

# **TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN JAPAN: COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND CLASSROOM REALITY**

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## **Abstract**

Since April 2011 all public elementary schools in Japan now include in their prescribed curriculum for 5th and 6th grade students a subject entitled ‘Foreign Language Activities’. In practice this equates to the teaching of English. According to the official course of study issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT), the chief aim of the subject is to “help pupils actively engage in communication in a foreign language”. Such an aim assumes that teachers possess the experience, competence, and confidence in their English language abilities to realise these aims. This paper will draw upon the results of a two-year long longitudinal series of case studies of four Japanese elementary schools and their implementation of the new course of study. It will detail how the curricular aspiration of foreign language communicative competence is subject to the influences of an expansive circle of constantly interacting variables. These include teacher education, curriculum design, resource allocation, and societal expectations. In particular the paper will highlight how the desire for communicative competence must take account of classroom reality.

## **1 Introduction**

When we discuss competence in relation to teaching English to young learners (TEYL) education we inevitably focus on the learner and the learning process. This is particularly the case with ‘communicative competency’ as it is the learner whom we want to achieve this competency. Thus our efforts, both in terms of teaching and research, have rightfully focused on how the learner can best become an effective communicator in English.

However, during the 1990s the importance of teaching and the teacher began to receive increasing attention as can be witnessed by the number of seminal publications on that issue (Richards & Nunan, 1990; Wallace, 1991; Flowerdew et al., 1992; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Medgyes & Malderez, 1996; Hayes, 1997; Richards, 1998; Roberts, 1998; Wallace, 1998). Such a development was inevitable as it is now widely accepted that the quality of learning is affected by the quality of teaching. Therefore when we consider communicative competency in EFL it is not just the learner we must consider, but also the competency the teacher brings to the classroom. Or rather the range of competencies the teacher must bring for as this paper will argue the effective teacher must be adept in a diverse set of skills that incorporate issues of pedagogy, classroom management, curriculum design, evaluation, and language ability, to name but a few.

This paper is therefore concerned with attempting to illuminate some of the possible answers to the question: what is the nature of the competency - the skills and knowledge - needed by the EFL teacher? And relatedly, what are the contextual issues that either promote or inhibit the teacher's acquisition of the necessary competencies. The teacher after all does not operate in a vacuum but is subject to an array of forces that, for better or worse, shape the nature of their teaching.

A final point to be made is that the generic term 'teacher competency' tends to mask the different types of teachers and teaching being done in the same way as the term 'learner' encompasses a huge amount of diversity in the many different people learning EFL. This paper draws on research I conducted over two years investigating early English language education in Japanese elementary schools. Thus, as I will outline in more detail later, it will be concerned with non-native, non-specialist teachers of compulsory English to young learners in fifth and sixth grades in public elementary school. This is a very different context to say, university students taking an advanced academic writing course at a specialised foreign language faculty in a liberal arts university. And it is these sort of contextual differences, I will argue, that tend to be overlooked in discussing communicative competency yet often play the most important role in determining whether or not such a goal is effectively met.

## **2 Competency in teaching**

Competency in teaching is rather akin to the apocryphal definition of great art: it is nigh impossible to objectively define it but nevertheless we recognise it when we see it. There is an underlying assumption that the characteristics of good and effective teachers are known and recognisable, albeit difficult to articulate in manner compatible with evaluation and emulation. This in turn points to the diverse yet complex interplay of factors that influence teaching, factors such as the subject matter, students' ages and proficiency levels, pre-determined curriculum, institutional resources, and the cultural values of the educational system. All belie the notion that a good teacher is simply an inherently 'good' teacher; rather she is a teacher who can marshal all these forces in to a pedagogical approach that best improves her students' learning.

Acheson and Gall (1997, p. 25) identify the following characteristics of successful teachers:

- 1: clarity
- 2: use of varied materials and methods
- 3: enthusiasm
- 4: task orientated, professional approach to teaching
- 5: avoidance of harsh criticism
- 6: indirect teaching (learners don't know they are learning)
- 7: emphasising content covered on achievement tests
- 8: use structuring statements to provide an overview for what is about to happen
- 9: use questions at many cognitive levels
- 10: know their students
- 11: know their limitations

However, as any experienced teacher will testify the above is not an exhaustive list nor do all the characteristics carry equal weight in every teaching situation. The concept of an objectively rated 'ideal' teacher "resists clear-cut definitions, because there are too many variables to consider (Medgyes, 2001, p. 440)". Again if we consider the vast range of EFL situations a teacher may find themselves in we would have to concur with Stevens observation that "informed teaching in the primary school calls for many differences in practice as compared with, for example, teaching English for specific purposes to mature adults (Stevens, 1989, p. 84)".

However, this is not to say that no criteria can be applied to gauge effectiveness in teaching. Such criteria may not be measurable but they are, for the most part, observable and can be used as a basis for assessing and improving teaching. To return to Stevens he states that "a set of regularly co-occurring features can be identified so that one may refer to informed teaching as the type of instruction and learning/teaching conditions that commonly produce effective learning (Stevens, 1989, p. 73)". He identified six features of informed teaching:

- (1) The teacher has specialised training and experience.
- (2) The methodology and materials employed are varied, interesting, and perceived by the learners as relevant.
- (3) The teacher maintains a high intention to learn on the part of the learners.
- (4) The teacher promotes good relations with the learners and makes special efforts specifically for them.
- (5) There are ample opportunities for practising the target language, in learner-centred and communicative ways.
- (6) Whenever possible teaching and learning are conducted at a high rate of intensity (20-25 hours per week).

These are though, aspirational ideals and perhaps focus too closely on the teacher as the principal facilitator of 'effective learning'. To take (6) as an example, the proposed weekly time given to teaching English would, at the Japanese primary school level, necessitate almost all daily class time being assigned to English lessons. Rather, as I will show, the other extreme is in fact the default position with English lessons being assigned to one 45 minute period in a week which as obvious (and detrimental) effects on learners ability to achieve communicative competence.

### **3 Effective teaching and communicative competence**

The key principal in developing learners communicative competence in a foreign language is to "equip the learner with the knowledge, skills, and interpersonal strategies they need effectively to be able to communicate with speakers of the [foreign] language in question" (Sharpe, 2001, p. 25). As can be seen from this definition there are a number of different yet interrelated competencies that need to be acquired by the learner which in turn calls for a range of pedagogical approaches. Canale (1983) has identified four competencies required for the learner to communicate effectively in a foreign language. These are:

- Grammatical competence - the ability to formulate and comprehend sentences and other acceptable utterances which accord with the fundamental rules of grammar built into the language.

- Discourse competence - this is the knowledge necessary to know which vocabulary, language structures, and register are used in different discourses, e.g. applying for a bank loan versus writing an academic paper such as this one.
- Sociolinguistic competence - this is the knowledge necessary to know which language is appropriate (and inappropriate) in different social interactions and settings.
- Strategic competence - the knowledge needed to maintain meaningful communication even when language ability is less than fluent, e.g., negotiating meaning or repairing misunderstandings.

### **3.1 How competent?**

To effectively teach these competencies then raises the question of what professional knowledge and pedagogical competencies does the teacher need to possess. Perhaps concentrating on such theoretical absolutes obscures the practical necessities of the classroom. Rather the question should really be one of degree in relation to competency; the language demands placed on a teacher of an advanced level university academic writing class will be very different to that of a teacher of young learners in primary school. Therefore we need to match teachers' linguistic and pedagogical competence to the level of language needed by their learners.

There is also the related question of how much foreign language expertise teachers need to effectively teach it. In my own research one of the principal concerns of the Japanese teachers I interviewed was their perceived lack of English language proficiency, a concern echoed in other countries too (Enever et al., 2009). Yet, as Garton and Copland (2011) have observed, it is unreasonable to expect non-specialist teachers at the primary level to have expert proficiency in English. Nor is it needed. For the most part their students are beginners and given the low intensity of curricular mandated instruction (as with Japan often only one class a week), there is no great need for teachers to have a comprehensive knowledge of the language. That is not to say they don't need any knowledge of the English, but certainly not to the level of specialist language teachers at the secondary level.

What then are the core competencies a teacher of English to young learners should possess? Drawing upon the work of Pinter (2006), Sharpe (2001), Rhodes and Heining-Boynton (1993), Garton and Copland (2011), Maynard (2012), and Gaynor (2014), I tentatively propose the following criteria:

- 1: An understanding of second language acquisition in childhood and its relation to first language development.
- 2: Knowledge of appropriate TEYL methodology.
- 3: Knowledge of appropriate assessment and evaluation techniques.
- 4: The ability to integrate English into the teaching of other subjects across the curriculum.
- 5: English language proficiency appropriate to the learners' level.
- 6: Motivation to teach the language.
- 7: The willingness to undertake professional development courses in TEYL.

To see how realistic these criteria are I will retrospectively combine them to provide a necessarily brief analysis of English education in Japanese elementary schools.

#### **4 Elementary school English education in Japan**

Since April 2011, all public elementary schools in Japan now officially include in their proscribed curriculum for fifth and sixth grade students a course of study entitled 'Foreign Language Activities'. This is best understood as official policy catching up with actual practice, as prior to 2011 more than 95% of public schools already had some form of foreign language education in place (MEXT, 2009).

However, 'Foreign Language Activities' should not simply be equated with the teaching of English to primary school students. The official course of study document (MEXT, 2009) does state that English is the preferred language of instruction, but describes such instruction in terms of activities rather than the teaching of the language per se. In addition, although compulsory, 'Foreign Language Activities' is not deemed an academic subject in the same way Japanese, Maths or Social Studies are. Rather it comes under the domain of 'general integrated studies', akin to art and music and accordingly is limited to a total teaching time of 35 hours for each grade during one full school year.

What these issues highlight is how policy decisions very much determine the nature of the teaching and learning experience in the classroom. Without a clear understanding of the context in which these policies are formulated at the national and local levels, we cannot truly assess the impact of such policies on the actual practice of language learning and teaching.

To give one example of this effect of context on pedagogy: in Hokkaido prefecture, in northern Japan where I am undertaking study, all public elementary schools are compelled by the prefectural Board of Education to participate in the annual 'National Assessment of Academic Ability' undertaken by the Ministry of Education (MEXT). These tests assess 6th grade students' knowledge of Maths and Japanese. Based on the results, schools, administrative areas and prefectures are all ranked. Hokkaido has consistently placed at the bottom of the national prefectural table, which has led to demands, particularly from parents, for steps to improve their children's scores (Asahi Shimbun, 2011), the implication being that both the problem and solution are found in the school system. In response, the prefectural Board of Education has initiated a series of classroom policies and professional teacher development programs to try and improve scores in the test.

All this in turn has a number of implications for the teaching of English. Foremost is the importance attached to Japanese and Maths within the overall curriculum. English, as a non-academic, unevaluated subject, is not integral to students' (and schools') academic standing, and thus is not prioritised by schools, teachers, students and parents. In addition, the emphasis placed on teacher's professional development in teaching Japanese and Maths by the Hokkaido Board of Education, crowds out what little time there is available for development in English language teaching. Finally, the presence of native speaking assistant language teachers in the majority of English lessons means that available financial resources are allocated to them (in the form of salaries), rather than the homeroom teacher (in the form of in-service professional development courses).

## **5 Professional teacher development**

This lack of qualified teachers means that Japan, as with many other countries at the primary school level (see Garton & Copland, 2011), has to rely on existing ‘generalist’ homeroom teachers who are not trained to teach TEYL. This in turn has an impact on learner outcomes and demands a realistic assessment of what can be achieved in elementary school. In Japan there is the added concern that successful classroom initiatives and effective methodology are often the result of the efforts of these individual ‘generalist’ homeroom teachers rather than specialised school programmes. Such a situation results in quality teaching being personalised rather than institutionalised so that when that teacher leaves the school (teachers are usually transferred every six years) much of the English program leaves with her.

Shortfalls exist too in the provision of both pre-service and in-service teacher training. As English is not an academic subject there is no specific qualification in TEYL offered at any of the 56 national educational universities in the country. The non-academic status of English also affects in-service training opportunities for teachers; greater emphasis is placed on career training in teaching Japanese, maths and science (Izumi, 2006). The result is that with the limited time they have for in-service training, teachers understandably opt for training in those courses upon which they and their students are formally evaluated. Furthermore, in-service training is for the most part conducted by local boards of education (BoE); there are no set standards for such courses and the quantity and quality of provision is very much subject to the resources available to the individual areas (Benesse, 2010). Thus whereas BoE’s in a large urban area situated close to one of the national university’s of education can call upon such expertise, such an option is not available in distant rural areas. Even the MEXT mandated courses teachers must take every ten years in order to renew their teaching licenses are not standardised but left to individual prefectures. It is indicative of the neglect at the policy level in this area that the only recourse available to in-service teachers seeking some form of comprehensive training program in TEYL are those offered by private companies, the expense of which must be borne by the teachers themselves (Akiyama, 2010).

## **6 Competence and teacher motivation**

A final issue that is sometimes overlooked is the rather uncomfortable fact that many primary school teachers simply don’t want to teach English; they are extremely busy as it is with the academic and administrative demands of their jobs, and adding an additional subject, particularly one for which they have received no formal pedagogical training, is something many of them resent. Such feelings, as I have observed, often manifest themselves in the classroom, where teachers sole aim is to ‘just get through’ the 45 minute English lesson. This often results in an over emphasis on games, teacher centred Japanese explanations, late starts and early finishes so that the duration of the class is considerably shortened, and little consistency from one lesson to the next. For many teachers, and unfortunately in my experience they are in the majority, elementary school English is regarded as an unnecessary burden rather than a rewarding challenge.

Resolving such problems requires a considerable increase in the quantity and quality of both pre-service and in-service teacher training. Butler (2005), in a comparative review of elementary school teachers in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, identified similar problems with teacher’s attitudes to TEYL, their English language ability, and methodological competence.

To alleviate these problems she suggested that teachers should receive comprehensive instruction in all areas related to child L2 learning along with systematic support in improving their English language ability. This is a call that has been echoed by many others (Edelenbos et al., 2007; Enever et al., 2009; Garton & Copland, 2011), yet in the case of Japan, such teacher support systems are not in place.

## **7 Conclusion**

It is easy to find fault with the current programme of elementary school English education in Japan, particularly in its deliberate ambiguity towards defining measurable learning outcomes for students. Less easy to do though is to provide workable solutions. Calls for greater resources, more qualified teachers, better pre- and in-service training, are matched by calls for similar provisions for other subjects in the curriculum along with greater investment in school facilities, particularly in information technology. These competing claims have to be reconciled somehow. Politics is after all the art of compromise and such compromises manifest themselves in official policy documents.

Compromise though shouldn't constrain possibility. In Japan, there is significant emphasis placed on the lack of teachers' English ability and thus their ability to teach the language (Butler, 2005). However, such an assumption rests on the belief that high levels of English mastery are necessary to successfully teach the language at the primary level. Garton and Copland (2011), based on their findings from a global survey of primary school English teachers, suggest that 'the real issue is not the teachers' lack of proficiency, which may well be more than adequate for TEYL, but rather a lack of confidence predicated on the belief that native-like competence is required to teach ... successfully'.

The issue then is to consider what can be done given present circumstances rather than what could be done under ideal circumstances. One such opportunity, requiring little in the way of language ability or specific training, would be to integrate TEYL with other subjects across the curriculum. Unlike the specialised and distinct EFL courses at the secondary level, the elementary school is institutionally structured to facilitate the natural diffusion of English learning across the whole curriculum and indeed, into most aspects of non-academic school life too. Within her classroom the homeroom teacher could conduct many of the usual routines such as taking attendance or assigning cleaning chores in English. At a more academic level English could be easily incorporated in other subjects such as numbers and calculations in maths, nomenclature in science, geographical features in social studies, and so on (for details, see Edelenbos et al., 2007). Such an approach could draw upon various initiatives developed under the auspices of Content and Integrated Language Learning (CLIL) with an emphasis on developing teachers' skills in mediating between languages, curriculum content and the development of inquiry and research skills in children (Arnold & Rixon, 2008). None of this requires expertise in English, but rather a willingness to both instigate and maintain such approaches so that the students become used to such linguistic transference and eventually consider them an integral part of their entire learning experience at school. As Sharpe rightly notes, '[students] are at an age to be taken along by a committed and enthusiastic presentation without the vulnerable self consciousness of adolescents. The foreign language is in this way "normalised"' (Sharpe, 2001, p. 16).

Such an approach would also bring into focus the competencies teachers need to effectively teach English at the primary level. To return to the case of Japan all elementary school teachers will have received a minimum of eight years of English language education prior to joining the profession. They are, therefore, equipped with a foundation of linguistic knowledge which can be built upon. And given appropriate opportunities, resources, and most importantly, the time to avail of them, both pre- and in-service teachers could acquire the necessary knowledge, skills, and understanding to effectively teach the mandated English curriculum. A corresponding requirement is to have a clearly focused and closely defined curriculum that specifies the content and communicative skills learners are expected to master and at each stage of their progression through elementary school. Doing this would then greatly facilitate the development of a teacher's competency in TEYL as she would then know:

- (a) what language needs to be taught and to what level;
- (b) what level of language and she needs to successfully master;
- (c) the range of associated linguistic competencies (grammatical, discursive, sociolinguistic, and strategic) needed to successfully teach the language;
- (d) what is required to effectively diffuse English education across other subjects in the curriculum.

Our guiding principal should be that 'competency begets competency': having a competent teacher in charge of the classroom is the most important factor in developing a communicatively competent learner.

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