

An Analysis of Students' Experiences under the “Communicative Course of Study Guidelines” in Japan

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Abstract

This paper explores the responses of 77 Japanese EFL students in regard to their learning under the “Communicative Course of Study Guidelines” that were fully implemented by April 2016 in high schools throughout Japan. It will look at the types of tasks students were presented with in the classroom, how much opportunity was provided to communicate in English during classroom time, and whether they feel the goals of the guidelines were met on a personal level. Asking students about their learning journey and preferences in relation to studying in the Japanese EFL high school classroom will be valuable in informing teachers about their students preferences, and will allow University level educators to better understand the high school classroom environments that their students are coming into University from. Results showed that students are not being provided with communicative opportunities in their high school English classes as the guidelines recommend and that their desires to speak can be hindered based on cultural constraints found within Educational environs.

Keywords

Curriculum Policy, Education praxis, Japanese EFL learners

1. Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) began to phase in the new curriculum guidelines for junior and senior high school foreign language classes in 2013. From that year, MEXT phased out the old curriculum with each successive graduating class. In 2013, only first year students were taught under the new curriculum, with first and second year students undertaking the new curriculum in 2014, and all students undertaking the new curriculum in 2015, with the phase-in fully complete by April 2016.

Scholarly literature investigating the Education environment in Japan shows that, education was focused on an entrenched sense of nationalism, and the purpose was for the

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betterment of the group. As recorded by Colpitts and Barley-Alexander (2019), education in Japan has been viewed by many as teachers passing on their knowledge to students, who are to absorb the knowledge with little to no disruption in the chain of knowledge transfer. This type of education has led to the typical Japanese classroom being one where students have few opportunities to express their own opinions, and where teachers give lectures to students in order to pass on their expertise (Bartlett, 2017). In schools today, teachers are seen as the holders of knowledge, and students are viewed as a homogeneous group who, both in society and in the classroom are expected to conform to the norms of the group. If they do not conform they are outcast and shunned until they conform to the dictated rules (Colpitts and Barley-Alexander, 2019).

However, the new curriculum focuses on incorporating CLT approaches and tasks that use English in a practical way in the classroom in order to improve students' communicative abilities and their verbal output in all other subject areas. This curriculum is intended to create students who are independent thinkers and learners, which is a challenge considering that education in Japan, up until recently, has been focused on the education of the group for examination success rather than on individual development (Kuramoto & Koizumi, 2018).

Even though MEXT hoped to improve the communicative competence of students through the implementation of a CLT-focused curriculum, there have been issues in the past that highlight difficulties at the grassroots level. According to Tahira (2012), up until the creation of the new curriculum, MEXT stated that students were not presented with enough opportunities either to listen or to speak the language in a communicative way that was personalised to them. This was consistent with the findings of the study into teacher practice in the classroom conducted by Gorsuch (1999), who found that Grammar Translation Methods (GTM) and approaches to teaching were typical practice in the Japanese EFL classroom even though this was the period in which MEXT first introduced CLT approaches into its guidelines. According to MEXT, the new curriculum was designed to address this issue by "creating students who would be able to use English in their everyday lives after completing high school, and for university graduates to be able to use English in the workplace" (Monbukagakusho, 2010, p. 11).

The intended outcome of this curriculum is to allow Japan to raise its national level of English on international tests, to allow Japan to have a greater voice in global business, and to enable Japan to have a greater influence at an international level where discourse is in English (Monbukagakusho, 2010). In addition, Smith (2013) suggested that it would allow the Japanese people to be more gracious hosts for the 2020 Olympics. Thus, it can be said that MEXT's action acknowledged the centrality of developing pragmatically effective English language education in the overarching plan for national development in an increasingly globalised world.

MEXT identified CLT as the best approach to allow communication and expression in English to be developed within the classroom as revealed by theoretical

literature, such as the study by Long (2015) to improve communicative competence and international understanding. According to Kanatani (2012), who was a member of the sub-advisory committee of the Central Education Council, the discrepancy between classes being taught so that students could perform successfully on grammar and short answer tests and classes being designed for the production and usage of English was one of the reasons MEXT decided that a practical course in communication through the implementation of CLT should be the focus of the new curriculum.

With the aim of the new curriculum being to foster communicative approaches in the classroom, English subject names were changed to reflect these communication goals, and publishers of nationally accredited textbooks were asked to adapt their textbooks to incorporate more communication focused activities. Table 1 demonstrates the course name changes that occurred.

Table 1: Curriculum comparison

Old Curriculum	New Curriculum
English 1, 2, 3	Communicative English 1, 2, 3
Oral Communication 1, 2	English Conversation
English Reading 1, 2	English Expression 1, 2

According to MEXT (Monbukagakusho, 2010), English should be studied for a minimum of five hours per week, with schools being able to distribute the combination of subjects as they feel is required. It is further recommended that students should study English Conversation for two sessions (either twice a week for one year, or once a week over two years), with English Expression and Communicative English being studied for three sessions (either thrice a week in the first year, or once a week over three years) (Bartlett, 2017). Further subjects focused on English can be incorporated in the student's course of study at the school's discretion. For example, students who belong to certain majors may have subjects specific to that major incorporated in their schedules (such as homestay English for students who will visit their sister schools, or medical English for students who study in nursing courses).

The importance of incorporating CLT approaches to English teaching was the first step in MEXT's plans. As a result, five key areas for change and evaluation within foreign language education were provided in a professional literature report by MEXT in 2014, one year after the new curriculum was introduced. The stated goals were:

1. Implementation of the goals presented by the government and improvement of the contents of education.
2. Improvement of teaching and evaluation in each school.

3. Improvement of English proficiency evaluation and entrance examinations at high schools and universities.
4. Improvement of textbooks and educational materials.
5. Enhancement of the education system. (Monbukagakusho, 2014, p. 3-7)

Thus, with the five stages of curriculum development outlined, from 2013 to 2016 schools and teachers were working in an environment where communication, rather than test results, was the stipulated goal of what classes should be focused on. Yet, even though MEXT had provided clear guidelines, there were still limitations inherent to incorporating CLT within the Japanese school environment based on organisational hindrances and a top-down workplace culture as outlined by Hofstede and McCrae (2016), and an examination system that tests for linguistic knowledge over the practical use of English for communicative purposes as suggested by Steele and Zhang (2016). The basis for curriculum changes and the goals to be attained were outlined by MEXT and sent to schools, yet the uptake was slower than the 2013 implementation of the new curriculum had been. Furthermore, with additional assessment, training and development within the school level still to be considered by MEXT, some researchers thought that the implementation of the new curriculum was premature (Humphries and Burns, 2015). Nonetheless, an analysis of how students are coping with the new curriculum is necessary since the new curriculum has been fully realized since 2016.

1.1 The Communicative Language Teaching Approach

CLT is an approach to teaching where communication, rather than a particular language point, informs the way that classes are conducted. Using this approach, the four key micro skills of Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing are taught and graded using "communicative means to characterise the abilities of language learners to interact with other speakers, to make meaning, as distinct from their ability to perform discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge" (Brown, 2000, p. 26). This approach to teaching encourages students to "negotiate for meaning and make clarity of content being studied through the incorporation of communicative tasks as a means to acquire the language while simultaneously learning the language" (Savignon, 2002, p. 267). Thus, according to the literature, CLT is the recommended approach for incorporating language acquisition within the classroom, a consideration supported and outlined by both Krashen (1988) and (Long, 2015). Widely endorsed by researchers in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the following key points outlined by Brown (2000, p. 26) showed the fundamental elements of incorporating CLT approaches within the classroom:

- Classroom goals allow various types of communicative skills to be present while simultaneously improving students' grammatical and linguistic competence.

- Language classes are designed to provide learners with authentic and practical language practice in a variety of settings that they will encounter in real life.
- Communicative activities foster fluency and accuracy within all learners' skillsets.
- CLT provides students with unscripted opportunities to use the target language in unrehearsed settings, promoting instantaneous language for meaning and clarification.

These views were influenced by earlier research by Wilkins (1972), who proposed that language teachers and researchers adopt a more functional and communicative syllabus for language teaching. Wilkins (1972) believed that the communicative skills that a language learner needs to know and express can be found in notional categories (such as time, sequence, quality, location and frequency), and that communicative functions (such as requests, denials, complaints, and offers) need to be considered when communication becomes the focus of a curriculum.

Scholars, including Savignon (2002), urge that, within the CLT approach, creating opportunities for students to experience language in a variety of settings allows both language acquisition and learning to take place. Key features of CLT tasks such as group discussions, debates, role plays, and presentations should be present to allow students to experience a variety of real-life language situations that they are likely to encounter during their day-to-day lives when communicating in the target language. Thus, the communicative approach aims to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching, and concurrently to develop procedures for teaching the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing (Hymes, 1972). Further research by Canale and Swain (1980) stipulated that the ability to communicate required four different sub-competencies:

1. Grammatical (ability to create grammatically correct utterances),
2. Sociolinguistic (ability to produce socially and contextually appropriate utterances),
3. Discursive (ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances), and
4. Strategic (ability to solve communication problems as they arise).

A CLT focused curriculum should include a variety of approaches to allow both knowledge development and communicative competence to occur in the classroom. Thus, because of the aforementioned studies, many educational providers believe that

communicative competence should be the goal of language education and therefore central to good classroom practice (Toro, Camacho-Minuche, Pinza-Tapia, & Paredes, 2019).

1.2 Cultural Considerations

In Japan, scholars have found that there is an underlying influence of Confucian pedagogical systems on education that have informed pedagogical practice (Liu and Fisher, 2010). Thus, certain problems can arise when incorporating communicative approaches and student-oriented approaches in Confucian educational systems. Issues related to the implementation of Western liberal educational systems in Confucian settings were referred to as "one community, two systems" by Liu and Fisher (2010). This has also been identified in other countries throughout Asia, such as in Indonesia, Korea and China, when attempting to incorporate CLT approaches (Butler, 2011). Littlewood (2007), in his research into the incorporation of Western liberal educational approaches within Confucian systems, outlined that the incorporation of CLT approaches and task-based language teaching (TBLT) had been mandated throughout Asian countries as a way to "increase the number of people in their population who can communicate in English" (p. 243). Littlewood (2007) concluded that teachers were resistant to the newly introduced systems, and that students were culturally driven to be cautious when it came to participation in the classroom. According to Durkin (2008), students in Confucian pedagogical systems who were undertaking classes that incorporated CLT and TBLT were operating under different assumptions to their Western teachers when it came to their understanding of classroom norms and expected behaviour.

Research conducted by Cacali and Germinario (2018) found educational challenges unique to Japan and other Asian countries were evident when looking at students transitioning from the Confucian pedagogical systems that they encountered in high school. When they transferred to universities, students were expected to conform to Western liberal pedagogical approaches and also to be competitive. This is a difficulty faced by students in their day-to-day lives. Now that MEXT is promoting a similar approach in EFL classrooms at the high school level, students are confused about what they are required to do, and for what reasons (Cacali and Germinario, 2018). One of the main reasons it appears that students are encountering difficulties is that classes are conducted differently from the way they were during the student's elementary and junior high school classes, which were focused on examination success in order to proceed to the next level in their educational careers. This created a clash between the student's long held expectations about what defines appropriate behaviour and participation in the classroom, as up until the new curriculum was implemented, the school careers of students were heavily impacted by the examinations that they were required to undertake in order to graduate and continue to the next level of education (Junior high to high school, high school to university). This could be one example of why CLT approaches have been relatively ignored in Japanese EFL contexts (Wicking, 2019). Even though these

understandings were in place decades prior to the new curriculum being implemented, MEXT still determined that communicative approaches in the classroom were the best way to counter the issue of the low-level communicative abilities of Japanese students. Thus, within this study, special consideration was given to the cultural constructs of *Uchi/Soto*, the *Senpai/Kohai* system and the concept of “Face” when it came to students willingness to participate in the communicative classroom (Okano & Sugimoto, 2019).

2. Methodology

Participants comprised a heterogeneous and convenience sample of the first group of students to graduate from the newly introduced curriculum. At the time of this study, the participants were second year university students who had undertaken compulsory English language classes in a CLT-influenced approach at a university located in Hyogo prefecture, Japan. These students were chosen using convenience sampling (based on the instructor-student relationship). 77 participants were recruited to take part in the study, and all 77 participants (n=77) completed the surveys. These participants were asked during the survey stage of data collection to provide details about their high school English classes, and to compare these classes with their university classes to determine how they interpreted their high school education and learning journeys, and whether they viewed their education as being focused on communication or not. Then, 15 participants were selected using Google randomizing software to participate in a focus group discussion that asked for clarification and detail about the trends that were attained after the surveys had been thematically and statistically analysed.

Table 2. Data Collection and Analysis procedure

Data collection and analysis procedure	High school graduates (n=77)
Data collection stage 1	Survey for students conducted using Lime survey.
Data analysis stage 1	Statistical and thematic analysis of survey results using Lime survey, NVivo and a manual analysis.
Data collection stage 2	Focus group discussions with randomly selected participants (n=15)
Data analysis stage 2	Thematic and descriptive analysis of qualitative data using NVivo and a manual analysis through the creation of codes and word trees.

3. Results

This section will summarise the results that were attained from the 77 participants who took part in this study.

Table 3. Age of Participants

Age	Total (n=)	Percent (%)
19	24	31.17%
20	45	58.44%
21	8	10.39%

Participants were asked their age (at the time of answering the questionnaires). As outlined in Table 3, most of the participants were 20 years old, making up 58.44% of total participants (n=45), followed by 19-year-olds at 31.17% (n=24), with 21-year-olds making up the remaining 10.39% (n=8). These results show that the ages are consistent with those who had completed their high school education as the first group of graduates under the new curriculum guidelines that were phased in from 2013 to 2016. This was also verified during question 4 of the survey, which asked students to input their year of graduating from high school. All 77 participants graduated in March 2016. This was further confirmed based on students being second year university students in September 2017, who had graduated from high school in March 2016, at a time when total implementation of the new curriculum guidelines was completed.

3.1 School distribution

This question asked participants to type in the name of the prefecture in which they attended high school. This result allowed the researcher to firstly, compare the educational environments of different prefectures to identify similarities and differences between 59 different schools located throughout 21 prefectures (as listed below), and secondly to provide an analysis on a wide scale that could be representative of the current educational environment across Japan, thus enabling the exploration of a diverse range of educational providers in which the new curriculum was implemented. This allows for the results attained to be generalised; they are therefore representative of the education being provided nationwide not only based on diversity and geography, but also because all high schools in Japan are required to implement the new curriculum guidelines, thus showing to what extent implementation and adoption in high school classrooms has occurred in multiple prefectural settings. Table 4 shows the demographic distribution of participants. Data specific to the schools that students graduated from has been removed to maintain participant anonymity. As can be observed from the table below, participants are from both metropolitan and rural prefectures, which can be reasonably expected based on the convenience sample selection methods incorporated within this study.

Table 4. Demographic distribution of participants (n=77)

Prefecture where students went to high school	Number (n=)	Percentage (%)
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Hyogo	22	28.57%
Osaka	16	20.77%
Nara	6	7.79%
Kyoto	4	5.20%
Hiroshima	4	5.20%
Wakayama	3	3.90%
Shiga	3	3.90%
Shizuoka	2	2.60%
Fukuoka	2	2.60%
Mie	2	2.60%
Kochi	2	2.60%
Gifu	2	2.60%
Okayama	1	1.29%
Ehime	1	1.29%
Kagawa	1	1.29%
Oita	1	1.29%
Ishikawa	1	1.29%
Nagano	1	1.29%
Aichi	1	1.29%
Ibaraki	1	1.29%
Tokushima	1	1.29%

Table 4 displays the demographic distribution of the participants who took part in this study (n=77). As participants in this category represent the educational environments of 21 out of 47 prefectures in Japan, the samples represent 44.68% of prefectures nationwide, which allows for generalisations of the data to be offered, as supported by Wiersma and Jurs (2005). Table 4 shows that participants from large metropolitan areas

(such as Osaka, Fukuoka and Shizuoka), medium sized prefectures (such as Hiroshima, Kyoto and Hyogo) and rural areas (such as Tokushima, Shiga and Ishikawa) are included, thus allowing for varying economic and lifestyle differences to be represented. This further allows for the data collected to be considered generalisable based on the above-mentioned variations being represented in the responses of participants.

3.2 Lesson focus

In this section, students were asked to provide data about the English lessons that they undertook in their high school education, with specific information about the amount of time covered by each of the 4 skills of Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing, along with the tasks they felt they mainly focused on during class time.

Main skills covered during class time

This survey question asked participants what skills they felt teachers focused on during their high school English classes, ranking these skills from most focused upon (1st) to least focused on (7th) during English classroom time. Participants were asked to rank the skills of "Reading", "Writing", "Listening", "Speaking", "Grammar", "Translation" and "Practice tests". These options were chosen based on Bartlett's (2016) research into high school teachers and their preferred teaching skillsets.

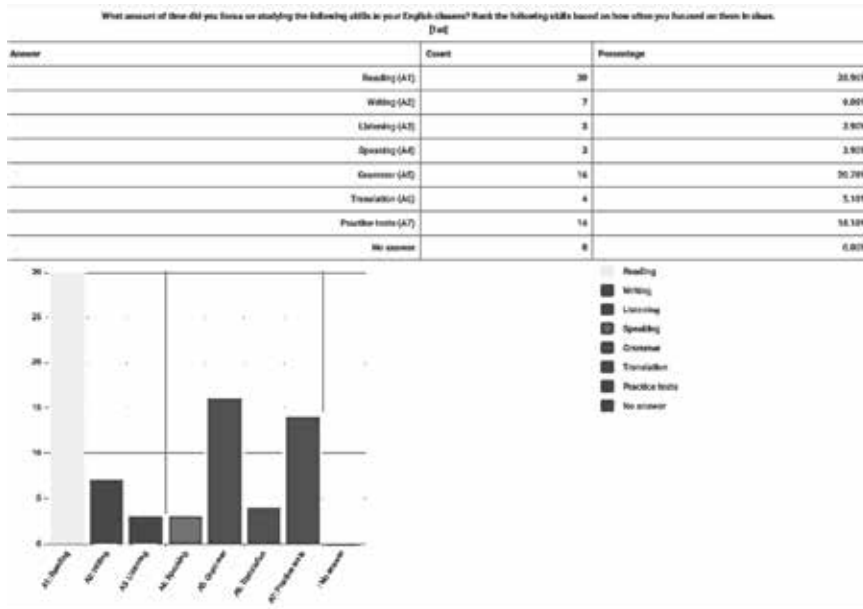


Figure 1: Skills focused on most during class time (n=77)

This question asked students to rank in order of frequency the skill that they most focused upon in their English classes. Responses to the survey as displayed in figure 1 shows that 38.96% of participants ranked "Reading" the highest, with "Grammar" being

second (20.78%) and “Practice tests” (18.18%) being the third most prevalent skillset that participants believed their teachers focused on. These results indicate participants’ belief that the skills their teachers focused on in the classroom are all skills that are usually found in a GTM focused classroom. Furthermore, the results show that communicative focused skills such as speaking and listening appeared at the bottom of the results table. Although the new curriculum had been designed to enhance CLT approaches in the classroom, skills that would be associated with the outcomes of these comprise the least selected skillsets chosen by participants in the “most focused upon skillset” category, with 3.90% selecting the skill of “speaking”, and 3.90% of participants selecting “listening”.

These results suggest that teachers were not focusing on the key skills of speaking and listening within the classroom, as required by the new communicative curriculum that was implemented nationwide. What also becomes apparent, based on the quantitative data from students, is that, according to these participants’ experiences of studying under the new curriculum guidelines their classes were still heavily focused on GTM approaches of instruction, with the focus being on reading, grammar, and practice tests. These results therefore show that regarding the sample of students selected to take part in this study, that communication skills were not promoted in their classrooms, and that they were not presented with opportunities to communicate in English during their high school language classes.

These findings are reminiscent of those outlined by Michaud (2015), indicating that even though expectations of teaching methods have changed in the curriculum guidelines, teachers and schools are still heavily focused on teaching skills that are considered essential for examination success. This then has an impact on the amount of time provided to students to communicate in English in the classroom, which is the main goal of the new communicative guidelines. These results illuminate the problem that even though the new curriculum is promoting communicative approaches in its policy, practice is still heavily focussed on GTM methods (Bartlett, 2017). Bartlett (2017) suggests that there seems to be a divide between teaching to the new curriculum and improving students’ communicative skills as outlined by MEXT, and that teaching in Confucian classrooms that are heavily focused on examination scores rather than for practical language competence, is a major hindrance to the incorporation of CLT in the Japanese EFL classroom.

3.3 Language instruction frequency

This section explored amount of time that they heard their teacher speak English in a typical 50-minute class, and how often they were provided with opportunities to communicate in English during class time. This question was created because in the MEXT guidelines, teachers are encouraged to provide more opportunities for students to speak in and listen to English, so this question allows for an analysis of how much time teachers and students are using English in the high school classroom since the

implementation of the new curriculum guidelines.

Language used during English classes

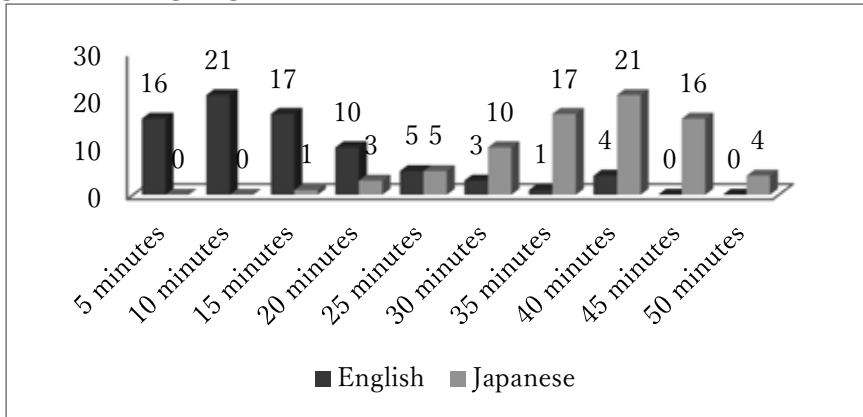


Figure 2: Amount of time using English in the classroom (n=77).

This question asked students to provide information about how much time they used English or Japanese in the classroom. As it was an open-ended question, students were able to freely provide their estimates. An analysis of the results as displayed in figure 2 allowed for the researcher to discover the median amount of time students were presented with speaking and listening opportunities in English, and to determine whether students were being provided with more opportunities to listen to and speak in English as had been recommended in the curriculum guidelines, to see whether the actuality of their educational experiences matched the ideals outlined in the curriculum guidelines.

Results show that 27.27 percent of participants (21 out of n=77) stated that their teachers taught a standard 50-minute class using 40 minutes of Japanese and 10 minutes of English. The second most popular recorded response by participants showed that 22.07 percent of participants (17 out of n=77) asserted that their classes consisted of 35 minutes of Japanese and 15 minutes of English. The third most recorded response representing 19.48 % of respondents (15 of n=77 participants), showed that classes were taught for 5 minutes in English and 45 minutes in Japanese. These results indicate that participants and their teachers used English in the EFL classroom between 5 and 15 minutes each class, with Japanese being used more than 80% of class time, with an average of 50 minutes. One of the aims of the new curriculum is to enhance students' opportunities to communicate in the classroom, but these results show that from the participants' perspective, this has not been the case. The lack of communicative competence of teachers and senior teachers dictating teaching approaches are certainly factors for this being the case, but when the data from this section was triangulated with participant responses in the focus group discussions, we can also find that students are at times hesitant to talk in the classroom in

case they are viewed as disruptive or negatively impacting the flow of the class.

These findings show that on average, Japanese students spend more time listening to their teacher speak Japanese in the EFL classroom, and also have more opportunities to communicate in Japanese rather than English in their English classes. The results show that even though MEXT has encouraged teachers to use more English in the EFL classroom, and to provide their students with more opportunities to use English during classroom time, it has not occurred. Student participants in this research have shown that not only are they not provided with enough opportunities to focus on improving their communicative skills, but that the focus of their classes is based on the passive skills of reading, grammar and short answer writing tasks. Until teaching approaches are changed to focus more on CLT, and until teacher's proficiency levels rise, it is doubtful that students would be able to improve their communicative competence as the goals of the MEXT curriculum hope to achieve.

3.4 Activities undertaken in the classroom

This section of the questionnaire asked participants to provide details about the types of activities they had the opportunity to focus on in the EFL high school classroom. The survey was designed so that students could select yes or no responses to a list of activities that are commonly used within the English language classroom based on literature provided by Brown (2001) and Anani Sarab, Monfared, and Safarzadeh (2016).

Variety of activities used in the classroom

The categories in this question that participants were able to choose from were created based on tasks that are usually found within the EFL classroom as outlined by Humphries and Burns (2015) and Bartlett (2016). This question was created to discover the focus of participants' learning in the EFL classroom, and whether they were taught in CLT approaches as stipulated by the MEXT curriculum, or in GTM approaches which are common practice in Japan (Ford, 2009).

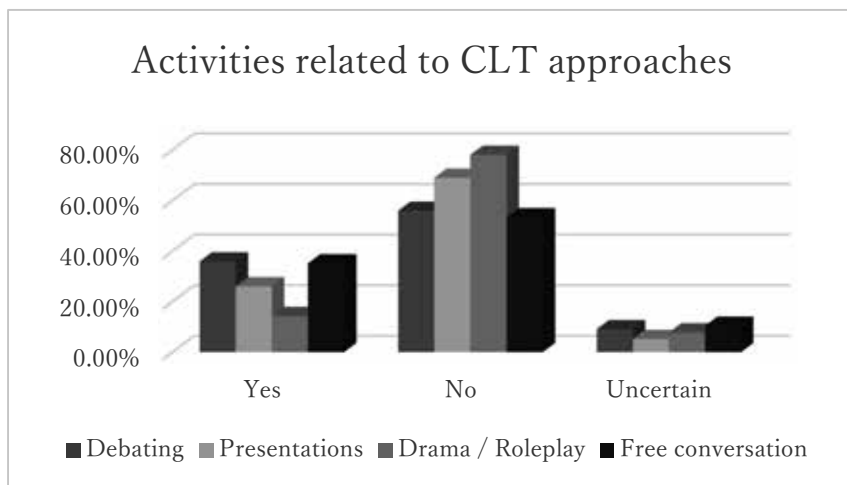


Figure 3: Activities related to CLT approaches (n=77).

Figure 3 displays the results where students responded “Yes”, “No” or “Uncertain” to the types of tasks they undertook in the EFL classes. As illustrated in figure 9, most participants recorded that they did not undertake tasks that incorporated debating, presentation, drama/roleplay or free conversations in the classroom.

With regards to debating with 55.84% of participants responding “No” while 35.06% responded “yes”, with 9.09% of participants responded that they were uncertain. The MEXT guidelines emphasized creating opportunities for opinion exchange through the incorporation of debating, yet it seems that more than half of the respondents did not have any experience with this type of task in high school.

When it came to presentation skills, the results were further divided, with 68.83% of participants responding that they did not have any opportunity to give presentations in the high school English classrooms. Although 25.97% of participants had experience with making presentations in their English classes, this number is much less than one would expect had the MEXT curriculum guidelines been the benchmark. A DVD of sample classes released to high school teachers in 2012 through each prefecture’s Board of Education outlined that presentation skills were one of the key focal points introduced, yet post analysis, the data shows that these tasks were not used in most of the participants’ high school classes.

When analysing the extent to which drama, acting or role-play activities were incorporated in the participants’ classes, results show that a majority (77.92%) of students did not have experience with these activities. Less than 1/6th of all participants in this group, representing 14.29% of respondents, had experience with these types of activities. Lastly, 7.79% of participants responded that they were uncertain whether they had experienced learning through drama, acting or role-play activities within their English

classes, which could further suggest that some of the sample participants who took part in the surveys, were not sure what the focus of their learning within the EFL classroom was.

Free conversation tasks were not experienced by most participants in this group, with 64.25% of participants selecting “no”. Only 35.75% of participants had experienced the incorporation of free conversations within their EFL classrooms. Some students have experienced this type of activity in the classroom, showing that not all classrooms are providing participants with the same opportunities and that individual teaching styles may play a role in what activities are selected to be incorporated within the classroom, a point previously addressed in the literature review. Yet 10.39% of respondents were uncertain as to whether they were introduced to free conversations within the classroom, a conundrum which would benefit from further analysis.

When it came to subjects that are used within GTM focussed classrooms, such as reading, textbook dialogue mimicking, translation tasks, grammar tasks and listening tasks, we can see that all 77 participants selected that they were introduced to these types of activities within the classroom.

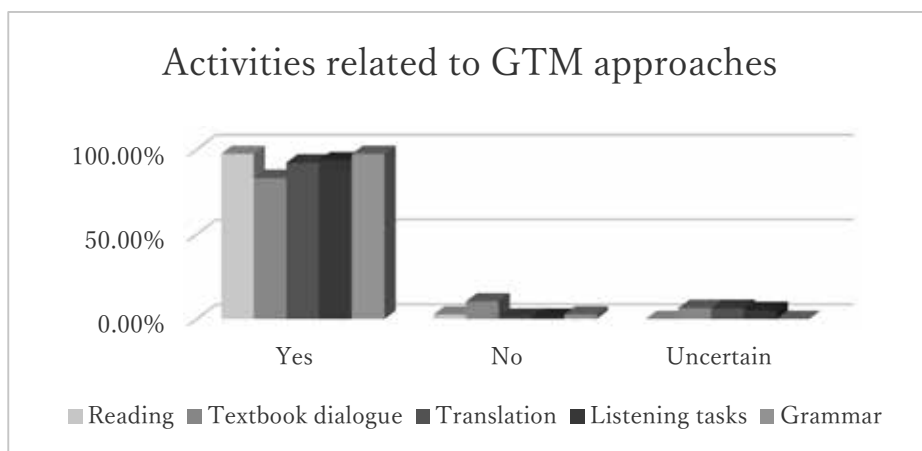


Figure 4: Activities related to GTM approaches (n=77).

As displayed in figure 4, the results showed that the percentage of participants who answered that they undertook reading tasks was 97.40%, with those who answered that they undertook textbook dialogues at 83.12%, translation at 92.21%, listening at 93.51%, and finally grammar at 97.50%. These findings show that an overwhelming majority of participants still received an education heavily focused on GT approaches to teaching regardless of the MEXT curriculum encouraging CLT (Monbukagakusho, 2014). From these results, it can be extrapolated that the focus of study was examination preparation, rote repetition and memorization through the tasks of reading for understanding and comprehension, translating passages for J-E or E-J, listening to

dialogues and answering questions about the conversation, and being able to use grammar in an appropriate manner. Even though the curriculum may have changed to emphasize and incorporate more CLT focused activities, these survey results further confirm that students have not been provided with activities that allow for the communicative use of English.

The results of this section show that according to the 77 participants who took part in this study, the focus of their classes were Grammar Translation focused, with reading, grammar, textbook questions being more prevalent compared to tasks that allowed for conversions, debates, discussions and role play activities. As classes are meant to be incorporating CLT tasks in an attempt to improve the communicative abilities in the classroom, and to provide students with both input and output opportunities in the target language to promote these skills (Swain, 1995), it is notable that the participants' responses give an contrary impression.

3.5 The value students place on their high school English classes

In response to the outlines and goals created by MEXT, this question asked students whether they feel that their education prepared them for using English in their daily lives after graduating from high school.

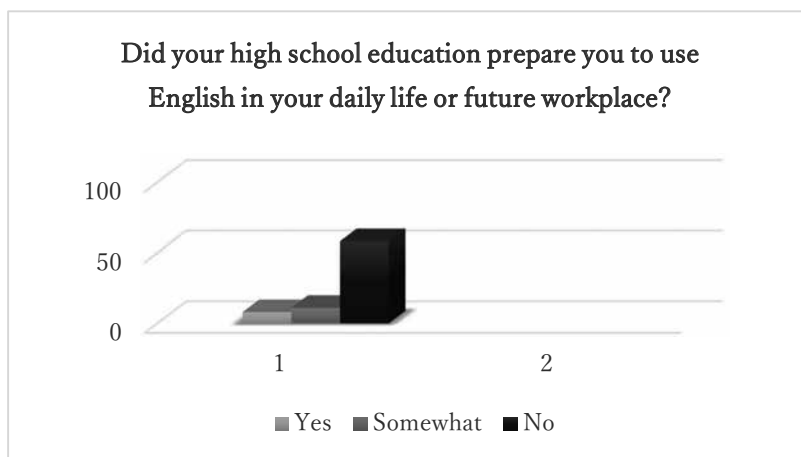


Figure 5 Impact of EFL education (n=77)

This question asked students to rate whether their high school classes prepared them to use English in their daily lives or in the workplace in the future. Participants were asked whether they feel that the English Language education they received in high school was adequate to prepare them to use "English in their daily lives" as was stipulated as one of the main goals of the new curriculum guidelines. As provided in figure 5, a majority of 75.34% (58 out of n=77) answered that they did not believe that their education prepared them to use English in either their daily lives or in their future workplaces, with 14.28%

(11 out of n=77) believing that it somewhat prepared them to use English, and 10.38% (8 out of n=77) believing that it did prepare them to use English in their daily lives. These results show that although 24.66% of participants feel prepared or somewhat prepared to use English if required, 75.34% of responses show that they were not prepared to do so. Although the curriculum was created and implemented to promote the communicative abilities of all students who undertake it, this has not been the norm. These results once again illustrate the lack of communicative approaches that were meant to be incorporated within the classroom, and further show a lack of communicative practice in the classroom, thus confirming that little has changed when the results are compared to the findings by Bartlett (2016). As the results show, a majority of sample participants who took part in this study do not feel comfortable communicating in a foreign language and do not feel prepared to do so in their daily lives or future workplaces.

4. Focus group discussion summary

When considering the data collected from students in this study, we can see that 10-minutes or less time was provided as the average amount of time that they were able to focus on speaking and listening in the English classroom. However, students expressed a desire from students to be given more opportunities to communicate and for more autonomous learning in English in the classroom, which could influence the ways in which classroom practice will evolve in the future. Although there are cultural issues that influence how successful this can be, based on the *Uchi/Soto* phenomenon and the culture of “Face” being present in all aspects of society, the responses from students showed that, at the core, there is a desire to communicate more in English in the classroom, and to be given more opportunities to do so. It is evident that students would welcome more practical based tasks to be present in the classroom level as to create more autonomous use of the language rather than for memorization of linguistic and grammar rules, which is the current trend.

Further analysis of student responses during the focus group discussion showed that students are taught mostly reading, writing and grammar skills during classroom time, showing consistency with the statistical data from the surveys.

As can be ascertained from figure 11, students are taught mostly skills that are expected to be covered in GTM focused classrooms. The skills of Reading, Grammar and Writing appear much higher on the scale than the communicative skills of listening and speaking. Although the categories of ‘Practice tests’ and ‘translation skills’ were not ranked first in any of the 7 most focused upon skills in the results attained, we can see that they are predominantly placed as 2nd or 3rd in the top 4 most focused upon skills in the classroom.

When considering the examinations, students stated that the current examination system is an influential factor in what tasks they feel that they are able to focus on when studying English. As the results show, students were provided with more tasks that focused

on reading passages for comprehension, on studying grammar rules and in translating passages from English to Japanese. Although these skills are an important part of a student's education, the results show that students are more receptive than teachers to opportunities for listening to and speaking in English, so long as it adhered to their Center examination study, which was recorded as their main motivation to study English.

When students were asked what types of tasks they would like to focus on in the classroom if the examinations did not play such an important role in their school lives, a majority of students wanted to incorporate more communicative tasks in the classroom and to use English in a more practical manner. However, a fear of making mistakes in front of classmates when communicating in English as a foreign language was recorded. Regarding students participating communicatively in the classroom, the following socio-cultural factors were identified as hindering their attempts to do so during the focus group discussions:

- Causing confusion among students as to whether they should verbally answer questions in front of their classmates
- Worrying about how they will be perceived by their peers if they make mistakes while communicating
- Concerns about whether they are hindering the teacher by asking questions during class time
- Questioning whether teachers will view them as disobedient or penalise the student for going against the GTM approach being used
- Being perceived as troublemakers in the heavily group-oriented classroom and school culture.

When student results are further analysed while considering the aforementioned sociocultural perspectives, we can see that students in each class are also classified as belonging to the group (such as the class they belong to), but, according to Holliday's "small culture" theory (2010), we can see that individual differences are also present within the classroom, with some students showing no issue with attempting to communicate, and others outright refusing to do so. This manifests itself in the ways that students record that they are willing to communicate in the classroom and are hoping for more opportunities to do so, but based on their relationships with all of their classmates and subject teachers, we can see that sometimes students are uncomfortable in doing so in case they are judged or seen as disturbing the group dynamic. When it comes to students' willingness to communicate in the classroom, they are interested in partaking in classes that are more CLT-focused, but they are also concerned about expressing their opinion in front of other students or making mistakes when doing so. One of the main reasons for this absence is that students have not been introduced to Learner-centred classroom environments until they reach university level and the system changes from Confucian classrooms to western liberal ones (Cacali and Germinario, 2018). Participants' responses illuminate the importance of being a group member rather than an individual in the

Japanese classroom. Although the desire to communicate in English has been recorded, so too have the cultural constraints that manifest themselves in the teacher-centred classroom. Such opinions that were discovered during the focus group discussions show that students do not feel that they have the opportunity to express themselves based on the Socio-cultural perceptions that dictate behaviour in Japanese society. Responses such as they feel that their 'role' is to absorb the knowledge that is being taught by the teacher rather than questioning what is being taught along with being worried about being viewed differently by their classmates based on the *Uchi/Soto* phenomenon, the concept of "Face", shows that learner autonomy is not present at the classroom level as much as some students would like it to be.

5. Conclusion

This study has outlined the key findings of a survey and focus group discussion that was undertaken with 77 (n=77) participants who were the first group to graduate from the latest manifestation of the high school course of study guidelines. The results show that even though policy stipulates that students should be presented with more opportunities to communicate in the Japanese high school EFL classroom, they have not presented with such opportunities fully as a result of the approaches that teachers select to use in their classrooms. It was also discovered that since the examination system doesn't test a student's communicative competence, and a culture that values conformity; with uncertainty avoidance and socio-cultural pressures being a prevalent feature of the social and classroom dynamic, has hindered the uptake of communicative approaches in Japanese high schools. Moving forward, it is important to consider the students responses and how they perceive their EFL education in high school, and to take these concerns to key stakeholders to promote further discussion and professional development dialogues to consider how to move forward within the communicative curriculum and to simultaneously meet the needs and desires of the learners that they are teaching. Through these considerations, hopefully learner focused classes can be further developed and implemented as a means to cover some of the recommendations introduced within the MEXT course of study guidelines.

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