best, drastically overstated. At worst it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it is not English ability in general that is usually lacking, but pedagogical and communicative confidence. The latter is frequently exacerbated by the presence of confidently fluent English speakers in the classroom, in the form of NES assistant language teachers (ALTs) or otherwise.

English-Only Classrooms and Native English Speakers

If the proposition that JTEs are incapable of teaching all in English (and thus communicatively) is accepted, then the burden of doing so passes to those who are seen as capable: NESs. The following excerpt from an interview in the *The Japan News* (the online, English version of *The Daily Yomiuri*) with LDP lawmaker Endo Toshiaki, who at the time led his party’s panel on education reform, exemplifies this attitude:

“Why don’t we have classes taught only by ALTs from the very beginning?” asks Endo. . . . it is a waste to pair an ALT with a teacher who can speak English. “How about placing a single ALT in charge of English studies?” proposes Endo. “The children might not be able to understand for the first 3 or 4 months, but . . . They’ll soon get used to classes taught only in English. (“There is no equality,” 2013)

Although nationality is an imperfect proxy for native speakerhood, most ALTs come from Kachru’s inner circle (see, e.g., JET Programme, 2016), and it is clear in this passage that Endo sees ALTs as NESs. A further assumption implicit in Endo’s statement is that these NES educators automatically teach “only in English.” I would invite NES readers to reflect on their own classroom practice in regard to the universal applicability of this assumption; I know I occasionally use Japanese in the classroom (see Hawkins, 2015).

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The assertion that it is a waste to pair an ALT with a (presumably Japanese) teacher is significant because this exemplary Japanese teacher is one who, quite explicitly, “can speak English.” The least wasteful course would surely be to have this English-speaking JTE conduct the class in English, yet this is not suggested anywhere in the article. Furthermore, the paragraph from which the above excerpt is taken opens by claiming, “It is necessary to cultivate teachers who can guide students,” but then fails to address teacher training in any way, instead discussing increased utilization of ALTs. The sum effect is to erase local teachers and promote ALTs, perpetuating a discourse in which English-only classes are framed as the exclusive jurisdiction of NESs.

These assumptions at the top of the system filter down to the classroom level. Sakui’s (2004) paper on Japanese educators wearing “two pairs of shoes” (i.e., the seemingly mutually competitive pressures to teach both communicatively and to the entrance exams) illustrates a particularly acute manifestation, wherein one of her interview subjects, Mr. Fujimoto, considers his hypothetically ideal approach:

Well, that’s a tough question. I will try to teach it in English as much as possible [in the ideal teaching situation]. We can have a native speaker, half the time, or most of the time. Well, difficult . . . Well, but I wonder about grammar . . . I said everything will be taught in English, but I don’t have confidence yet. Maybe I will start teaching grammar . . . So the grammar explanation will be conducted in Japanese at the beginning of the class. (Sakui, 2004, p. 159, ellipses and brackets in original)

Even within an idealised thought experiment, the vicious triangle manifests itself. Mr. Fujimoto began by claiming to want to teach in English, but decided that in the absence of a full-time NES educator (“Well, difficult . . .”) this was not viable as he lacked confidence. Although Endo Toshiaki assumed the presence of NESs compels English-only teaching, Mr. Fujimoto offered the converse: Their absence effectively prohibits it. He then introduced the triangle’s third and final element: Absent a NES, the class cannot be conducted all in English so CLT is, in turn, a nonstarter (“Maybe I will start teaching grammar . . .”). Although the link posited here between CLT and NES educators is indirect, passing through English-only classes, more direct discursive links between the two will now be explored.

Native English Speakers and Communicative Language Teaching

The current CoS guidelines contain only a single reference to NESs, but one that reinforces the third side of the vicious triangle: “Moreover, team-teaching classes conducted in cooperation with native speakers, etc. should be carried out in order to develop stu-

dents’ communication abilities and to deepen their international understanding” (MEXT, 2009, p. 4).

The association between NESs and communicative teaching is clearly evident. The concept of team teaching suffers from a lack of definition similar to CLT, yet a key component is the notional interaction between JTE and ALT. In this framing the focus is once more upon the language and communicative abilities displayed by the teachers. The exact mechanism through which students will thereby develop their own abilities is again left unspecified. The implication is that the sheer presence of NESs (“etc.”) in the classroom cannot help but improve students’ communication, reinforcing the connection between NESs and CLT.

This discursive association between NESs and CLT in the current CoS is a relic of the practical association of NESs and CLT encouraged in previous versions. From 1989 to 2013, the SHS CoS included a separate English Oral Communication (OC) course, focusing on speaking and listening (Stewart, 2009). JTEs were as ill trained to implement this as they presently are for CLT, and in combination with the low weighting of listening (and almost total absence of speaking) on university entrance exams (Guest, 2008), many attached little importance to the subject. This frequently resulted in OC being restricted to team-taught or ALT-led classes (Sato, 2002, p. 46), which was certainly my experience as a SHS ALT. Although in many ways this represented an efficient division of labour, it nonetheless reinforced the perception that NESs teach communication and JTEs teach grammar.

This association also manifests at other educational levels. In the 2014 qualitative study introduced above, Mr. Furuhata was asked about the CLT training he experienced at university. After claiming in the initial questionnaire that he had not received any, during the follow-up interview he offered a correction:

Actually I took, you know, many lessons! For example, once a week I had an English course taught by a native English speaker and he used a communicative way of teaching. For example, information gap activities. What else? What else? Role playing, and writing essays based on what we read. It’s communicative teaching, right?

Confusion about the practice of CLT is again evident. Essay writing, for example, although productive, student centred, and generally underutilized in Japanese contexts, is not typically described as a CLT activity. Nevertheless, as these activities occurred in a NES-led class, they are styled as communicative. When subsequently asked if he had received any communicative lessons from his Japanese professors, Mr. Furuhata said he had not.

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Furthermore, the original question was not whether he had been taught communicatively, but whether he had been taught to teach communicatively. This is especially significant in Mr. Furuhata’s case, as at the time he was a newly qualified teacher, graduating from university in 2012, 1 year before the new CoS came in to effect and 3 years after its initial publication. Despite this period covering the greater part of the 4 years available to institutions to adjust to the forthcoming CoS requirements, his university education included no instruction on the pedagogical approaches that would be officially expected of him at the outset of his new career. The inadequacy of teacher training is a key factor perpetuating the vicious triangle.

Impacts—Of Menageries and Wilderness

The vicious triangle encourages and authorizes a division in EFL educators’ roles: Japanese teachers teach grammar-translation, non-Japanese teachers teach *real* English communication. This is reified through the discourse and is damaging for three parties specifically: non-Japanese educators, Japanese educators, and, ultimately, students.

Non-Japanese educators are damaged by being pigeonholed as teaching communicative-style classes. As the practical value of CLT is still underappreciated and poorly understood by the wider Japanese EFL community (Taihara, 2012), so too are those whose very presence in the classroom is discursively contingent upon English immersion and CLT. Furthermore, due to their presence throughout the pretertiary sector, the most common NES educators are ALTs, who frequently lack teaching qualifications and experience. As their classes are discursively constructed as communicative and English only, often regardless of actual practice, inexpert application by the most widely recognised NES educators can further devalue these approaches. This cycle creates what I term the communicative menagerie, in which CLT and its practitioners can come to represent an exotic, diverting, and entertaining attraction, but one that is also narrowly circumscribed, difficult to maintain, and of little practical purpose.

Japanese educators are even more negatively affected by the vicious triangle. They are discursively excluded from CLT and English-only classes through the perceived necessity of NES-level fluency—a fluency that JTEs are automatically presumed to lack. Many JTEs, like Mr. Fujimoto, would like to be more innovative in the classroom but feel they lack the knowledge, skills, and (under pressure from stakeholders to deliver exam results) authority to deviate too far from existing practice (see Matsuura, Chiba, & Hildebrandt, 2001): all factors that are not perceived as impeding NES educators so directly. The attitudes creating the communicative menagerie are partly a result of NES educators being seen as actors in, but not of, the situation, and so JTEs are apt to view NESs as instead

occupying what might be called a wilderness of fluency: a remote and slightly threatening place, but one where communication can run free, unconstrained by linguistic inadequacy and the restrictions of test preparation, peer comparison, and methodological uncertainty.

Students bear the brunt of this unnecessary division between nonlocal and local educators and between progressive and conventional pedagogies. The vicious triangle denies them opportunities to view JTEs as role models of successful Japanese-English bilingualism and entrenches the practically unobtainable goal of native-level mastery. It further reifies the distinction between school English—objectified vocabulary lists and grammar rules useful only for passing tests—and real English and makes it clear that ownership of the latter does not, and cannot, lie with them.

Conclusions: Mitigating the Effects of the Triangle

In this paper I have introduced the model of the vicious triangle, in which discourses within Japanese ELT construct CLT, NESs, and English-only classrooms as a mutually dependent triad. The links along each side of the triangle have been explored, demonstrating how the discourse is marked by logical *non sequiturs* and unsupported assumptions throughout—actions are assumed to deliver results, with little attention given to the processes and practicalities necessary for them to do so—resulting in a structure that works against transformation in Japanese ELT, constrains educators, and negatively affects students’ learning. As these discourses are ingrained in a system encompassing millions of people, it is beyond the scope of a single paper to offer a comprehensive solution. Once it is realised that the pedagogical misunderstanding at the heart of the model places undue attention on teachers and takes it away from students, however, a route forward may be proposed.

The weakest link in the triangle is that between CLT and English-only classes, as it is, at present, the least strongly established. Official endorsement of communicative classes and the use of NESs stretches back over three decades. Over this period both the perceived necessity of these elements and the discursive links between them have gathered significant political and pedagogical momentum. Equally, to suggest that NESs should not conduct English-only classes would be seen to defeat the principal reason for employing them in the first place. This is not to say that the value of these links and elements should not be challenged (see e.g., Kumaravadivelu, 2003, on the universal appropriateness of approaches developed in the English core). However, they are so entrenched within discourse on Japanese ELT that to successfully do so would be perhaps unachievable.

There is, however, greater feasibility in drawing a clear distinction between the practi-

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cal implementation of CLT and English-only classes. This is especially true as it relates to Japanese educators for whom, as seen in Mr. Kitagawa’s training experience and the principle within the 2009 CoS, these two elements are often conflated to detrimental effect. Many JTEs were so concerned about the step change the CoS demanded of their English use in the classroom (from using it only when necessary to using it all the time) that its ultimately communicative goals were overwhelmed by more immediately noticeable performative worries. The key corrective to this is to recognise that, although the two elements can complement each other very effectively, CLT is primarily concerned with the language use of the students, not the teacher; to conceptualise CLT as being necessarily led by the teacher in the target language is to miss the point entirely.

A competent programme of CLT training (i.e., training that actually and explicitly addresses CLT, rather than just English proficiency) should not only help reduce pedagogical uncertainty, but also make clear that a key concern of CLT is development through strategic use of a limited linguistic repertoire: learning more through effective use of what you currently have. This would help to address the pervasive misconception that CLT must necessarily be conducted all in English and would render concerns over local educators’ English fluency more manageable, if not moot. Many JTEs currently suffer from a lack of confidence in both their English and CLT knowledge (Sakamoto, 2012). Requiring teachers to improve their levels of English may well encourage them to greater empathy with their students, but it will not magically endow them with new pedagogical skills. Effective CLT training, however, should give JTEs greater pedagogical understanding, reduce their concerns over their own English abilities, and empower them to take full ownership of both the language and how it is taught.

Bio Data

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