

Integrating a Functional Approach With Japanese Junior High School Teaching Practices

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This paper details the changes necessary to integrate communicative language teaching (CLT) functional principles with weekly junior high school (JHS) English classes. Firstly, the JHS teaching context and the rationale for adopting a more functional approach are considered. Next, with reference to practical examples, I suggest ways of adapting the current approach, the roles of teachers, and evaluation practices to focus on meaningful interaction. This employs the use of rubrics, which allow the changes to be closely linked to the current curriculum and testing requirements. This can allay stakeholders' concerns about relevance and efficacy. As the tasks described are highly adaptable, and many of the necessary resources are already in place, integration is possible without significant costs. Finally, I suggest that by adapting CLT to complement current practices, individual teachers and institutions can take the lead in reforming how the JHS curriculum is implemented.

本論文はコミュニケーション・ランゲージ・ティーチング (CLT) の機能原則を中学校英語教育に取り入れた場合に必要の変更点について述べている。まず中学校における英語教育の現状とCLTの必要性について検討する。次に例を用いて教師の任務、評価方法、有意義な言語活動に焦点をあてた取り組みを提案する。その取り組みは評価表を活用することで教師や保護者などが抱くであろうCLTに対する懸念を和らげる。本論文で提案する取り組みは順応性が高いため、労力をかけることなく、現行の教材で対応可能である。最後に、一人ひとりの教師がCLTを活用し、各学校で取り組むことにより英語教育に影響を与えることができるかと結論づけている。

THIS PAPER presents a framework for implementing a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach at a Japanese junior high school (JHS) and outlines the adaptations necessary for it to be effective in this context. First, the current state of Japanese JHS English education is examined. Then, CLT as a methodology, the rationale for its use, and its appropriateness in this context are evaluated. Third, with reference to practical examples, I identify the steps necessary for a functional approach, in which students actually use the language to achieve meaningful outcomes, to be successful within the current framework. This includes an analysis of the conditions specific to a JHS context and the ways in which CLT can be adapted to suit them. Finally, I suggest that by adapting CLT to complement current practices, individual teachers and institutions can take a prominent role in reforming how English at JHS is taught.

Changing Japanese JHS English Teaching Practices

The Current Situation

With the spread of globalisation and the growth of English as a lingua franca in all aspects of business, the malaise in Japanese English language education could have serious implications for Japan's future economic growth. Recent statistics show that Japan has some of the lowest TOEFL scores in speaking and writing in Asia (TOEFL, 2012). According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2010), fewer students want to study abroad than in previous years. In addition, fewer employees want to be transferred overseas; this trend has been linked to workers' low confidence in their language ability (Sangyo Noritsu University, 2013). Although all Japanese secondary students have at least 6 years of English education, the continued use of outdated teaching methodologies (Hahn, 2013), the negative effect of a testing system based almost completely on reading comprehension and grammatical accuracy (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009), and a lack of variety and creativity in lessons (Rapley, 2010) often demotivates students and deprives them of functional competency. As JHS is a key stage in the development of learners' attitudes to using English, any improvements here could have significant future benefits.

MEXT has aimed to address these issues through several administrative reforms. In recent years, the number of JHS English class hours has been increased from 105 to 140 per year and the vocabulary list has been expanded from 900 to 1,200 words (Tahira, 2012). These reforms are intended to underpin a shift in approach "from lecture style toward student-centred language activities" such as "speeches, presentations, debates and discussions" with a focus upon what students functionally can do (MEXT, 2011, p. 3). JHS teachers are currently developing *can-do* lists to provide performance-based goals for students, using guides such as that provided by the textbook publisher Sanseido (2012). However, detailed prac-

tical advice on how to integrate these goals with current teaching practices is still somewhat limited.

Obstacles to Change

Although MEXT first started introducing CLT more than 20 years ago, changes in Japanese JHS education practices are happening at a "sluggish pace" (Tahira, 2012, p. 5). In addition to teachers' lack of knowledge about CLT methodologies, the biggest obstacles to change are the high school entrance exams. These typically are oriented to grammar and reading comprehension, with only a small section allocated to listening, and there is no speaking test. They consist of a single test for public high schools and numerous different independently produced tests for private high schools. Given this complexity, the exams are, unfortunately, rather resistant to necessary reform. Therefore, any move towards communicative methodologies must address the fact that students still need to score highly in these tests.

The Suitability of CLT to Japanese JHSs

CLT comprises a range of approaches that focus on learning to communicate effectively through using a language. These approaches share the following principles:

- Learners learn a language through using it to communicate.
- Authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities.
- Fluency is an important part of communication.
- Communication involves the integration of different language skills.
- Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 172).

Simply put, the instructors following the CLT approach ask what learners might be expected to do with language and use this to inform how it is taught. In this way, tasks, discussions, problems, games, and activities that mimic real usage are designed to facilitate production. This not only enables language learners to develop functional competence, but is also motivating and better allows for a range of levels, interests, and learning styles in the classroom (Willis & Willis, 2007).

However, difficulties related to the Japanese JHS context have hindered adoption of CLT methods. These include (a) classroom management issues in frequently large classes with unmotivated students (Littlewood, 2007); (b) an incompatibility with assessment demands (Sato, 2010); (c) teachers' lack of confidence in their own English abilities (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009); (d) a lack of time; and (e) the need to fully complete the national curriculum requirements as prescribed in the textbook (Nishino, 2011). Despite these challenges, there has been "emerging evidence of successful, grassroots implementation" (Adams & Newton, 2009, p. 1), through the use of innovative approaches that adapt CLT to specific Asian teaching contexts. In this paper I endorse a hybrid approach to CLT by taking account of these very real issues and providing teachers with practical tools to integrate communicative tasks within the existing context.

A Practical Guide to Implementing a CLT Approach in a Japanese JHS

Currently, the communicative element of the JHS curriculum takes the form of weekly classes with a native-speaking assistant language teacher (ALT) and a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) team teaching. These classes typically consist of practice or review activities focusing on a tightly controlled grammatical form. Even in the case of situational topics, the focus remains on correctly producing the pattern rather than communicating meaning. A shift in focus of these classes could provide space for CLT. Next, based on a curriculum

presented in the JHS *New Crown 2* textbook, three steps to integrate CLT principles into these weekly ALT classes are described.

Step 1: Change the Approach

First, let us look at how a CLT approach might fit within the current framework (see Figure 1).

Lesson	Task procedure	Textbook focus
1	In groups students choose a tourist site they would like to visit in Japan and write a letter to the tourist information office requesting guidebooks. These are corrected and sent.	It will be... I am going to... I think (that)... If it...
2	Students rewrite the corrected letters and rehearse for short unscripted interviews with the ALT/JTE on future plans.	
3	Students have short unscripted interviews with the ALT/JTE about their future plans.	There is/are I like playing... 's ...
4	Students use the tourist guidebooks for vocabulary building exercises.	
5	Using the new words and phrases found in the guidebooks, students write and submit plans for visits to their chosen destinations.	
6	Students, in groups, make and give poster presentations describing their chosen destinations and the plans for their visits.	want to.. went to ~ to play...
7		
8	Students ask the groups questions about their presentations.	something to...

Figure 1. An 8-week task schedule based on the *New Crown 2* textbook (Takahashi, 2012), lessons 3 to 5.

Central to CLT is the principle of acquiring language through using it to do something, and the 8-week task schedule shows how this might be incorporated into the weekly communicative element of the curriculum. In this schedule, students achieve functional goals such as writing a request for information, communicating future plans both in writing and orally, using reference materials, and giving and comprehending a presentation. The schedule satisfies all of Richards and Rodgers' (2001) principles of CLT; that is, it integrates all four skills, requires creative construction, stresses the importance of fluency, and has meaningful communication as its goal. These weekly lessons would run in tandem with the more traditional JTE classes, which are typically conducted three times per week without an ALT. Given the recent increase in class hours, this constitutes no real decrease in traditionally focussed classes. By coordinating the tasks with the linear textbook syllabus, the lessons would be highly relevant to the required linguistic features, but not limited to them, and therefore students could continually review what was previously learned. Because classes would be more learner centred and frequently based around group work, students would have greater individual choice, allowing learners to be more personally invested in the classes. For example, a group of students that liked a particular pop group could make a quiz about that topic, or a lesson on making requests by email could allow for students to join a favourite fan club. This focus on group work would provide peer support for lower level learners, an important issue in mixed-level classes. This also fits closely with the JHS culture of fostering success through teamwork. Because of the functional nature of the classes, learner autonomy would be improved, providing students with a more concrete notion of the purpose of English. Most importantly, by giving students the framework and opportunity to enjoy using English to communicate, significant benefits in motivation and confidence could be achieved. An example of a yearly syllabus for 2nd-year classes using the *New Crown 2* textbook is provided in the Appendix.

Step 2: Change the Role of the ALT

In order to facilitate a change of approach, the role of the ALT should be reconsidered and more clearly defined. In contrast to the current role, in which an ALT usually acts primarily as a model for correct production, the new role would focus on several key responsibilities. First, the ALT would act as the stimulus for students to produce language in a nonscripted way, for instance, by playing the role of a pen friend in an email chat or the facilitator in an unscripted group discussion. Secondly, the ALT would assist the students in creative production, for example, by helping to prepare a presentation or role-play. CLT in a multilingual context often uses activities such as discussions or debates in groups. However, in a Japanese JHS context, where students are likely to switch into their L1 when frustrated, this is ineffective for all but the most motivated students. By inserting the ALT into interactions to mimic natural communication, negotiation of meaning becomes necessary. Critical to this change, however, is a complete overhaul of the way students are assessed, and this is outlined in the following section.

Step 3: Change the Focus of Marking From Accuracy to Meaning

In the assessment-driven context of the Japanese JHS, changing the focus of marking from accuracy-based to meaning-based is fundamental to the success of any CLT program. Currently, written production, and to a slightly lesser extent spoken production, are assessed based on accuracy, with each mistake penalized. Proficiency at communicating meaning is rarely, if ever, factored into grading. Even in the case of potentially communicative activities such as role-plays, accuracy-based marking reduces them to displays of rote memorisation. This creates the unnatural situation in which teachers often limit the topic of a lesson to a single grammatical item and encourages students to produce the minimum possible to get a “correct” answer. By emphasising clear communicative aims in assess-

ment (i.e., rewarding students for what they can achieve rather than merely penalising them for their errors), meaningful communication can become the goal of study. By introducing a greater focus on meaning in assessment, students could benefit from far greater freedom in their creative production.

Integrating CLT with Current JHS Practices

In order for an innovation to be successful, there needs to be a degree of accord between those involved in the change and the change itself. Kelly (1980) identified three factors necessary for an innovation to be successful. The first is *feasibility*, or simply put, if the change is practically achievable. Second is *acceptability*, or if the change is acceptable to the beliefs of those involved. Third is *relevance*, that is, if the change is relevant to the needs of the learners. In order for communicative classes to be feasible within the curricular requirements, acceptable to teachers, and relevant to students' needs, they must enhance learners' exam prospects. This is discussed in the following section.

Integrating Testing and Syllabus

To effectively integrate CLT into the JHS English syllabus, it must adapt to fulfil the assessment requirements. To do this, rubrics are an extremely useful tool. The task description (Figure 2) and the rubric (Figure 3) for assessing the poster presentation from the 8-week task schedule clearly illustrate this point.

Task Description

In groups, make and give a poster presentation describing your plan to visit your chosen destination. This should include the following:

1. Plans to do at least six things,
2. Descriptions of at least four places, and
3. The reasons for your choices.
4. All students should say at least five sentences.
5. The presentation should be entertaining and use pictures or photographs.
6. The presentation should include all target grammar and at least 10 new words.

Target grammar includes: *will*; *going to*; *I think that*; *there is*; *there are*; *want to*; *if it's ___*, *we'll. . .*; and *like ___ing*.

New words are any new word found in the tourist guide or in the new words list of the textbook from Lessons 1 to 5.

Figure 2. A task description for a communicative poster presentation.

	Grammar	Words	Task Completion
A	Learners used all target grammar structures correctly at least once.	Learners used 10 or more new words correctly.	Learners completed all elements of the task.
B	Learners used four or more of the target grammar structures correctly at least once.	Learners used five or more new words correctly.	Learners were able to complete at least three elements of the task.
C	Learners used fewer than four of the target grammar structures correctly at least once.	Learners used fewer than five new words correctly.	Learners were able to complete fewer than three elements of the task.

Figure 3. A scoring rubric designed to grade group poster presentations.

Rubrics are useful tools to clarify the standards of quality performance, communicate expectations to students, and give ongoing, focused feedback. By clearly defining the assessment criteria, teachers can assure that it meets the requirements of the curriculum. In the example scoring rubric, in order for students to score highly in the grammar and vocabulary column, they must use structures and words from the appropriate point in the curriculum. This guarantees that students and teachers stay on track for the important high school tests. However, unlike current assessment techniques that are focussed purely on testing declarative knowledge, this assessment has the functional goal of using the knowledge as its central component. Teachers, in discussions based upon students' needs,

can decide on a scoring ratio, how closely this links to certain explicit linguistic features in the textbook, and the extent to which students are rewarded for fulfilling functional goals. For instance, in the task description above, there are six clear functional goals, and only meeting all these requirements will result in a high grade. Similarly, an activity focussing on written fluency and reading comprehension might combine writing a response to an email with the rubric in Figure 4.

	Comprehension	Fluency	Quantity
A	Learners replied appropriately to all elements of the email.	All sentences in the email could be easily understood. Sentences connected smoothly and logically.	Learners wrote at least 40 words.
B	Learner replied appropriately to three or more elements of the email.	At least four sentences could be easily understood. Sentences were like a list or not very natural.	Learners wrote at least 25 words.
C	Learners replied appropriately to fewer than three elements of the email.	Fewer than four sentences could be easily understood.	Learners wrote fewer than 25 words.

Figure 4. A scoring rubric designed to assess written fluency and reading comprehension.

Rubrics for continuous assessment might incorporate specific learner needs such as correcting unnatural vowel sounds at the end of words or improving capitalisation. Once learners and teachers are familiar with rubrics, they could be adapted for use in end-of-term exams. Importantly, by allocating a proportion of the yearly mark to these assessments, teachers can ensure that students are properly extrinsically motivated. Also, by receiving the marking criteria in Japanese both prior to assessment and in feedback, students are able to focus their efforts and understand their marks. The information gained would be a valuable tool for teachers and students to pinpoint areas of difficulty to be addressed in future classes, homework, or self-study. Providing parents, head teachers, and other important stakeholders with Japanese translations of rubrics can reassure them that the correct goals are being set. This is particularly important in introducing CLT, a methodology often misunderstood (Tahira, 2012), or associated with purely speaking “games.”

Gradual Integration

To promote ground-up, organic change, an innovation must be *acceptable* to stakeholders. Therefore, to enable teachers to take ownership of development, the CLT approach should be *trialable* and *adaptable* (Kelly, 1980). Concerns about scheduling, effectiveness, applicability, and a lack of confidence in the approach mean that in many cases implementation of CLT is likely to be gradual. Therefore, the flexibility of the approach is important, and each task could be used as an individual entity. This allows teachers to trial tasks for themselves until they gain confidence in using the methodology. Although teachers often assume that these types of activities take a long time, frequently because students are instructed to memorize everything to achieve perfect accuracy, this is not the case in primarily meaning-based assessment. If adopting a weekly CLT lesson, a yearly plan that is agreed to by all teachers to determine the best times to use each task would be beneficial. For example, writing emails to the ALT might be allocated as summer

homework, or group interviews might be scheduled prior to end-of-term tests, thus giving groups waiting for their turn time to revise. Through teachers coordinating efforts as a whole English department, any perceived costs relating to lost time for regular classes can be minimised.

Attitudes

The trialability and adaptability of the CLT approach is important for changing attitudes. Innovative teachers who wish to experiment with these ideas in their own classrooms may do so easily. This can stimulate gradual ground-up change. From personal experience, I have found that colleagues invariably want to repeat these types of classes when exposed to them. Furthermore, they can provide a valuable tool for implementing MEXT's (2011) can-do proposals. Currently, teachers are developing lists of student goals based upon these reforms. By integrating rubrics and CLT principles into planning, these could be more clearly tied to classroom practices. This, if communicated to all stakeholders, could provide the impetus for change to evolve.

Students, as in the case of other stakeholders, hold academic success as their main motivation (Rapley, 2010). However, demotivation is a significant problem. In the case of a study conducted to assess students' attitudes to task-based spoken interview tests, I found that over 90% of learners enjoyed them and wanted to repeat the experience (Asquith, 2014). Although demotivated older students, who are already conditioned to grammar-translation methods, may find some aspects of CLT classes difficult, this is not the case for younger students who have experienced 2 years of conversational English at elementary school. By cultivating learners' functional confidence from elementary school onwards, the self-perpetuating cycle of demotivation could be alleviated.

Training

As suggested by Nishino (2011), opportunities for teachers to learn from colleagues are important in developing skills in communicative methodologies and overcoming obstacles in the current system. Currently, combined training sessions for JTEs and ALTs are infrequent; these should be increased. In these training sessions both ALTs and JTEs could provide ways of improving current tasks and introduce ideas for new ones. Also, ways of improving rubrics and practice in using them could be provided. For example, videos might be an important resource in both checking that scoring is consistent and promoting effective tasks. Any concerns about task relevance to the current high school tests could be addressed. These training sessions not only would be important in evolving and improving the CLT program, but also would give teachers the opportunity to take ownership in this improvement. By coordinating this training between schools and districts, new and successful practices could be promoted and effective innovators recognized. Although the costs to teachers, especially in terms of the time commitment needed in an already busy schedule, may be problematic, this investment would promote a more vibrant and progressive system, serving to fill the gap between policy makers and policy implementers.

Conclusion

Although over 20 years have passed since MEXT first attempted to introduce CLT into Japanese JHSs, relatively little progress has been made at the classroom level. Many contextual obstacles still remain in place, and it is difficult for teachers to gain understanding and confidence in the methodology. This paper has detailed a CLT framework designed to support teacher development, integrate effectively within current conditions, and improve students' academic and functional performance. By providing the possibility to trial individual elements, the framework allows stakeholders to gain confidence in the methodology without incurring costs. As confidence

using the tasks and testing procedures grows, so further resources and curriculum changes would follow naturally. This, I believe, could precipitate a gradual organic movement towards a greater integration of functional methodologies. This shift would not only have the benefits of a far greater functional English proficiency for learners, but also be a more rewarding and efficient pedagogic environment for educators.

Bio Data

Steven Asquith has worked as an ALT in Ichikawa City for around 12 years. He holds an MA TESOL from The University of Birmingham. His interests include methods of adapting communicative approaches for Japanese contexts, vocabulary testing and acquisition, and corpus-based analysis. He can be contacted at <stevenasquith@hotmail.com>

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Appendix

A Sample Syllabus for 2nd-Year JHS Classes Using New Crown 2

Key Points

- The main focus of the activities is on communicating meaning rather than accuracy. A student who communicates information, but makes mistakes, should receive a higher mark than a student who simply memorizes, even if accurate.
- Students must **use** the language to **do** something, not just produce memorized sentences for no outcome.

Text book focus	New approach
Lesson 1 Simple past	Giving/asking for directions based upon unrehearsed dialogues. For example, students are given a map of Tokyo JR train lines and asked for directions individually or in groups, or students are given directions for an unspecified destination (A) and have to identify it.
Directions	
Lesson 2 Simple and continuous past.	Student group interviews about past time, for example, spring vacation, yesterday, last year, or elementary school. Focus on fluency. Students write a report of the discussion to consolidate.

Text book focus	New approach
Lesson 3 Future – will, going to, I think that	In groups students choose a tourist site in Japan and write a letter to the Japanese tourist office requesting guides in both English and Japanese. The vocabulary in the English guide can then be used for the activities.
Lesson 4 There is .. There are	
Lesson 5 Future – want to	
Lesson 6	Students learn how to write emails or chat by text message. Students write emails to the ALT about a subject of their choice. The ALT should reply and continue the dialogue so a further response is necessary. This could also be possible paper-based.
Lesson 7 Comparatives Superlatives	Students in groups make a survey on a subject of their choice, for example, “Who is the coolest member of Arashi?” Students then collect the data and give a short presentation on the results. Alternatively, they could make a written presentation of the data to put on the classroom wall. Students in groups choose a quiz category and make the questions. The whole class then participates in the quiz using each group’s questions.
Lesson 8 Passive	We’re Talking consolidation role-plays. Students can choose from any of the We’re Talking sections of the text and write and present situational role-plays.

Optional Activities

- Interviews with the ALT on topics chosen by students. For example, future plans, top three movies/games/songs, hobbies, etc.
- Write a reply to a pen friend.
- Write an invitation or request.
- Role-plays based either upon “We’re Talking” or other useful situations. For example, a trip to McDonalds or asking for/giving directions at Disneyland. These could be performed either with the ALT or in groups and ideally would be unrehearsed.
- Vocabulary building activities.