

# Turning the Japanese High School Homeroom Period Into an Opportunity to Communicate in English

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This paper reports on an attempt to increase students' exposure to communicative English in a senior high school environment. Despite common awareness of the importance of exposure "to develop students' communication abilities" (MEXT, 2011, p.1), research shows that activity-based all-English classes are not always conducted. Other research has also revealed that even with classes taught entirely in English, the total hours are not enough for the acquisition of basic skills of English. Therefore, in order to increase exposure to communicative English, I conducted morning and afternoon homeroom periods in English for two years [EHR]. In addition, one student per lesson gave a one-minute speech in English during the morning HR every day. Most of the students reported that EHR was instrumental in developing their comprehension and speaking skills, and at the end of each school year, they chose to continue EHR in the following school year.

本稿では、高校の授業外で生徒が英語でコミュニケーションをする時間を設けた実践例を紹介する。コミュニケーション能力を育成するためには、実際に英語でコミュニケーションをする機会が必要である。しかし現場では必ずしも英語で授業が行われているわけではないとの報告がある。また、仮に全授業をオールイングリッシュで行ったとしても、基本的なコミュニケーション能力を養成するのに十分ではないという研究もある。そこで、実際に英語を使う時間を増やす目的で、朝と帰りのホームルームを2年間英語で行った。また朝のホームルームで1日一人の生徒が「英語1分スピーチ」を行った。年度末のアンケートでは、生徒が英語ホームルームの成果を実感し、次年度も継続したいと望んでいることがわかった。

In 2003, MEXT launched the Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities. Its aim was to enhance students' motivation to communicate in English by providing them with more opportunities to speak English, such as English speech contests at schools. The stated goal was for high school graduates to be able to have daily conversation in English, and the average practical English proficiency should be the equivalent of pre-second or the second grade of the EIKEN Test. This objective has not been attained yet as shown in the results of the English proficiency test conducted on 70,000 third-year Japanese high school students (MEXT, 2014). In this test,

the percentage of students who were categorized into the lowest A1 level in CEFR [Common European Framework of Reference] in reading, listening, writing and speaking was 72.7%, 75.9%, 86.5% and 87.2% respectively. A1 level is equivalent to the third to fifth grade of the EIKEN Test.

MEXT's current guideline to increase the amount of exposure to communicative English states, "classes, in principle, should be conducted in English" (MEXT, 2011, p. 3). This new course of study, with language activities at the center of the lessons, has provoked a controversial debate among teachers. Although there seems to be legitimate theoretical rationale in all-English communicative language teaching [CLT] (Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Richards & Rodgers, 2001), some have raised concerns that this teaching method has more detrimental effects on students than positive ones. Some of the reasons advanced by teachers and researchers are: university entrance examinations (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Kikuchi, 2006; Kikuchi & Brown, 2009; Nishino, 2011; Terashima, 2009; Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011), lack of students' understanding resulting in a wider gap among students (Erikawa, 2009, Terashima, 2009), lack of teachers' English abilities (Koby, 2015; Narita, 2013), lack of teacher training (Browne & Wada, 1998; Tahira, 2012), increasing burden on busy teachers (Erikawa, 2009, 2014; Terashima, 2009), insufficient resources (Underwood, 2012), etc. As a former lecturer at a cram school, former full-time teacher at three different senior high schools and a junior high school, I personally experienced every single one of the above claims. Nonetheless, I could not dismiss the importance of increased exposure to spoken English (Krashen, 1982; Suzuki & Roger, 2014) and attempted to teach in English as much as possible with selective use of Japanese. Still, according to research (Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011), even the total amount of hours of all English lessons are not enough for the acquisition of basic skills of English and "input beyond simple classroom English is a precondition

for learning the language from the point of view of SLA" (Sato, 2015, p.16).

In this paper, I describe one of the ways to increase exposure to communicative English. I conducted an English homeroom [EHR] with one-minute English speeches by students every day for two years. It was revealed that EHR was favorably accepted by students as they felt it had a positive effect on their English abilities.

### English Homeroom with English Speech

At Japanese high schools, there are morning and afternoon homeroom [HR] periods for 5 to 10 minutes every day. During these periods, HR teachers give students information about day-to-day events at school. I decided to utilize this period to communicate in English as follows:

1. During HR, I speak only in English, and all the interactions during HR are in English.
2. Each day, during morning HR, one student gives a one-minute speech.

After gaining approval from the school, I decided to put EHR into practice, in my first-year senior high school HR class. In April, students did not think that they could manage, as one student confessed later in the questionnaire "I thought Ms. Itaya had gone out of her mind". Therefore, until students built up confidence, I spoke slowly, repeated important information, used gestures, and asked questions to find out if they really understood. Typical interactions would be as follows:

Teacher: There will be a committee meeting for the school festival today at lunch-time in the audio-visual room on the third floor. Those students in-charge, please, raise your hands.

(One student understands the teacher's announcement and raises his or her hand.)

Teacher: Only one? I think there are two students representing this class for the school festival.

(Seeing the first student raising his or her hand and receiving whispered hints from classmates, the other student grasps the situation and raises his or her hand.)

Teacher: Okay, so it's you (the first student) and you (the second student), right? Today at lunch-time, please go to the audio-visual room for the meeting. Which floor is the audio-visual room on?

(This question confirms students' comprehension without translating it into Japanese.)

Students: I don't know.

(Since every student should know where the audio-visual room is, this response could mean that the students concerned are not familiar with the word "audio-visual".)

Teacher: The meeting is held in the audio-visual room, on the third floor.

(This time, when saying "audio", I point at my ears, when saying "visual", I point at my eyes, and when saying "third", I show three fingers and then show the direction of the room with my palm. Most students know the phrase "the third floor", and they have a good idea of the room on the third floor that is often used for meetings.)

Students: Ah, okay.

Teacher: What time does the meeting start?

(This question again confirms students' cognition. Most students do not have considerable difficulty saying time in English.)

Students: 12:45.

Teacher: Good.

This kind of English interaction to facilitate students' learning without using Japanese is also possible in English classes. Teachers, however, are always pressed with textbooks to cover for the term examinations, and hence sometimes have no choice but to resort to Japanese.

Day by day, I spoke faster and faster. Especially when I talk on topics not directly related to students' school life (e.g., a math teacher had a baby late last night.), I deliberately spoke very fast for them to get used to natural speed. Interestingly, though, students paid particular attention to those private stories.

At the end of the morning EHR, one student was asked to come to the front of the class to make a one-minute speech in English. Students were not allowed to read from notes and did not have to worry about making grammatical mistakes nor construct perfect sentences. I told them that using gestures, eye contact and a big smile would do. The sole purpose of the speech was to convey messages. As Japanese students have enough of form-based instruction, I employed a meaning-based approach during EHR. I show later in the results of the questionnaires that many students enjoyed the speeches.

## Questionnaire Results and Discussion

At the end of the first year, second year, and when they graduated from high school, students (and parents at the time of graduation) were asked to fill out questionnaires on the EHR. At the end of the first year, questionnaires were filled out anonymously by 27 students, and at the end of the second year, anonymously by 28 students. Twenty-nine students and 26 families filled out the questionnaires at the time of graduation, this time with names (see Appendices A, B, C and D).

Tables 1 and 2 shows the number of students who answered the first question, "How much do you think you understood of what the teacher was saying?"

When Table 1 and Table 2 are compared, it is apparent that students felt a solid sense of progress in their comprehension. By March in the first year and beyond, the lowest comprehension rate was 70%. In April of the second year, 20 students understood more than 90% and this increased to 25 students by the end of the second year. It merits attention that in the second year, 9 to 10 students answered that they understood 100% of what the teacher said. Considering the reserved nature of students, who tend to avoid expressing strong opinions, this is a very encouraging result.

In question 2 (Appendix A & B), 5 students in the first year and 2 students in the second year reported missing deadlines or meetings because they did not understand the information in English. I judged this negligible as students often make mistakes even with information in their mother tongue.

With regard to question 3, "What did you think of the English HR? Write your opinions freely," all

students except one, both in the first year and second year, wrote positive comments. Popular opinions were "I feel my listening ability has improved," and "My fear toward communicative English lessened." Other students wrote "I learned some of the daily phrases without struggle and actually used them in talking to Australian hosts during the school trip." (For more comments, please refer to Appendices A and B).

In answering question 4, "What did you think of the one-minute English speech?", 21 students in the first year and 24 students in the second year found others' speeches interesting. Listening to classmates' speeches gave them a chance to hear friends' experiences and opinions that they would not have known otherwise. I myself truly enjoyed the students' speeches and my understanding of the students' personality deepened. Therefore the experience was valuable as a HR teacher, too. In the kind of school speech contests that MEXT (2003) proposed, only a small number of students speak in the contests, and others suffer from listening to lengthy speeches on high-level topics. In the one-minute English speech in EHR, in contrast, every student has a chance to talk about everyday matters in a friendly environment without being judged. A mutual sense of support was created in the classroom, which encouraged even weaker students to participate.

The fact that all 27 students expressed a willingness to continue the EHR is an indication that the students felt the effects of the EHR on their English study. At the end of the second year, 3 students were opposed to the continuation of the EHR for the third year. They cited preparing one-minute English speeches as a potential distraction from studying for entrance examinations. Still, the ma-

**Table 1. The Degree of Understanding of Teacher's Spoken English in First Year**

	100%	90%	80%	70%	60%	50%	40%	30%
In April	0	0	4	9	8	3	2	1
In September	0	7	12	5	3	0	0	0
In March	5	15	5	2	0	0	0	0

Note. Numbers in the Table show the number of students. N=27

**Table 2. The Degree of Understanding of Teacher's Spoken English in Second Year**

	100%	90%	80%	70%	60%	50%	40%	30%
In April	9	11	4	4	0	0	0	0
In September	10	11	5	2	0	0	0	0
In March	10	15	2	1	0	0	0	0

Note. Numbers in the Table show the number of students. N=28

jority of the 25 students were in favor of continuing the EHR even as a *Jukensei* [exam takers]. Some students even commented that “a phrase I repeatedly heard in the EHR appeared in mock examinations and I felt happy to feel the effect of the EHR during examinations.”

Upon leaving my position at the end of the second year, the EHR ended. A year later at graduation, the final questionnaires were given both to students and their parents. As many as 23 students considered it regrettable not having EHR in the third year. Many felt either a decline in their English ability or a disadvantage on entrance examinations due to the termination of EHR, while 6 students manifested relief to see EHR end. They looked upon preparing speeches as taking time from preparation for entrance examinations.

Questionnaires were also sent out to parents at graduation. All except one mother supported the EHR. This mother commented that she did not have the heart to watch her son suffer from preparing a one-minute speech the night before. Her son, on the other hand, wrote at the time of the graduation that he was sad to see the termination of EHR. It deserves attention that 24 mothers out of 25 wrote that they would have felt it unfair if EHR had been conducted in another class but not in their children's class. This response, together with some encouraging comments such as “EHR for my daughter was a dream come true,” demonstrates how much EHR was appreciated by parents. This feeling of unfairness, however, could be a major obstacle for the implementation of EHR. Jealous feelings from regular HR classes could disturb the harmony of the whole school. This is where active involvement of native English-speaking teachers [NESTs] should be sought after. Both from my observation and from research (Koby, 2015), NESTs are often underused. NESTs are at school to facilitate natural acquisition of English, and yet they often do not have homerooms to visit but stay in staff rooms during HR period. If they visit homerooms of non-English teachers in turn to conduct EHR, then more students can benefit from authentic interactions with native speakers.

## Conclusion

This essay illustrated my journey of increasing students' exposure to communicative English. Although students expressed some anxiety at the start, as we proceeded, comprehension improved and apprehensions lessened. In English classes, language activities are carried out for the sake of learning. In EHR, language activities are authentic school activities. In other words, it is a task itself, not a task-based

approach. In EHR, no one is evaluated and so the gap of scores does not exist. EHR, however, is far from flawless. It could invite feelings of envy from other classes, creating dissonance among students. Further collaboration of JTEs and NESTs is required, which means more work for both parties. JTEs should be fluent enough to conduct EHR, which could potentially be demanding. Above all, establishing rapport with students is a prerequisite before trying any unconventional methods. It was hard work continuing EHR every day for two years, but it was a challenge worth carrying out, on my journey with students toward better communicative proficiency.

## Acknowledgement

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### Appendices

The four appendices containing the questionnaires referred to in the text can be found with the online version of this article at <<http://jalt-publications.org/tlt>>.

## [JALT PRACTICE] MY SHARE



### Philip Head and Gerry McLellan

We welcome submissions for the My Share column. Submissions should be up to 600 words describing a successful technique or lesson plan you have used that can be replicated by readers, and should conform to the My Share format (see the guidelines on our website below).

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Hello one and all, and welcome to My Share. This fall issue contains a bumper crop of activities ready to be harvested and incorporated into your teaching practice. First up, we have Emily Mindog, with a suggestion for changing smartphones in the classroom from a distraction into a valuable tool for self-awareness of pronunciation issues. Next, Shun Morimoto presents a consciousness-raising activity (using the word break) that allows learners to see a diversity in meaning beyond a one-to-one equivalent between words in the L2 and their L1 translation. Following the topic of consciousness-raising, Brent Amburgey demonstrates a

way for students to gain an appreciation for what makes a good essay in an English proficiency test, and how their current expectations compare with those of an exam marker. Finally, we have Nathaniel Reed and Eliot Carson, who show how a typically solitary activity such as reading can be turned into a communicative group task. And of course, don't forget to check out <<http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/myshare>> for appendices containing useful worksheets, as well as excellent online-only content. This online issue contains articles by Carl Vollmer, who shows how using dice can make spelling activities both cooperative and com-

## **Appendices**

All answers on the questionnaire were originally in Japanese. They have been translated into English as examples only.

### **Appendix A**

#### **Questionnaire for First-Year Students, and Students' Comments for Questions 3 and 4.**

Note: The total number of the respondents was 27. Numbers in parentheses show the number of the students who wrote similar comments.

1. How much do you think you understood of what the teacher was saying?

The result is shown in the paper (Table 1).

2. Have you had any trouble in school life, such as "missing a committee meeting" or "missing a deadline" resulting from poor understanding of the teacher's English?

Yes (5). No (22).

3. What did you think of the English HR? Write your opinions freely.

My listening ability has improved. (26)

My fear toward communication English lessened. (12)

I learned some of the daily phrases without struggles and actually used them in talking to Australian hosts during the school trip. (6)

Scores of the listening tests rose dramatically. (1)

I could familiarize myself with correct pronunciation of many words. (1)

I became accustomed to phrases and grammar in everyday spoken English. (1)

I didn't feel any progress in my overall English ability. (1)

4. What did you think of the one-minute English speech? Write your opinions freely.

Classmates' speeches were creative and interesting. (21)

It was hard at first but gradually I got used to it. (16)

I couldn't understand classmates' speeches. (3)

I didn't feel any progress at all. (1)

5. Would you like to continue English HR in the second year?

Yes (27). No (0).

### **Appendix B**

#### **Questionnaire for Second-Year Students, and Students' Comments for Questions 3, 4 and 6.**

Note: The total number of the respondents was 28. Numbers in parentheses show the number of the students who wrote similar comments.

1. How much do you think you understood of what the teacher was saying?

The result is shown in the paper (Table 2).

2. Have you had any trouble in school life, such as “missing a committee meeting” or “missing a deadline” resulting from poor understanding of the teacher’s English?

Yes (2). No (26).

3. What did you think of the English HR? Write your opinions freely.

My listening ability has improved. (20)

My fear toward communication in English lessened. (15)

4. What did you think of the one-minute English speech? Write your opinions freely.

Classmates’ speeches were creative and interesting. (24)

It was hard at first but gradually I got used to it. (9)

I couldn’t understand classmates’ speeches. (2)

I actually felt some progress in my speaking ability. (1)

I didn’t feel any progress at all. (1)

5. Would you like to continue English HR in the second year?

Yes (25). No (3).

6. Write anything freely on the two years of English HR and English speeches.

Classmates’ speeches were creative and interesting. (21)

The English HR was hard at first but I gradually got used to it. (16)

I felt happy when I found many expressions from English HR in mock exams. English HR is actually helpful for university examinations. (4)

My listening score has improved thanks to English HR. (3)

I think both English HR and speeches were beneficial in improving my English. (2)

Although I would like to continue English HR, I don’t want to spend time on preparing speeches next year, as I want to concentrate on studying for the university entrance examinations. (2)

Making a speech was hard but I actually had fun when thinking about what to talk about. (1)

Preparing a speech became easier and easier. It was a good opportunity to use phrases I had learned. (1)

I felt closer to English and felt less intimidated by listening tests. I am glad that we did English HR and speeches. (1)

When I first heard the plan for English HR, I thought my teacher was crazy. Now, when I hear my teacher talk in Japanese, I feel uneasy. (1)

Thanks to English HR, I had no trouble communicating in English when hosting Australian students. (1)

I think my classmates do not understand much of what I spoke about. I don’t know whether it is because of my poor English ability or because my voice is too quiet. Next time, I will speak in a louder voice. (1)

I can understand English much better now and listening to others’ speeches is fun. (1)

I was surprised to find myself trying to listen to English without looking at subtitles on movies. It is now

my source of joy to find out how much English I can understand from movies and news without subtitles. (1)

## **Appendix C**

### **Questionnaire for Students at the Time of Graduation and Their Answers.**

Note: The total number of the respondents was 29. Numbers in parentheses show the number of the students who wrote similar comments.

1. What was your reaction to the termination of the English HR and speeches?  
I was sad. (23)  
I was happy. (6)
2. What do you think was the outcome of ending EHR and speeches?  
My listening ability has declined. (18)  
My speaking ability has declined. (18)  
It was regrettable that I could not listen to interesting speeches of my classmates. (14)  
My ability to understand English without translating has declined. (10)  
I think it had an adverse effect on university entrance examinations. (9)  
I don't detect any decline of my English ability. (4)
3. How did you like the EHR and speeches by non-English teachers? Write your opinions freely.  
It was fun. (22)  
Their English was quite rusty, and I felt my English can only improve by continuing to use it. (1)
4. If you were to choose only one thing to expect from high school English education, which would that be?  
(A): To equip students with enough English ability to pass entrance examinations. (24) (82%)  
(B): To equip students with enough English ability to communicate in English. (5) (17%)
5. How much of the English class time would you like your teachers to spend on (A) and (B) in question 4 respectively?  
(A): (B) = (68% of class time) : (32% of class time)

## **Appendix D**

### **Questionnaire for Parents at the Time of Graduation and Their Answers.**

Note: The total number of the respondents was 26. Numbers in parentheses show the number of the parents who wrote similar comments.

1. If you were to choose only one thing to expect from high school English education, which would that be?  
(A): To equip students with enough English ability to pass entrance examinations. (17) (65%)  
(B): To equip students with enough English ability to communicate in English. (9) (35%)



2. How much of English class time would you like your teachers to spend on A and B in the question above respectively?

(A) : (B) = (58% of class time) : (42% of class time)

3. Were you for or against an EHR?

For: (25) Against: (1)

4. If your children had been in a different class with a normal HR, whereas some other students were in a class with an EHR, would you have felt it unfair? Yes: (25) No: (1)