

"View from the Front: English Language Education in Japan" JASEC  
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The following is a summary of the views expressed at the symposium by the author:

Recent Education Ministry guidelines for high school English education are intended to lead to a more communicative approach. However, until college entrance exams are revised to reflect this change, high school teachers will still feel compelled to emphasize grammar and vocabulary over communicative objectives. While students' knowledge of these fundamentals benefits both Japanese and native English speaking teachers, emphasizing these aspects of language learning at the college level instead of developing students' fluency and listening ability is in apparent contradiction to communicative goals. College teachers should concentrate on deepening students' understanding of what they have already learned in high school, and activating it.

At present most entrance exams do not test actual language ability but rather the preparation that students received in high school, 'juku' or 'yobiko.' Moreover, the tendency of certain organizations to rank colleges based on their entrance exams' 'hensachi' perpetuates a system where reliability and validity are seldom questioned. Instituting a nationwide test, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) used in the U.S., would make entrance exams more reliable and valid, and save schools time and resources. In addition, more weight could be given to high school grades and faculty recommendations when determining an applicant's qualifications.

Another concern relevant to English teachers in Japan is the reliability of standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and STEP. Many students take courses designed to improve their scores, and as with entrance examinations, what is often being measured is students' test taking ability, rather than their true language competence. Program directors at foreign institutions often say that scores achieved by Japanese students on the TOEFL do not accurately reflect their skills.

As for the role of native English speaking teachers in Japan, perhaps their principle job is to provide oral/aural linguistic input, and expose students to cultural variation which will give them better insights into their own values, beliefs, norms and customs. Foreign teachers can also share their teaching methods with their Japanese colleagues, and provide accurate information in regard to present-day English.

In order to perform their roles effectively, foreign teachers must consider a number of cultural factors while preparing for and teaching classes: formal vs. informal preferences, directness vs. indirectness, the vertical society, group vs. individual, hesitancy and reticence, and finally an obsession with accuracy emphasized through the exam-oriented education system.

However, the biggest problem that university teachers face is the lack of interest in academic subjects that many students show. Students seem more concerned with dating, part-time jobs, obtaining car licenses, and participating in clubs; things that students in other countries generally do in high school. Stressing the practical value of lessons and making them stimulating and meaningful through role play, skits, relevant debates, and the use of authentic materials such as video, music, newspapers, etc., is essential. Such tasks and activities should relate to students' interests in order to motivate and improve retention. Reading classes should also move from grammar-translation methods to an extensive reading approach by using graded readers.

It is also important for teachers to work on all levels of students' communicative competence, i.e. grammatical, socio-linguistic, discourse, and strategic. Though stressing grammatical competence is necessary at lower levels, many college teachers overemphasize it. Without socio-linguistic competence students end up using grammatically accurate, yet stilted phrases that can miscommunicate their true intentions.

In order to improve the present situation universities need to give teachers more concrete guidelines in regard to the goals of the curriculum, and devise ways to evaluate whether the goals have been achieved. At present Tokyo University's standard English textbooks and curriculum attempt to address these concerns. However, whether this approach can be effective at schools with lower levels of ability is not clear, and it is possible that some teachers will not be willing to accept such limits on their freedom.

Though many universities have reduced class sizes and set up sophisticated AV facilities, other schools still fail to recognize the particular needs that language instruction has when compared to lecture classes. With the communicative approach now established, it is desirable for classes to be limited to 30-35 students, be conducted in reasonably sound-proof rooms with movable seats, and equipped with video and tape players.

As teachers we should remember that our students will not always share our enthusiasm for language learning. Since it is a living language that we are teaching, we should draw upon the 'real' learning materials around us. Finally, perhaps the best thing we can do for our students is to help them develop an interest in language learning which will remain throughout their lives.