Training teachers

Over the last several decades, the Japanese government, through the Course of Study guidelines promulgated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, has directed schools to include more communicative language teaching (CLT) in their English programs. These top-down directives have met with mixed results. One commonly cited problem is that English teachers are rarely provided with sufficient training in CLT, and thus are unable to implement the new guidelines effectively. However, since other objections also play a role in the rejection of CLT, one question is whether or not increased training increases compliance with the guidelines. This paper examines two local contexts to determine the role that proper training can play. Specifically, it considers informal training provided at a public high school by an Assistant Language Teacher, along with training conducted by a Board of Education to prepare elementary school teachers to begin teaching foreign language classes.

過去数十年にわたり、政府は文部科学省が公布する学習指導要領を通して、英語教育にコミュニカティブ・ランゲージ・ティーチング(CLT)をより多く導入するよう教育機関に指導してきた。このようなトップダウン指導は多様な結果を導いた。一般的によくあげられる問題として、英語講師は十分なCLT研修をほとんど受けていないので、新たな学習指導要領を効果的に活用できないと論じられる。しかし、CLTに対する異議はそれだけはなく、果たして研修が増えれば講師の学習指導要領の実践につながるかどうかが論点となる。本論では、公立高校においてALTが行う非公式の研修と、小学校教師が外国語のクラスで生徒に教えるための準備として教育委員会が実施する研修という2つの状況を通して、適した研修が果たす役割を考察する。

Aaron Hahn
Fukuoka University

In 2008, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) revised the curriculum for all subjects in all public schools, from kindergarten through high school (MEXT, 2008a). These changes came into effect for primary and middle schools in 2011 and 2012, respectively; high schools just started fully implementing the plan in April 2013. For English, the changes range from starting foreign language education two years earlier (in the fifth year of elementary school) to the requirement that high school English classes be taught, in principle, in English (MEXT, 2008a, 2008b; Stewart, 2009). This is the fourth time since 1990 that the curriculum guidelines, called the Course of Study (CoS), have undergone major changes; each change ostensibly brought the Japanese English curriculum more in line with CLT practices and away from treating English as just a testable, academic subject (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006; Life, Falout, & Murphey, 2009; Tahira, 2012).

Despite MEXT's ever-growing attention to CLT, it is widely recognized by teachers and researchers that these changes have not substantially altered how English classes are conducted in Japan (Butler, 2011; Gorsuch, 2000; Stewart, 2009; Tahira, 2012). While there are sound pedagogical objections to the use of CLT (see Butler, 2011, for an in-depth review of constraints on CLT across Asia), one of the major concerns is that teachers lack sufficient training and experience in CLT (Nishino, 2008). As a result, teachers often fall back on the *yakudoku* method (roughly, the Japanese version of the grammar-translation method) by which they themselves were educated with (Gorsuch, 2002). Tahira (2012) recently expressed concerns that the vagueness of the upcoming high school changes and the apparent lack of plans for extensive training will once again leave teachers unable to fully implement the new guidelines.

While training is not a sufficient condition for successful adaptation to the new guidelines, it is a necessary one. Formal, MEXT-directed training will certainly help, but informal interactions between teachers can also serve as a type of in-service training. I would like to relate two instances of training that occurred in the prefecture where I worked as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in order to show how effective training on the new guidelines might be enacted. The first involves informal training at the high school where I worked, and shows how an initial push towards the use of a strongly TBLT-based curriculum failed, and how a modified approach that involved more collabora-

tion and adjustment to local concerns resulted in increased teacher acceptance of CLT. The second involves formal training for elementary school teachers in the prefecture that seems to have significantly increased teacher understanding of, and comfort with, English teaching.

ALT as trainer

Interaction with ALTs brought to Japanese schools under the JET Programme, can, if those ALTs bring TESOL experience or knowledge, act as a form of informal training. Based on surveys from nine prefectures in Japan, Gorsuch (2002) found that ALTs can serve as a "dynamic, if unevenly available, form of in-service teacher education" (p. 24). While her study did not prove a causal connection between teaching with ALTs and acceptance of communicative activities, it did show a correlation between them, one that she (and I) hold is logical. Engaging with foreign teachers not only gives Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) more chances to use and thus improve their English, but can also expose them to alternative teaching methods.

I worked for five years as a JET ALT at a high academic public high school in Kyushu, where high academic means that almost all students enter four year universities after graduation; the majority aim just below the top rank of universities. I team-taught Oral Communication (OC) to first year students, Reading to second year students, and Writing (translation and essay writing) to second and third year students.

The OC classes were primarily under my pedagogical control, and for my first two years as an ALT I generally used a mixture of communicative activities and audio-lingual role-playing. Additionally, I was asked to include specific, testable points for midterm and final exams in my lessons. In my third year, however, I transitioned away from mixed method OC classes towards task-based (TBLT) approaches, including the use of much longer group projects requiring more extensive intra- and inter-group communication. Unfortunately, these new lessons were often unsuccessful. The JTEs didn't always understand the point of the lessons, and I failed to provide adequate rationales for my approach. This led to them being unable to assist in classes as well as they had in previous years, since it was unclear to them what their role was supposed to be and what I wanted the students to accomplish. Furthermore, since there were fewer "testable moments", both students and teachers saw less reason to engage actively in the work. In some cases, students without pre-existing motivation to use English simply stopped participating, leaving the bulk of the work to a much smaller number of "good English students", much as Carless (2002) found happening in Hong Kong primary school English classes trying to implement TBLT. Finally, the classes were more chaotic, which made some JTEs uncomfortable.

As a result, I believe that many of the JTEs developed a negative opinion of these task-based lessons. In essence, I had done something similar to what MEXT does when it lays out a new CoS: I had dictated a new type of class, but failed to train the JTEs in how and why TBLT is supposed to work.

Shifting focus

In response to those "failed" TBLT classes, and due to concerns about an overall drop in students' scores on standardized tests at the school, the head of the department proposed that we reduce the number of OC classes to save time for "more important" grammar and translation work. Luckily, I found an ally in a recently transferred JTE who also saw the value in incorporating communicative activities into English classes. Together we developed a plan that we persuaded the other teachers of first year English to follow. This involved a new style (for our school) of team-teaching lessons based on the English I grammar textbook rather than the OC textbook. That is, rather than trying to strike a balance between the "right number" of OC classes and exam-focused classes, we decided to teach a portion of the grammar lessons communicatively. We came to call the new lessons *hybrid* lessons. While we did not know it at the time, we were essentially following the recent trend of modifying CLT/TBLT approaches to account for local conditions (Bax, 2003; Hu, 2005; Sato, 2010).

Each of the hybrid lessons reviewed one unit of the grammar textbook that the students had already covered with a JTE. Practice included both form-focused work and communicative activities using the target grammar points. While the lessons were intended to be less communicative than previous OC classes, they still contained significantly more student participation than JTE-taught grammar lessons, in which student interaction was mostly limited to providing answers to homework problems. We had three primary goals for the hybrid lessons: helping students convert learned rules into acquired rules, increasing the amount of time spent listening to English, and giving students chances to concentrate on using English as a tool for communi-

cation rather than as a set of rules and vocabulary to be memorized for translation purposes.

JTE response

The hybrid classes had a varied effect on JTEs. The most positive effect was on the department chair—the same one who had originally sought to curtail the number of team-taught classes. At the beginning of the semester, he regularly expressed an inability to visualize how the lessons we had planned would work. He understood grammar-based lessons, and understood how to let an ALT run a standard OC class, but he did not understand how the two could be integrated. He was a perfect example of a teacher who is aware of the existence of CLT, but does not fully understand it; that lack of familiarity combined with the never-ending pressure of entrance exams led him to believe that CLT would do more harm than good. As the semester progressed, however, his understanding seemed to grow. In class, he became very enthusiastic about engaging the students in English. His enthusiasm even led him to allow me to collaborate on similarly hybridized English II classes the following year.

I believe two key things made the informal training effective for this teacher. First, the three JTEs and I held weekly meetings in which I laid out not only the lesson plans but also the principles behind them. Furthermore, my JTE ally regularly answered questions in Japanese to the other teachers, ensuring that they could more fully understand the lessons without the affective barrier of trying to do teacher-talk in English. Second, the department chair often scheduled his classes to occur after those of other teachers, so that he could watch others teach the lessons before having to teach them himself. This points to the need for training to extend beyond written materials, including demonstrations and chances for teachers unfamiliar with CLT to see what it looks like in practice, rather than in theory.

The response from English teachers who had not taught the course, however, was not transformative. After watching a demonstration lesson, they explained that they had been impressed with the class, but they felt that teaching such a class themselves would be too difficult. They attributed the success mainly to my JTE partner (my aforementioned ally, who has near-native fluency and over five years' experience living in the US as a graduate student) and not the hybrid approach itself. As a result, in the following year, the new teachers of first-year English requested that I go back to the traditional OC format and topics. This demonstrates that curriculum changes, which appear to be a directive from the ALT, are just as problematic as those originating from MEXT. Teachers must be involved in planning and implementing curriculum changes from the beginning so that they can incorporate the aspects of CLT they find most valuable, rather than having the changes imposed from an external source; furthermore, training must accompany curricular change.

Adapting to English in elementary schools

As mentioned at the opening of this paper, foreign language classes now begin in elementary school. These classes are taught once per week to fifth and sixth grade students, and focus on listening and speaking (MEXT, 2008b). The primary goals are to improve students' ability to communicate (in any language) and to foster a positive attitude towards foreign languages (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011).

An initial problem identified with respect to this new requirement was that the classes must be taught by homeroom teachers (with some assistance from native-speaker ALTs and "local experts"), most of whom did not study English at university beyond general studies requirements. A survey of teachers in Tokushima Prefecture by Fennelly and Luxton (2011) found that a majority of elementary school teachers lacked confidence in their English skills and worried about their ability to deliver English lessons successfully.

However, just as informal training at my high school helped alleviate some of the concerns of JTEs with respect to integrating CLT in their work, so too did formal training conducted by the Board of Education in the prefecture help allay the problems found by Fennelly and Luxton. For several years a team of teachers and administrators, including an ALT working out of the Education Center, engaged in extensive training and evaluation of elementary school teachers, including demonstrating how to use the mandatory textbook, giving sample lessons, and answering questions. In addition, the university at which a large portion of local primary school teachers study now includes training in teaching English as part of its education degree. Finally, the prefecture extensively employs JET ALTs to visit elementary schools periodically. While the prefecture has not yet published any official results of this work, the Education Center ALT reported that her team has received very positive

feedback from elementary school teachers. The team estimated that at least 70% of elementary school teachers had become "eager to teach English activities" (and the majority who did not are over the age of 50) and that lesson quality and consistency had significantly improved (Johnston, personal communication, January 30, 2012).

Looking forward

MEXT has given the directive to Japanese schools, for the fourth time in about twenty years, to use a more communicative approach in English classes. Past directives have not led to much change due in part to a lack of training in how to implement them. JTEs need clear advice on how they can incorporate communicative activities while still meeting the rest of their ethical and professional obligations as defined by their local contexts. If the informal polling of my prefecture's elementary school teachers is an accurate representation of local trends, it may be that a serious focus on formal training at the high school level will produce similarly positive results, though such a program would have to be adapted to the different needs and perceptions of high school teachers and students. Such a program could be supplemented by informal training from ALTs and JTEs already familiar and comfortable with CLT. While knowledge of contemporary TESOL practices is not required to be accepted into the JET Programme, the nature of the program could allow MEXT to directly train ALTs in ways that may be impossible or ineffective with JTEs. Further research on how ALTs are trained, along with how they can be agents of change, could help determine how to implement such a program.

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Aaron Hahn is a fulltime Lecturer at Fukuoka University. He holds an MA in Rhetoric and Writing Studies: Teaching of Writing from San Diego State University. His research interests include teacher training and identity development, the JET Programme, and the intersection of gender, language, and language learning. He can be contacted at <aaronhahn@hotmail.com>.