Listening & Speaking, Reading & Writing

– Improving Four English Language Skills through the Eclectic Approach of International Educators in Japan –

Erica Maria Muramoto, Angela Marli Karsten, Luzinete de Lima Nagatani, Yukiko Nakajima

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Abstract
This paper elaborates on the language teaching experiences of four international educators working in Japan. With diverse nationalities and backgrounds, and as language learners themselves, these professionals’ eclectic approach is the result of many years of teaching within a multilingual and multicultural environment. It is argued that alternative forms of teaching might influence student’s motivation towards speaking, listening, reading and writing in an L2 (second/foreign language). In addition, the authors provide a few suggestions of activities that might contribute to successful outcomes in the English language education in Japan, which presently strives for communicative language teaching practices.

Initial Thoughts: The Role of English Education Around the World
Within the global world, that sees the daily and constant connection among nations as common place, there is a benefit of being bilingual (Grosjean, 2010). This said, it has become a well-known fact to many that English language, while being considered the Lingua Franca of modern times, is necessary for international mobility and professional opportunities. As one in four of the world’s population speaks English at a useful level, different multinationals around the world are implementing the mandatory use of English as a corporate language (Neeley, 2012). The importance of forming a nation able to cope with such demands concerning the use of English seems therefore quite recognizable.

In light of such reality, English language instruction is increasingly taking over education in many countries, with children at times even learning subjects in a language that is not their heritage language, i.e., a language inherited from their parents. In addition,
university students in diverse countries also often find it easier to discuss university subjects using English (Holmes, 1992). As a consequence, the concept of English as a Lingua Franca has even started the discussion of what kind of English should be taught in classrooms, as pointed out by Sung (2013):

“...the widespread use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has given rise to the controversial issue of whether English as a Native Language (ENL) norms should continue to be taught in the ELT classroom, especially in Expanding Circle Countries (Kachru, 1985), such as Japan and China” (p. 174).

Independent of the kind of English thought, the essential need of the language for international communication purposes seems to have turned into common sense among nations. Swaan (2001) for example, presents languages as a hierarchy, where English is positioned as “The hypercentral language”. The author emphasizes that all the speakers of languages in the categories that are lower in the hierarchy have to learn English to function globally. This appears to be the case of the Japanese nation, which has been working hard to ensure its position within the international community.

Japan’s current aspirations towards internationalization might be illustrated by implementations in the nation’s daily life. As Holmes (1992) states, “Though Japan is considered a very homogeneous monolingual society, one researcher reported that almost 20 percent of the signs in the area of Tokyo that he surveyed were multilingual” (p. 67). Within this scenario, a good command of English listening, reading, writing, and especially speaking has become the goal of many people in Japan.

In response to the changes in English education that have been implemented since 2011, which introduced English compulsory education starting from fifth and sixth grade in elementary schools (Fukada, 2010), Japanese parents are also seeking more opportunities for their school age children to access the language. The Japanese government has increased the number of English classes at public schools while putting forward a goal of ‘Japanese with English Abilities’, not as an imitation of a native speaker (MEXT, 2003). MEXT has revised the English education in elementary school, junior high school and senior high school to insist on developing oral communication skills and communicative language teaching (CLT) (MEXT, 2014). While considering the changes, Yoshida (2017) mentions that English education in Japan is finally starting to establish a foundation of changing from “English knowledge” based to “English that learners can actually use (thoughts, decision, expression)”. However, in response to research
conducted by Benesse corporation in 2015, Yoshida also points out that usual activities in English class in junior and high schools concern “practice of reading and pronunciation”, “grammar explanation and exercises”, “listening of textbook”, “comprehension of the textbook by questions and answers”. Per contra, “practicing of key sentences” and communicative activities such as “discussion”, “debate”, and “summarizing and telling stories in English”, are not much practiced in class.

In considering and in addition to the above, it seems that the repetition of traditional methods, allied to the high value placed on native-like competence constitute aspects that are still very common among many language teachers in Japan (Benesse, 2015). An example of such traditional methods are the common exercises in textbooks aiming at written sentence translation from English to Japanese or vice-versa, which often expect students to strictly memorize a specific and limited number of sentences. While owning their own individual characteristics as learners, students are not always able to cope with the demands of such methods. As a result, many linguistically talented individuals might end up believing that they cannot acquire English communicative skills because they feel incapable of reaching an expected level, which is judged through paper tests results. Notwithstanding the need for test preparation within Educational systems, Dörnyei (2007, cited in Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2013) pointed out, “Boring but systematic teaching can be effective in producing, for example, good test results, but rarely does it inspire a life-long commitment to the subject matter” (p. 111). It might come as a fact then that the overall tendency of students who feel disappointed with their English performance at school, is to experience a shrinking in their English language learning motivation in general.

Even though there are signs of change in English education such as a movement seeking to apply new ways of evaluating students’ four English skills in school and also university entrance examinations, Abe’s (2013) research, which looked into current practices and future prospects of CLT in Japan, shows that students are confused about the reasons for studying English. The author suggests that, “future CLT in Japan needs instructors who understand the value of the concept of World Englishes and enthusiasm for teaching students” (p. 52). In the same study, Abe gathered data among university students aiming at finding out their views on English education in Japan. The author points out that, “Unfortunately the overall assessment of 75% of the students was that six years of CLT was unsatisfying or useless for building up practice communication skills in English” (p. 47). The same topic was also brought up by Osumi (2017), who reported on findings by Benesse Holdings Inc. stating that around half of junior high school students think that communicative skills gained during elementary schools were meaningless.
Osumi states that, “Researchers with the firm’s think tank arm analyzed the grammar-oriented programs in junior schools and said the programs were likely discouraging students” (Osumi, 2017). Similarly, and while trying to determine the source of the problem, Yumiko Fukumoto (2017) in an interview to the Japan Times argues that, “In junior high schools, children don’t spend much time on speaking or writing and the program is mostly based on translating, memorizing or grammar exercises” (Fukumoto, 2017 cited in Osumi, 2017).

The overall unfavorable feedback gained from students in Japan gives rise to the discussion on what might be influencing this apparent lack of learning motivation, in times when the Japanese government has been promoting international talent by improving English-language education (Aoki, 2017). Although efforts put forward concerning the implementation of communicative teaching practices at schools are praiseworthy, the necessity of preparing students for standard tests during their school life, especially from junior high school on, appears to influence the actual teaching approaches in class, in a process that does not leave much room for the practice of communicative skills in English.

It seems that the challenge of changing Japanese English education goes beyond the development of materials and guidelines with focus towards communicative language skills development. The real question lies in how to implement teaching approaches that generate the necessary motivation, so students would aim at taking their studies further, while ultimately acquiring communicative language skills in English. One insight arising from this discussion is that preparing English teachers to explore different combinations of approaches in language teaching might help to attenuate the problem. After all, as stated by Cook (2013), “To serve the unique needs of actual students, the teacher needs to do whatever is necessary, not just that which is scientifically proven and based on abstract theory” (p. 271).

In order to address the several issues concerning English education in Japan cited above, the authors suggest the use of an eclectic teaching approach which, while being able to reach the different needs of students, might also raise their motivation towards English language learning. The goal here is not to supply readers with a unique formula of teaching English, but to suggest that an active exchange of ideas, and implementation of combined approaches might help English teachers in Japan to cope with some of the dilemmas they often face. One such dilemma deals with how to prepare students for English related challenges, such as tests in advanced academic grades, while naturally motivating them to seek further knowledge of the language, aiming for communicative competence.
2. The Eclectic Approach Used by the Authors as International Educators in Japan.

While defining eclecticism, Kumar (2013) states that, “it involves the use of a variety of language learning activities, each of which may have very different characteristics and objectives” (p. 1). An eclectic approach of language learning does not constitute a novel concept. It deals with using different approaches while considering the diversity of students’ needs and learning styles. Many educators might in fact relate their classroom techniques to the term. Nevertheless, the eclectic approach described here is believed to yet possess some distinctive features when compared to others. While belonging to an international community within the still monolingual context of Japan, where according to Gordon (2005, cited in Cook, 2013) 121 million of the 127 million inhabitants speak Japanese, throughout the years the authors have developed an approach based on their diverse experiences in language teaching, whether in Japan or abroad. It aims at not only the integration of four language skills while enhancing language learning motivation, but also to encourage students to develop useful learning strategies, which are hoped to fundamentally pave the way to mastering English.

In addition, the practice includes the idea that any contribution is welcome, and that culture awareness is an essential part of language learning. This claim finds support in Shrader’s (2011) interview with Joseph Shaules, in which Shaules states, “language learning fits easily within the larger process of cultural learning. When you try to do the opposite – to include culture as a single component of a language learning process – it becomes difficult to figure out what to focus on” (p. 36). Therefore, the authors believe that their eclectic teaching approach reaches for all areas of knowledge, with the central idea that language plays the key role within this process.

2.1. Main Features of the Approach

2.1.1. Feature 1: Educators in the pursuit of innovation via exchange. Having been built upon the experiences of licensed educators from different countries and with diverse teaching backgrounds, the authors approach is primarily grounded on the exchange of ideas. This process takes places during meetings, in which new creative class activities are introduced, and reasons for eventual failures are extensively discussed. At the same time that teachers’ meetings can be considered a common practice at schools, the premise that lies underneath the professional debates suggested here is that these are always aimed at bringing something new to the classroom. This pursuit for innovation allows for a win-win situation, in which educators gain confidence through their achievements, and experience through peer advice, while students have access to the new
in classroom, in a process that most often generates language teaching as well as language learning motivation.

2.1.2. Feature 2: Hands-on projects. The learning of an L2 is made more tangible through hands-on activities, such as creating posters, diary writing, role-plays, party-planning, cooking, and so on, which allow learners to express ideas through multiple ways and materials. Attention to this is quite relevant when considering scholars such as Widdowson (1978) suggesting that, “Overemphasis on drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences tends to inhibit the development of communicative abilities” (p.67).

While moving from a solely text-based traditional method and drilling, and towards the authors’ suggested eclectic approach, a good example of an activity is the Kamishibai (Japanese style storytelling) Project. This consists of the creation of story sheets in English, in which students with diverse abilities have access to new cultural and language knowledge by merging their expertise. The targeted skills to be developed are diverse and include: creative writing (transforming a theme into a story), linguistic skills (translation when needed, discussion and presentation), artistic skills (development of illustrations), organization skills (necessary during the construction processes), and so on. For the most part, activities like the Kamishibai Project might generate a good atmosphere in class, and great satisfaction on the part of those involved. As suggested by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013), “Membership in various small groups such as learner groups, project teams, work parties, etc., has a powerful impact on the groups’ members’ motivation and behaviour” (p. 256).

2.1.3. Feature 3: Creativity as an element supporting language learning. While most people would agree that artistic activities in the classroom might develop students’ creativity, few seem to see the link between Arts and L2 learning. In order to shed light onto this topic, defining creativity seems relevant. Albert (2015), while citing other authors, states that, “According to recent summaries, it is becoming generally accepted that creativity refers to the production of ideas that are both novel and useful (Mumford, 2003; Sternberg and Lubart. 1999)” (p. 144).

Based on this premise that creative individuals are able to come up with new and beneficial ideas, it seems consistent to believe that L2 learners’ creativity contributes to the development of individual learning strategies, which in turn, might benefit the learning of a target language. Individual language learning strategies are a well-known part of L2 learning in general. Such techniques are, for example, referred to as beneficial
for vocabulary acquisition by Cook and Singleton (2014) when stating, “The importance of image in lexical acquisition suggests that learners could be helped by encouraging them to use images and imaging techniques to come to grips with new items” (p. 50).

In light of such implications, promoting artistic activities that help to boost students’ creativity in L2 classrooms appears to be a clever way to provide learners with an important tool in their often long journey of studies, while pursuing the knowledge of a target language. This idea finds further support in Runco (2004, cited Dörnyei, 2015), whose studies’ findings suggested that creativity is inhibited by some usual tasks in classroom, such as test-like activities, but released by other activities that are given in a lenient way or game style. In addition, and as previously suggested, many L2 educators might attest that artistic as well as game-related activities are often seen as enjoyable and appear to motivate students in class. Artistic activities presented within an L2 classroom are often combined with many speaking and listening opportunities that allow students to naturally access different components of the language, such as phonics and vocabulary.

Finally, artistic activities, for their own flexible nature, also often integrate curriculum and might cover numberless areas of studies, while reaching for students’ different areas of interest. This sort of curriculum integration can be illustrated by the Word Cloud Project, which could be used at university level, for example. The project is divided into five steps and might extend the length of one single lesson, but because it enables the practice of many different skills, it is surely a good way to bring innovation to the classroom. First, students divided in groups pick a topic of interest and develop a short research question, followed by a short interview related to that topic. Second, groups interview each other and take notes on the answers. They can also use their phones to record the interviews, if that suits the needs of the group. Third, each group discusses the collected data and tries to answer its research question in a succinct way. Fourth, the group creates a word cloud that represents the opinions of the other groups, while illustrating the answer to the research question. Word clouds, which can easily be created by software that helps researchers to code data, become the artistic component of this short project. Students are free to choose the materials to create the word cloud. Fifth, each group presents their research question and word clouds orally while providing the rest of the class with their findings.

2.1.4. Feature 4: The value placed on students’ backgrounds and activities requests. Based on the authors’ classroom experiences, and as other language teachers in the country might agree, there is often a lack of English oral communication practice opportunities among students in Japan. To this end, the pedagogical choices made by
language educators play an important role, especially when it comes to the types of activities applied. There is a tendency among language teachers in Japan to bring pre-determined activities that have brought results (Benesse, 2015), rather than testing new ideas in the classroom. However, the fact is that not all practices, even though well-planned and executed, have the same result within different groups or contexts, so attending to students’ requests and developing unique activities for different groups, even though laborious, can be very exciting.

The first step in this process is to encourage students to express interests and challenges the group/class is ready to go through in order to enhance new knowledge. Giving students a chance to share their opinions most often generates task ideas such as role play, foreign language presentation practice, and cloze activities on song lyrics in English. Occasionally though, more innovative ideas such as e-mail exchanges in English, and commercial or video clip productions by students might arise in class. Students’ ideas and requests are usually based on their previous learning experiences, but most importantly, they demonstrate students’ interests and what they perceive as enjoyable. This leads to not only appreciation of the foreign language, but also allows for favorable situations in class that promote self-confidence, while enhancing different aptitudes and talents. In effect, the value placed on students’ backgrounds and requests in the classroom allows them to operate based on their own interests, beliefs and abilities. When given to students, this kind of opportunity might foster the view of language learning as not being static, i.e. the more one uses it, the more skills are developed.

**Final Remarks**

In this paper, the eclectic approach followed by suggestions from the language teaching experiences of four international educators working in Japan are summarized. In order to explain these characteristics, it was necessary to allude to the aspiration of internationalization sought by Japanese society, as well as to Japanese parents seeking opportunities for their children to meet the demands of English language skills in the country. The ambiguous understanding in Japan, connecting a second language learning merely to extra English classes for a certain period, causes problems. Another drawback refers to the situation in which classroom practices do not always match students’ interests, resulting in a shrinking in their English learning motivation, and rarely promoting the long-term commitment necessary to learn a second language.

Nevertheless, a trend that is constantly under discussion nowadays among educators is the forms of English that should be taught in classrooms, and the role of ELF in that context. The impasse ensues since the revision of English education by MEXT,
which insists on developing communicative skills through CLT, appears to not be applied as its essence, and traditional methods are still enforced. The current practices seem to be based on the strong influence of the necessity of preparing students for standardized tests, and result in students viewing the acquisition of communicative language skills as useless.

Therefore, the authors understand that the challenge of changing Japanese English education goes beyond the development of materials and guidelines with a focus towards communicative language skills development. Such purpose calls for the need of preparing teachers to explore different combinations of approaches. Hence, an eclectic pedagogy, not always based on abstract theories or scientifically proven theories, meets the different needs of students and at the same time motivates them in their language learning. At this point it seems important to mention another benefit of projects such as the ones suggested by the authors. They might help students hoping to take English proficiency tests, such as TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), or Eiken (Test of Practical English Proficiency). This can be said to be true once considering that the skills evaluated during these tests, and that are suggested by their acronyms, come through the encounter of what is widely practiced during the projects suggested within the eclectic approach described in this paper.

To this end, some features of the authors’ eclectic approach such as: 1) Educators in the pursuit of innovation via exchange, 2) Hands-on projects, 3) Creativity as an element behind language learning and 4) The value placed on students’ background and activities requests, were shared in this paper. These features, which have been present in the authors’ teaching practices for almost two decades in Japan, are hoped to stimulate other language educators who wish to develop a truly eclectic approach. Yet, with the belief that active discussion brings benefit to all involved in the educational field, whether in theory or practice, feedback on the topics here presented is encouraged. Furthermore, additional research is considered of substantial value when dealing with the challenge of enhancing English language four skills development, while attending to the needs of learners within Japanese schools and in society, including successful academic performance and motivation to seek for the aimed-for English communicative competence.
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要旨

日本における英語 4 技能（聞く・話す・読む・書く）の向上

—多様なアプローチの可能性—

ムラモト エリカ マリア・カルステン アンジェラ・ナガタニ ルジネッテ デリマ・中島 有季子

本稿は、日本に在住する国籍や背景の違う 4 名の教育者（著者）の日本における言語教授体験を研究ノートとして考察したものである。著者は、国籍、文化、言語、教育背景が異なり、自身も多言語を学習する立場である教育者として、その経験や知識を数年間に渡り共有、協働しながら、多言語多文化の環境を通して学習者への多角的な英語教育アプローチを実践してきた。柔軟性のある多様な教授法は、4 技能（聞く、話す、読む、書く）の向上において、学習者のモチベーションに好影響を与えることが示唆され、紹介する具体的な活動例は、特に今日の日本の英語教育が目指す実践的なコミュニケーション力の習得に寄与する実践活動と言える。