Japanese High School English Teachers' Perceptions on 'Communication English': Voices from Experienced Teachers

Kyosuke Shimamura

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how senior high school English teachers perceive the newly introduced course of study based on their English educational beliefs, experiences, and classroom teaching. Two experienced in-service Japanese English teachers were interviewed to share their thoughts, and the data were subsequently analyzed as well as categorized qualitatively into : *textbooks, in-class English use, teacher's dilemmas, and professional development.* Both teachers have acknowledged the new textbooks' compiling policy improved the students' English use in the classroom. Conversely, some dilemmas arose such as diverse perceptions among English teachers or educational beliefs, particularly, between the communication emphasized new course of study and the traditional style of English education through their rich experience. Based on the research findings, the author suggests an educational implication that collaborative study meetings by both English teachers and academics in English education could be one of the ways to share existing issues and seek for better solutions in each school environment, hence improve in-class communication in English as a whole.

Keywords : English as a Foreign Language, Qualitative Research, Case Study, Teacher Professional Development

Introduction

A new senior high school course of study was introduced from 2013 with more than ever an emphasis on improving students' communication skills in English (MEXT, 2010). A notable point in the document is a statement in its Article 3-2(3) encouraging teachers to conduct classes in English in principle (EIP) so that students have the opportunity to use English more. Before the new course of study was introduced, the "conduct classes in English, in principle" policy drew discussions among academics regarding how to interpret and implement this principle. For

example, the necessity of considering the diversity of each high school and the need for teacher professional development was remarked upon by Kaneko (2010).

Along with the shift from the traditional English teaching styles to more communicatively oriented ones, questions arise about how the new subject, 'English Communication,' which is assumed to help implement the new EIP policy in particular, has been impacting on English teachers' classroom teaching. This paper explores in-service English teachers' perceptions of the new EIP policy by focusing on the senior high school English classroom and with reference to teachers' beliefs about English education.

'English Communication': Official Policies and School Realities

Kogo (2013) at the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) explains clearly the new policy from MEXT by stating that it aims at enhancing students' communication skills in English all through the educational system from primary to secondary education. Additionally, 'English Communication' does not simply mean 'English Conversation', but the organic unity which should relate the four linguistic skills. The older version of the course of study (MEXT, 1999) did raise the necessity of relating the four skills requiring that teachers conduct their classes by considering balanced instruction of these skills. Thus a clear difference between the older and the new course of study in the above mentioned Article 3-2(3) is the added "Conduct classes in English, in principle" statement in the new version. This addition seems to be drawing attention from many senior high school English teachers.

Kogo (2013) elaborates on the motivation for this clause in terms of two main reasons for its addition to the course of study: First, promoting an environment of active English uses in the classroom since there are few opportunities for such outside the class; and second, interacting with students by encouraging them to think and respond in English. Kogo's explanation thus implies a strong necessity for senior high school teachers to use English more than ever in their classes. Further, the second point particularly requires a teaching technique which elicits students' ideas or opinions in English.

The question is how English teachers, in the face of the new change and challenge, perceive MEXT's intentions reflected in the new course of study. Tanabe (2011) conducted a survey for about 100 high school teachers, and found that their English use in class was not active although about 80 percent of the teachers responded that active English use would benefit both students and teachers. On the other hand, the study also reported that 75 percent of them worried that more active English use in the class might hinder students' better understanding of lesson contents. The survey further disclosed that 61 percent of the participants assumed that their students would be against taking English classes mainly taught in English.

Based on these obviously rather high aims by MEXT and facing realities of senior high school English education in Japan, the fundamental questions are: (1) How have English

teachers been perceiving the aim of raising students' communication skills in English?, and more importantly, (2) What are they doing in their instruction regarding challenging EFL circumstances? After three years since the initiation of the ambitious aims of the course of study by MEXT, studies are needed to reflect on curriculum changes as to whether they have been seeing positive aspects in the classroom. One important means to assess the degree of curriculum implementation is to go into schools to elicit the teachers' perceptions on what they are being asked to do. Therefore, a qualitative research design was used in this study to explore the two research aims of gaining insights into two high school Japanese teachers of English perceptions and ways they are implementing the MEXTs policy aims presented above.

The Study

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research has been widely used and accepted in the field of social sciences. Applied linguistics and education have also accepted this methodology recently enabling deep interpretations of specific contexts taken place in a natural setting (e.g. a school environment) where researchers investigate participants' inside views of particular phenomena by taking an emic approach (Killam, 2013). Such an inductive approach is often taken to describe what can be obtained through observations of classes or interviews of participants (Duff, 2008).

The present study integrates a Grounded Theory Approach (GTA) method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Cobin, 1998) into the framework of the qualitative research design. GTA is a suitable method for the present exploratory study by taking an inductive as well as theory generating approach from collected data. The process of GTA approach entails the multiple refinements of collected data from which categorization of concepts arise itself through researchers' careful text interpretations (Creswell, 2014).

The current study employed a modified version of GTA which is widely used by qualitative study researchers called Modified Grounded Theory Approach or M-GTA (Kinoshita, 2003). In *The Japanese Society of M-GTA*, a website, Kinoshita explains the characteristics of M-GTA as follows: (1) directly accepting the possibilities of the original GTA, (2) making unique modification in terms of research, theory, epistemology, and technique, and (3) improving it for greater practicability. Kinoshita further points out that M-GTA differs from GTA in that it does not fracture the data, meaning it does not cut up data into small chunks at the beginning of data collection in the manner that GTA does, which can be taken as a fundamental difference between the two. In taking this approach, M-GTA allows for the labeling of data within a larger frame so that concepts can be formed within broader contexts. That is by being better informed of contextual influences on the data, the researcher is then able to obtain richer insights for categorization.

Participants

Two senior high school English teachers were asked to have an interview with the researcher. They teach at the same private school in the Kyushu area, in western Japan, and have long and rich experiences in English education. Teacher 1 (T1) was a female English teacher and was a head of English teachers at the school until the previous year. She had been teaching English for 17 years when the interview was conducted. Teacher 2 (T2) was a male and was offered a full-time teaching position at the school upon his retirement from a public senior high school a few years back for his outstanding teaching techniques. T2's abilities had been recognized earlier in his career as he was presented with a scholarship to study teaching abroad for year. His career as an English teacher spanned many years since early 1970s.

Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured with questions regarding the textbooks, teachers' beliefs on the new curriculum, teachers' perceptions and professional development. After brief observations of the two teachers' in their classes (ten to fifteen minutes for different grade years at school), interviews were held and were about 30 minutes each. The two interview sessions were voice recorded, and then transcribed for later analyses.

Coding

Transcriptions of interviews were exported to a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) program of Nvivo (ver. 10) for the purpose of coding as well as analyses. M-GTA was applied to sort the data using analytic worksheets associated with M-GTA, whose format includes: concept, definition of concept, variations (examples), and theoretical notes (see Kinoshita, 2003; Saijo, 2007). According to Saijo (2007), to be more specific, some concepts can be later subsumed, subdivided, or redefined so that they can become bases for generating potential categories. The worksheet format as outlined in M-GTA topically is labeled with the name of the *concept*, followed by its *definition*, and then various data that substantiate the concept under the term *variation* illustrating the concept by presenting raw data from transcription. *Theoretical notes* are memos that enable researchers to jot down whatever comes up to their minds such as relationships with other categories or points to remember. The following is an example of one of the categories that arose from the data:

An example of the M-GTA Worksheet
・Concept: Teacher's Beliefs
・Definition: Teachers' educational philosophy or principles in teaching English
・Variations (excerpt):
　#79　T1 : I think students get easily bored with teacher-centered classes. It is easily
　　　　　　recognizable among them. Without having students speak English, and unless

we use oral communication oriented activities in teaching, I feel lessons become lackluster.

· Theoretical notes:

No. 79 exhibits T1's pro-communication oriented English educational philosophy. The comment also implies students' interest in using English more during the class.

Coding processes using Nvivo as well as filling in M-GTA worksheets were conducted concurrently considering respective advantages such as efficiencies of utilizing CAQDAS while taking the researcher's reflective or theoretical comments for the purpose of later discussion.

As the research proceeded, about twenty conceptual categories emerged through coding the data. This level was still a pre-stage of generating categories. In GTA and M-GTA, labelling of data and category formation is an iterative process that can happen immediately in the study. Eventually they have to be sorted out, accepted or discarded depending on whether there is enough data to substantiate them. Sometimes different concepts were mixed together or, in a reverse manner, other similar types of concepts were mingled in different groups. Thus it required another approach to sift through these primary coded concepts so that they can either be dispensed with or to be logically bound together into higher level of categories. Nvivo, in this sense, served the purpose by running cluster analysis.

Bazely and Jackson (2013) in their book illustrating the use of Nvivo in detail point out the capability of cluster analysis as, "Cluster analysis provides an overview of the structure of the data, allowing you to gain some distance to supplement your thematic understanding arising from close reading of your nodes" (p. 236). The researcher ran a cluster analysis on the coding similarity in Nvivo hoping to get an idea of categorization based on its clustering tendency obtained by the first categorization. As a result, the researcher decided to merge the result of the original classification into four categories : *textbooks, in-class English use, teacher's dilemmas, and professional development*. The data will be analyzed in the next section according to these categories.

Research Findings

Textbooks

Since 'English Communication I to III' (up to II when the research was conducted) were newly introduced English subjects, data on changes in the textbooks emerged as an informative category. For example, how the new textbooks were different from previous 'English I and II" as one of the core materials in the new course of study. This is a crucial element for MEXT because English education in Japan may not be able to introduce positive change in improving high school students' communication skills in English if the textbooks show little signs of

revision from the previous ones. The two teachers addressed this issue in the data when the topic emerged:

(Interview with T1)

Int.: (Interviewer): Do you think that the classes of new curriculum such as English Communication I, II or English Expression have been enhancing students' English use in the classroom?

T1: Yes, I do. The textbooks are compiled to meet such purposes, and we should make the best use of them.

(Interview with T2)

Int.: So you say the textbook encourages students to think in English?

T2: Exactly. In a word, it enhances their abilities of self-expression in English.

The subsequent question asking in what way they had favorable impressions of the new textbook they were using at school revealed some detailed points:

T1: Um... I think students may find the new textbooks more accessible than the old ones. Additionally, I found that the new textbooks contain more questions encouraging student to use English than the old ones. I would like to interact with my students in English using such questions in my future classes, for example in warm-up or wrap-up activities.

T2 below further substantiates T1's analysis that the new textbooks offer more questions to increase interactions in English:

T2: Well... as I understand it, firstly, it is because short summaries are provided for each paragraph. Secondly, at the end of passages, the textbook asks questions, for example, environmental issues, and it asks, "How strongly are you conscious of environmental issue in your daily life?" or "What have you done to cope with the issues?" So you see, students must find answers in English as to whether they like it or not. Answers such as, "I have been trying not to waste too much water." I personally find these questions very good.

T2's comment explains how the textbook is structured; providing short summaries of the text in each unit, and asking open-ended questions concerning the topic at the end of reading passages. Providing students with short summaries should assist them to remember the story line of each passage, that is to say, help them create schema for later production in a shorter, manageable form of context. Finding answers for closed questions may be relatively easier for students from original passages. However, preparing answers to open-ended questions from original passage

may be a rather challenging task, considering that students also have to create sentences to answer in English. These steps of 'reading original passage', 'providing summary', and 'asking open-ended questions' appear to be smoothly arranged according to the level of difficulty while assisting students to feel at ease answering in English as much as possible. This could also be an implication of "questions encouraging students to use English" which T1 meant in her comment above.

In-class English use

The second category is 'in-class English use', which can be applied to both students and teachers. Although T1 was not teaching 'Communication English' when the interview took place, the crucial question of 'conducting classes in English, in principle' had to be asked to learn their usual attitudes toward English use in class:

> T1: Actually, after you (the interviewer) left the classroom, I explained to students about using English, for example, "This is the subject and this is the verb of this sentence." or "This is the relative pronoun, here." Well, I know not all of them understood my explanations. Next year, when I teach the first-year students, I would like to teach them this way from the beginning so that they can be accustomed to learning sentence structures in English as much as possible. This is going to be my experiment next year. I am curious to know how it goes.

When asked a rough estimated rate of her English use, T1 said that about 30 percent. However, T1 stated her wish to increase the rate more than 50 percent in the following year when she would be teaching the first-year students again. Despite that T1 was teaching a class with the old curriculum, a point to be noticed in T1's comment is that she used English to explain grammatical concepts. Further, T1 manifested a will to increase in-class English hoping to use it for more than half of a whole lesson. T1's words imply a potential that she will not hesitate to use English in class, and clearly she is not threatened, but encouraged by the introduction of the more English use policy in the new course of study. In this sense, T2 also stated frequent English use in class:

> T2: As an English teacher, I am aware that I need to use English a lot to teach in the class.
>   For example, when I teach the first-year students, I give instructions in English.
> Int: Do you mean what is usually called 'Classroom English?'
> T2: Right. I also explain the meanings of new words in much simpler words.
> Int: Um... paraphrasing?
> T2: Yes. I do these things consciously in the class.

As was mentioned a little in the textbook category, students may need assistance in digesting original reading passages, particularly in English. Teacher's techniques such as using easily understood prefabricated classroom English frequently or paraphrasing should be effective in getting students to understand what is going on in class with less dependence on Japanese. T2's own impression of L2 use in the classroom can be seen in his view that students want communicative opportunities when he responded, "Yes, in a word, I feel that students want oral communication activities in their classes." T2's conviction based on his own impression that students themselves want oral communication activities through active interactions in the classroom, which the researcher had a chance to have a glimpse during the school visit.

Although both teachers in-class English use appear to be very active, they have concerns in English-only classroom teaching. T2, in particular, comments on this point as follows:

> T2: I think it (the new course of study) is fine. Having said so, considering the diversity of students, I doubt if the "English only" approach would be entirely appropriate. I mean introducing the new curriculum uniformly in every high school might be very difficult. It should require skills and techniques of teachers. Planning carefully when and where to use English effectively in a class... this is going to be my challenge as well.

On T2's words about "skills and techniques", the researcher asked the teachers to present some examples they had been using in their classes. Here are some excerpts from the interview:

> T2: When I teach English grammar, I try to make my explanations as short as possible, and have students answer English more. So they are either speaking or writing in English in my classes.

In T2's 'English Expression' class, T2 explained the process to increase the amount of students' English use in detail:

> T2: In our daily lives, there are various things going on around us, right? We can choose some familiar topics and pose them to our students. First, get them to write on the topic in English since they cannot talk about it from the beginning. I tell them to submit their writings so that we can check them. I proofread the assignments and give them back to students with feedback. Then, I instruct students to learn their writings by heart, and then give oral presentations in class. During the presentations, I do not allow them to read their drafts. Instead, I encourage them to say their own opinions without relying on the scripts. I also take part in the presentations.

T2's teaching technique appears to be well structured, following the steps of preparation,

feedback and presentation with some interactions with T2 in English as a post-presentation.

A point to be noticed is that the whole process is intended to decrease students' anxiety in using English through first allowing them to present from rote memorization, a technique they are use to, but then successfully weaning students away from that to be on their own when they actually are making oral presentations. T1 commented on teacher's psychological effects on students to relax and encourage their willingness to communicate (WTC) in English as follows:

> T1: I believe, regardless of school subjects, teachers should be cheerful and lively. Thus first and foremost, they need to create a bright atmosphere in the class. For example, when I ask a student in English and even if the student answers back in Japanese, I try not to blame him or her. As long as they respond to my questions, I praise them by remarking such as, "Well done!", "Good job!" or "Excellent!" with a slightly exaggerated tone.
> Int.: So you praise students...
> T1: Yes, I do. As you have observed my class, I am teaching or acting like a stand-up comedian when I use English during a lesson, and that is why they probably feel at ease in using English.

In fact, 'use of humor' or 'creating cheerful atmosphere' was found to be one of the effective factors to raise Japanese EFL learners' WTC in English based on a study of EFL teachers, (Shimamura, 2012). Thus, T1's words add further empirical support to what English teachers could do if they wish to conduct active English use in their classes.

The researcher further asked the interviewees what factors might turn off students to use English actively in class from the opposite viewpoint. T1 paused for a moment, and continued:

> T1: Um... that is a hard question to answer because students use English actively in my classes... Well, I assume students may be turned off if teachers do not use English... These teachers do not create an enjoyable circumstance for not only students but also teachers themselves.

T1 here points out the necessity for teachers to enjoy their classes if they wish to make their lessons lively unlike somewhat traditional lecture styles found in classroom education. While observing one of T1's classes, the researcher received a striking impression that T1's class was quite different from a stereotypical one-way lecture style. In her style, she conducted an active two-way interactional class such as giving instructions, asking questions, giving students feedbacks, etc. in English. To the same question of negatively affecting factors to discourage students' English use in class, T2 replied as:

> T2: I assume that could be attributed to too much use of Japanese and explanations by

teachers. It would be better that they do not even take initiatives in class. I believe that it is our job to create active atmosphere so that students can autonomously work on their tasks. I know it is not easy though… it would be ideal if students respond to a teacher's clear and concise instructions. Having students accustomed to the environment at the early stage should be very important.

It should be noted that both teachers raised an issue of teacher's English use in class, that is, the less and sooner the teacher uses English in class, the less the students' WTC becomes. This conversely suggests a hint to increase students' in-class WTC in English. Through the interviews in addition to short observations of the classes, the researcher certainly confirmed that the two teachers had been using English a lot in their classes. However, as the interviews proceeded, they also shared their dilemmas, which will be presented in the next section.

Dilemmas

The two teachers responded from opposite viewpoints in this category. T2 mainly talked about an external dilemma, that is, T2's frustration about Japanese English teachers, while T1's dilemma was more concerned about internal issues based on T1's educational belief. The dilemmas could be attributed to the fact that both T1 and T2 are very active English users in class as well as having high teaching skills, in a word, very passionate about English education. Naturally, they might feel frustrated by teachers who have lower standards or less passionate attitudes in teaching English. An obvious sign of such an atmosphere about English teachers can be found in how much they actually use English in the classroom.

The researcher asked the interviewees, understanding that they both use English actively in class substantiated by classroom observations, if such an awareness or attitude should be shared among other English teachers. T2 responded as follows:

T2: Yes, I personally believe it should be so. However, in that regard, let me point out one negative aspect… that is, each teacher is like an independent business owner. They do not appear to have ambitions to improve their own teaching skills by comparing what other teachers are doing in other classes. At least I cannot find such an atmosphere in this school. I feel private schools in this prefecture lack in such awareness. I have visited and observed some other private schools, and I found that… well let me put it bluntly… the problem is the teachers' lack of motivation to improve in teaching English.

On the point of other English teachers' negativity about English use, T1 also comments:

T1: Honestly speaking, teachers who use English actively in our school are T2, I and another young teacher who has studied in the U.S. The others, unfortunately, are not using

English actively in the classroom.

These statements certainly do not generally represent all Japanese high English teachers' passive in-class English use. However, the problem concurrently pointed out by both teachers appears to be describing one of the principle issues concerning English education in Japan, casting a fundamental question of "How can teachers teach 'Communication English' using English in principle if they do not use it actively in class?" Moreover, all three teachers, who use a lot of English have had experience studying abroad. Does this say something about the role of target language proficiency or gaining pedagogical insights to alter instruction away from traditional approaches to more contemporary ones? These outcomes may have implications for teacher education.

The second type of dilemma, an internal one, may be the highlight of the interview told by T1 pouring out her feelings about the new communication emphasized curriculum. The next comment describes T1's teaching beliefs through T1's own experience as an English teacher:

> T1: After I became a teacher, I went to cram schools such as [well-known cram school] myself, and learned techniques of teaching English to students. Consequently, I found that the traditional teaching style was one of the shortcuts to raise students' deviation value. A straightforward way to pass entrance exams of very competitive universities. Since then, I used the method and consequently, I have produced results. However, now the trend of English education in Japan has been so focused on so called "communicative English." This made me reflect on my own teaching style, and I felt my teaching style was rather dated. I debated myself whether my teaching style was going against the stream or not.

The statement above shows that T1 taught English in the traditional style focusing on grammar, vocabulary and sentence structures so that students were able to have better comprehension of texts written in English. T1's strong conviction is supported by successful experiences of having had T1's students pass competitive entrance examinations, and sending them to good universities. Since communication skills have not necessarily been questioned in entrance examinations (Stewart, 2009, Wada, 2002), T1's belief must have been robust until 'communication' has come to be emphasized, as it is these days. Thus the present course of study posed a conflict of getting T1 caught between her belief and the new curriculum.

Still, T1 appears to be flexible enough using English actively in class as we can find T1's quotes in the previous part of this paper. The following quote further exemplifies T1's flexible and positive attitude trying to find ways to lead students to higher L2 academic proficiency levels.

> T1: Well, reading skills are absolutely necessary so I think teachers might have students

make summaries of each lesson. We also need to aim for the level of communication where students can express their ideas or impressions concerning the topic of lessons, not simply covering the textbook on a superficial level. It would be ideal if students would conduct further research from that point on their own that would lead to a higher level of discussion. I wish to establish my own teaching style. So I think teaching sentence structures in English more rather than explaining every grammatical point mostly in Japanese could be a compromise between the new policy by MEXT and my teaching philosophy.

This comment explains T1's attempts at keeping a subtle balance between integrating the new curriculum policy asking teachers to conduct classes in English and her changing belief of trying to get students to express themselves in English by her using more English to teach grammatical or sentence structures. The comment above also implies T1's positive struggle of self-improvement as a professional English teacher, which will be analyzed in the next category.

Professional Development

Both teachers in this study proved themselves to be highly motivated, passionate and positive teachers in terms of teaching 'Communication English' in their own ways. Yet, at the same time, they expressed their dilemmas about the perception gap between their beliefs and that of other English teachers in the same senior high school. They both agreed on the necessity of teachers' professional development during the interviews in spite that teachers are very busy with their teaching as well as various school duties. In fact, Japanese teachers are famous or notorious for their long work hours as T2 points out here. For example, a recent survey comparing junior high school teachers' working hours in 34 countries by the OECD reported that average Japanese teachers worked 1.4 times longer than teachers in any other countries with teaching and, especially in case of Japanese teachers, supervising extra curricular activities (Nihon Keizai Shimbun. 2014, June 25). Then what type of teacher education is preferable for teachers wishing to improve themselves even under circumstances pressed for time?

The subsequent question more specifically asked the interviewees' preference of professional development styles by offering three specific choices as follows:

Int.: Suppose there are three styles: teachers study independently for themselves, teachers work together with colleagues or teachers work together with external academics. Which one do you think is ideal?

T2: I would definitely choose the last one. As you grow older and more experienced, you come to take a defensive stance. You would do anything to protect your fragile ego. So you see, it is not easy... Um... I have noticed, since I moved to this school, that the English teachers do not willingly use English. I have not heard them speaking English often. I assume they

may be protecting themselves by not speaking English. I personally would like to study more with academics if possible using English.

T2's last words about a hope to work with academics in English are based on his previous experience at the school. In fact, T2 played a key role to have teaching professional development sessions including classroom observations and after-class reflective discussions collaborating with an American academic working at a local university whose field is in TESOL. Thus, that type of professional development must have been one of the ideal styles for T2.

   When offered the three choices to the same question, T1 responded with a combination of the second and the third choice with a bit of mixed feelings as follows:

   T1: Colleagues would be best in terms of exchanging practical ideas about classroom teaching. Unfortunately, it is rather difficult for teachers to be united at our school to have study sessions. If there are any knowledgeable academics available as we did with Professor XX (same as aforementioned by T2) before, I would appreciate it to ask for their assistance.
   Int.: So would you like the second and the third style of professional development?
   T1: Having said so, the utmost ideal is that colleagues collaborate for the sake of our own school's English education. Since we know our students better than external academics, we could observe and discuss each other's classes, regardless of teaching experience between experienced and novice teachers, crossing psychological boundaries between us so that we could improve together as professional English teachers.

Here, T1's comment sounds reasonable because there is no denying that school teachers know their students best, and hence the utmost ideal style of professional development should be collaboration with colleagues. T1's comment implies that external interventions by academics could possible aid to making a breakthrough in implementing professional development inside school if they can understand the realities teachers at her school face. This pragmatic view is why she also believes strongly that professional development can be most effective if it is done together with colleagues who are more likely to share the same realistic concerns and needs. In the next section, further discussion based on the analyses will follow.

Discussion

   As the analyses of the transcripts proceeded, some bright signs and points of concern have simultaneously come to emerge. The first bright sign is the textbooks complied for the new course of study. The talks by the two teachers both confirmed that for them the textbooks are well devised to assist improving students' communication skills. This means they feel that the new textbooks do take MEXT's policy to enhance students' communication skills in English

into consideration encouraging students to express their ideas or opinions in English. Therefore, according the views of these two experienced teachers, the textbooks have found to be positively functioning trying to meet MEXT's guidance.

The results of these teachers further showed that the new 'Communication English', the textbook under the guidance of the new course of study, was positively perceived to encourage students' active communication in English more than the old versions of textbooks. The researcher had a chance to explore several 'English Communication' textbooks after the interviews, and had a similar impression with the interviewees. This should be a plausible and welcoming sign for English education in Japan that the textbooks can be a useful resource in carrying out the new reform policy. However, studies on the relevance of the new textbooks regarding implementation of the increased English focused curriculum policy need to be carried out.

Clear contrasts of perception as well as English use have also come to emerge from the interviews. The two interviewees happened to be passionate about English education, motivated in self-improvement as professional teachers, and active users of English in their classes. However, in the case of the interviewees' senior high school, they commented that teachers with less active in-class English use were the majority, and ironically, the fact had caused dilemmas to the interviewees.

The dilemmas told by the two teachers had provided the researcher with a supposition that the classroom lessons might be divided into two types: those with active interactions between teachers and students, and others with less frequent interactions in English between the two. The latter type of class naturally poses serious question of how teachers may be able to raise students' communication skills in English if teachers do not use English frequently in their classes. This problem also goes against the course of study, "conduct classes in English, in principle."

Even teachers actively tackling with the issue of communication English, for example T1 in case of the present study, may have internal dilemmas between the well-established approaches of English teaching focusing on sentence structure. During the discussion, T1 showed her concerns about the trend of too much emphasis on communication, which might be taken as fluency centered approaches of teaching English over sentence structured approaches to develop academic skills needed in reading and writing. Ideally, the two aims should go hand and hand. MEXT's ultimate goal of raising senior high school students' communication skills in English is meant to be focusing on developing academic literary skills in the target language. However, without appropriate teacher development, an imbalance favoring the traditional structured and translation focused approach in teaching exists. Moreover, a belief in the need for this approach over a communicative one is further reinforced by T1's comment that teaching in the former way leads to results oriented success in her students' test score.

The researcher is not in the position to generalize or decide what level of communication or

academic skills should be achieved in each school because senior high school students' English proficiency is so much diversified across the country. Some teachers may be struggling to teach basic level communication skills in English while others may be able to teach at a more advanced level including speech or debate in English. Still, regardless of diversity, senior high schools' English education should be directed toward communication-oriented styles both socially and academically than before because as T2 said in his interview, "That is what students want in class." The knowledge based traditional English education has been the answer to the present university entrance examinations. As MEXT has disclosed a plan to introduce a new type of test in the four skills in English targeting with the effectuation of the next course of study in 2022 (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun, 2015, March 15), future entrance examinations may shift from the present style to more communicative aspects such as speaking, listening and writing, and consequently senior high school English classes might be able to accommodate them.

Still, the issue is not that simple because EIP naturally raises the bar on students' English proficiency standards, which might risk students' better understanding if their English level barely hovers around a minimal ability to communicate. Although there is no doubt that meaningful communication in English can be achieved, the question remains how to reach that level in the classroom, where the traditional style of knowledge-based English education was prevalent for entrance examinations and not necessarily emphasizing the development of communicating one's ideas in social or academic situations in the target language.

The comments from T1 show the teachers are aware of the dilemma of narrowing the gap between traditional instruction required to help students pass entrance exams and developing their students' communicative abilities. The gap between the two appears to be wide enough to require teacher skills of providing scaffolding for students to proceed step by step, not at once, from simple and easy phases to gradually challenging ones. EFL learners first of all need to follow the step of comprehending the text and its message in each unit of the textbook. Then they require some time to digest the context, mull it over to be ready to establish their own opinions. Based on all the groundwork, they can draft out their opinions in English for writing or oral presentation. The whole process can be interpreted as developing academic communicative skills which Japanese senior high school English education should aim for (see Kogo, 2013 in the second section of this paper); to get students to 'think' and 'respond' through active interactions in English. In this sense, what T2 does in his class (see 'in-class English use' in this paper) can be a good application of taking the step-by-step style approach, assisting students to the level of communicative competence.

Another factor needs considering is how teachers may lower students' anxiety in using English in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, an EFL environment in Japan raises English learners' psychological pressure to use English simply because there are very few opportunities for many Japanese to use it in their daily lives. Thus students' WTC in English stays at a lower level unless teachers' make conscious efforts to raise its level by lowering students' anxiety,

and these efforts should be the first step to bring meaningful, educational changes to learn and use English.

The two teachers appear to be handling this problem effectively. T2's 'step-by-step' approach involving T2's feedback preceding students' oral presentations should assist in lowering students' anxiety by putting them in a situation where they may feel less embarrassed in front of their classmates by making grammatical mistakes. Additionally, students can have enough time to memorize and practice before their presentations, allowing them to develop fluency in speaking English. Managing these two sources of anxiety: accuracy and fluency, should contribute to raise students' WTC in English in the classroom. For example, T1 talked about creating a cheerful atmosphere with frequent encouragements as well as praises in the classroom, which directly affect students' minds helping them feel at ease using English psychologically. If students' WTC does not increase, the communication oriented English teaching may not be able to expect effective results no matter how the textbooks are improved to meet the purpose. Thus how English teachers may be able to create a good affective atmosphere in addition to their teaching skills appears to hold the key to successful communication enhancing classroom English education.

As the analyses of the interview transcripts continued, a crucial problem on the issue of 'Communication English' has also emerged from the two teachers' voices, that is, enthusiasm or perception gap regarding in-class English use among English teachers. The interviewees in the present study demonstrated that they have been taking initiatives in using English actively in their classes. In spite of their active in-class English use, however, their comments toward their colleagues, other English teachers, turned out to imply strong dilemmas reflected by those teachers' less frequent English use in their classes. If English teachers do not use English actively in class, how could it be possible to raise students' WTC, and hence improve their communication skills in English at all?

More fundamentally, such a passive attitude of English use is contrary to the MEXT's new policy of "conducting classes in English in principle." T1 consciously or unconsciously did not specify why other teachers do not use English actively in their classes. Presumably, T1 might have felt rather uncomfortable showing her gut feelings to the researcher on her first encounter. T2 spoke out more candidly that one of the possible reasons could be attributed to such teachers' lack of sense in self-improvement as professionals in teaching English. Since T2 has a much longer career than T1, having extensive teaching experience at both public and private senior high schools, T2 might have felt less inhibited in speaking out his opinion through his more senior position, knowledge and observations of various English teachers.

On the issue of active English use, they both implied that it would have something to do with the experience of studying or staying in an English-speaking country for a certain time. T1 also mentioned that another active user of English is a young teacher who had studied abroad. Although the researcher could not confirm if the English teachers other than the three

mentioned above had any experience of staying in an English-speaking country before, the fact why the three teachers have been using English actively in class while other English teachers have not could be possibly explained by whether a teacher has experience overseas or not. This may also explain one of the reasons why T2 expressed his wish that more opportunities should be given for in-service teachers to study in English-speaking countries.
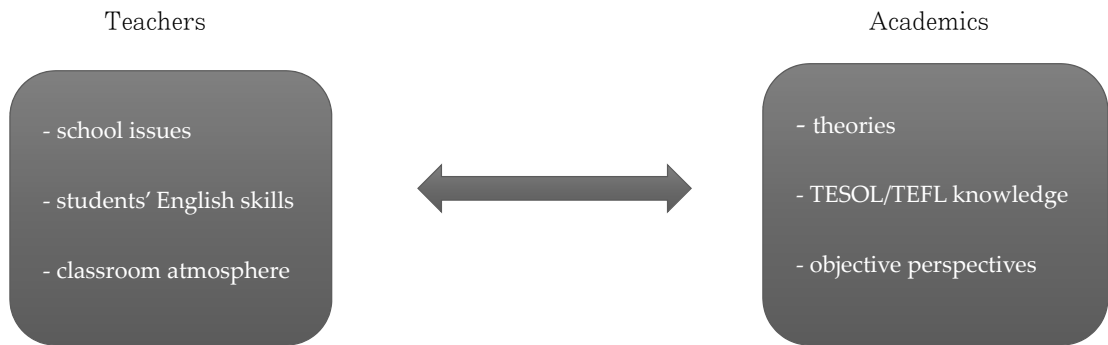
The teachers' dilemmas appear to be derived from two-directional issues: internal and external, as briefly touched upon in the analyses section. The external dilemma is the aforementioned English teachers' perception and in-class behavioral gap in terms of English use. Meanwhile, the internal dilemma concerns the issue between teachers' long-established teaching beliefs and the communication emphasized curriculum issued by MEXT. As teachers continue in their career in education, their successful experiences firmly nurture their educational beliefs. This internal dilemma mentioned above was notably expressed by T1, whose teaching style emphasizing the understanding of sentence structures, achieved good results by sending T1's students to competitive universities. T1 expressed her conflict between the traditional teaching style and the communication enforced teaching with active English use in class. T1 was flexible enough to get along with the new MEXT policy with T1's capabilities such as fluency in English, rich teaching experience, cheerful character, passion in teaching English. Yet, T1's dilemma based on her belief is well expressed in the following words:

> T1: I feel that so-called 'communication English' or 'practical English' seem to have become focused rather excessively these days. I personally believe that education should not seek for practicality too much. I have come to wonder if it is a good idea to jump on the bandwagon. English classes simply focusing on pronunciation, output, quick response and so on makes me wonder if it a right direction of English education. Thus I am a little skeptical of the current trend. I could be misinterpreting MEXT's true intentions.

The comment shows T1's anxiety over the curriculum policy. T1's concern about 'Communication English' seem to be not off the track of the MEXT's intention because previously referred by Kogo (2013) or Yoshida (2009) state that the MEXT's aim is to guide students' communication skills in English meeting a higher academic level of senior high school. Still, the academic diversity of senior high schools across Japan cannot be generalized regarding how teachers may be able to raise students' English communication skills to meet the new curriculum demands. The issue, therefore, needs to be solved at each school level, and its fundamental key to solution seems to be closely connected with professional development.

The difficulties of the issue call for the necessity to exchange ideas and work together in the form of teacher professional development, on which both T1 and T2 strongly agreed. A silver lining that the researcher felt from both teachers' comments was that they have not lost the sense of necessity and enthusiasm of having professional development possibly with

external academics as they had done before. Their positive comments suggest that in lesson study they had met their needs as a style of professional development. The fact that they had discussions using English (because the American professor mainly used English as a means of communication) might have further added a positive stimulus to be motivated with a strong awareness of self-improvement as professional teachers. This type of professional development with participation or assistance by external academics can function as a positive intervention because they could discuss and comment on observed lesson study classes from theoretical or general viewpoints whereas teachers could do similar things from a practical standpoint with specific viewpoints. This is a reciprocal win-win relation between senior high school teachers and academics; the former knows their school and students inside out offering opportunities to let the latter understand the reality of classroom teaching, and conversely, the latter can inform the former of academic aspects of English education which they are interested in for self improvement but fail to study themselves because of hectic teaching and school work. (see Figure 1)

Teachers   Academics

- school issues		- theories
- students' English skills	⟷	- TESOL/TEFL knowledge
- classroom atmosphere		- objective perspectives

Figure 1. Possible Benefits of Professional Development

Getting less passionate teachers involved in professional development must take a lot of time, patience and negotiations among English teachers working in the same school. Still it is well worth trying that English teachers, novice or experienced, could cooperate and collaborate for the betterment of their own teaching, and above all, their students' English communication skills.

Conclusion

How to improve students' communication skills in English is both a complicated and challenging task. The present study found that collaborative lesson study between English teachers and academics could be one of the answers to get colleague teachers involved in professional development. Teachers can easily become self-contented as their experience enriches

as T2 stated. However, there should be no end for English teachers to aim for higher levels as professionals. Therefore, teachers are suggested to be flexible and open about participating in professional development, particularly during the time of experiencing a shift of English education in Japan. Academics in the TESOL or TEFL field also need to seek opportunities of classroom observations or lesson study at schools. More collaborations between high school English teachers and academics can achieve a positive breakthrough beyond the border of high school and university.

The present study is a case of only two English teachers at the same senior high school, and thus the results and analyses of the interview should not be generalized. Additionally, further study needs to be substantiated by triangulation methods including classroom observations, and hopefully a second round of follow-up interviews of what the two teachers have been up to since the first interviews. If both teachers and academics can overcome physical as well as psychological barriers for a single purpose, that is, to improve students' communication skills in English, English education in Japan should be able to proceed to the next stage where English can be used as a useful communication tool in its true sense.

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日本人高等学校英語教師による「コミュニケーション英語」のとらえ方：
ベテラン教師の意見

島村　恭輔

この論文は、日本人高等学校英語教員が新学習指導要領の施行により新しく導入された「英語コミュニケーション」科目について、実際に高校で英語を指導する教師がどのように考えかつ授業実践を行なっているかについて調査したものである。2名の経験豊かな英語教師にインタビューをし、データは質的研究方法論の一つである修正版グラウンデッド・セオリー・アプローチを用いて分析された。その結果、教科書、授業中の英語使用、教師が陥るジレンマ、そして研修の必要性等が「コミュニケーション英語」の導入に伴う要因として浮かび上がってきた。教科書については評価している結果が得られたが、授業中の英語使用についての教師間の温度差、従来の英語教育との差などについてジレンマを教師が抱えていることが判明した。また、これらの問題点を解決する方法の一つとして高校現場実態を熟知し、実際に生徒の指導に当たる教師と、専門的な見識から英語教育の研究者との協同形態の研修の必要性を論じている。