

Toward Communicative Competence in the Japanese Context: The Challenges Facing Japanese English Teachers

Yuko Iwai

The University of Southern Mississippi, USA

In the twenty-first century, as the world has become more global, the English language has been considered a significant tool for communication. This study examines how to effectively teach English communicative skills to students in the Japanese setting. Based on the selected review of literature, this paper revisits concepts of communicative competence and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It also examines the objectives of the English curriculum in Japan developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT] and describes current situation of its implementation. Finally, this paper proposes some tips for Japanese English teachers. It is highly recommended for the teachers to understand and teach communicative competence within the frame of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Developing qualifications of the teachers and their inter-cultural awareness also contributes to a more adequate implementation of CLT in the Japanese context.

Key words: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Japanese English teachers, communicative competence, MEXT

INTRODUCTION

In the current society of globalization, scholars have argued over issues

dealing with the varieties of English within the concept of World Englishes for the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles (e.g., Crystal, 1997; Kachru, 1985). In this context, it is important to consider how English can be improved in Japan. Demands in the field of English education in Japan have shifted (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT] 2002, 2003b). Currently, students are encouraged to acquire a balance of English language skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, in accordance with the guidance of MEXT (2002, 2003a). Reflecting on the historical background, Yoshida (2003, p. 291) describes how English education in Japan has shifted as follows:

In 1960, the Course of Study emphasized teaching all four skills plus understanding the people who speak the foreign language being learned (MEXT). In 1970, ...focus turned from teaching the four skills separately to a more integrated communicative ability to comprehend the foreign language and express oneself in the language. This...included the need to understand the worldviews of other peoples and the creation of a basis for international understanding. More major changes did not occur until the 1989 revision in the Course of Study. It emphasized that students were to gain a positive attitude toward communicating in the foreign language and should deepen their understanding of international society.

Even though MEXT (1998) encourages students' communicative ability in the foreign language, in which English is a major subject in the current Japanese context, there are some challenges teachers and students face (Takanashi, 2004): What challenges do they experience? Why do they occur? What suggestions can be offered for solving the problems of teaching and learning English in Japan? Based on these questions, this paper aims to suggest more effective approaches for English teachers in order to improve students' communicative competence in English in the Japanese setting. Although communication can be conducted through different means, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing, this paper emphasizes speaking and listening abilities. This paper reviews the historical background of communicative competence, examines the current English curriculum in Japan, and proposes

key teaching elements for English teachers in Japan.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The historical overview revisits communicative competence. It also describes definitions and elements of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This framework is significant in understanding issues concerning English education in Japan and how it can be improved.

Revisiting Communicative Competence

The term *communicative competence* was first introduced by Dell Hymes (1967, 1972). Hymes claimed that Chomsky's linguistic grammatical perspective (1965) was too limited to language competence. Hymes also argued that communicative competence should also be viewed from the social and functional perspectives. Since that time, the notion of communicative competence has been a key component among scholars and has been revisited and revised by them.

Canale and Swain (1980) revisited Hymes' concept of communicative competence and proposed their own notion about the concept. According to them, there are three elements in communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Canale (1983) later added one more element by distinguishing discourse competence from sociolinguistic competence. Grammatical competence refers to the basic elements of communicative competence, which includes vocabulary knowledge and rules of morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology (Canale & Swain, 1980). Studying lexical items, word structures and forms including their derivation and compounding, sentence patterns, meaning in languages, speech sounds, and their roles in languages are part of grammatical competence. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the social and cultural knowledge. It requires participants' awareness and understanding of the appropriateness of

language use in a variety of contexts, including the roles of the participants, the shared information by the participants, and their goals for the interaction. Discourse competence is concerned with the “mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres” (Canale 1983, p. 9). It also includes the concepts of cohesion and coherence. The former indicates grammatical correctness in sentences, whereas the latter refers to the relationship between texts and one’s abilities to read between lines in the discourse (Halliday & Hassan, 1976). The last subcategory of communicative competence is strategic competence. It is defined as “the verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). This type of competence is used in order to strengthen communication despite deficiencies of the participants’ language knowledge.

Brown (2000) states that further developments occurred after the model of communicative competence was developed by Canale and Swain. For example, O’Malley and Chamot (1990) viewed the concept of strategic competence in terms of learning. Bachman (1990) focused on testing by expanding the original model of communicative competence. Savignon (2002, p. 8), who revisited her original version of components of communicative competence in 1983, suggested the “inverted pyramid classroom model.” This model includes four elements of communicative competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence. Savignon’s framework of communicative competence was similar to that of Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). However, Savignon’s model included a broader perspective on sociolinguistic competence, which she called *sociocultural competence*. This illustrates cultural aspects valued among the language participants.

Definitions and Features of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is viewed as an approach rather than a method, first began in the late 1960s in Britain as a replacement of Situational Language Teaching and was developed in the middle of the 1970s (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The significance of CLT to learners is that it promotes their communicative competence (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2005). Littlewood (1981) explained two major activity types in CLT: functional communicative activities and social interaction activities. Functional communicative activities are those which involve communication requiring participants to focus on achieving certain goals. Social interaction activities are concerned with dialogue, discussion, or debate. Moreover, Nunan (1991, p. 279) described some key features of CLT as follows:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

CLT is learner-centered (Savignon, 2003), in which teachers help to facilitate learners' communication process and motivate learners' positive attitudes toward learning. It focuses on the processes rather than outcomes as well as on the development of communicative competence. It encourages risk-taking. Learners may make mistakes in the process of learning and develop their communicative competence through trial and error. Fluency,

which requires speakers' appropriate speed, accuracy, and prosody, is also considered to be a key feature of communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

CURRENT ENGLISH CURRICULUM IN JAPAN

This section of the paper consists of three parts. First, it explains guidelines by MEXT. Second, it focuses on teacher qualification. Last, it discusses some issues regarding English in elementary schools, followed by challenges to entrance examinations.

Guidelines by MEXT

English has been recognized as the most common international language in the world (MEXT, 2002; Torikai, 2005). Living in the global society, it is important for students to have adequate communicative competence in English. In the Course of Study (the national curriculum), MEXT (2003a) states that the main purpose of learning foreign languages at lower secondary schools (7-9th grades) is to enhance students' communicative skills, build their awareness of language and culture, and cultivate their positive attitudes toward communication. By using elementary English, students are encouraged to establish functional conversational skills, including understanding speakers' intentions and expressing their thoughts orally. Also, they develop abilities in understanding writers' intentions and conveying their thoughts and opinions in writing.

For upper secondary schools (10-12th grades), the objectives for learning English are the same as the lower grades. They also emphasize communication abilities, language and cultural understanding, and the positive attitude toward communication. The significant difference between the lower and upper secondary schools is that more practical and advanced skills are to be mastered for older students. Despite the MEXT reform to emphasize communication skills in the curriculum, it seems that students and teachers

still experience challenges in developing these skills. Gorsuch (2000) stated that upper secondary school teachers focus on teaching reading, not communication skills, due to the stress of preparing for university entrance examinations.

Teacher Qualification

According to MEXT (2003b), the qualification of the English teacher should be improved so that teachers can better focus on communicative competence. This allows them to gain certain English abilities and demonstrate their possession of required levels of English proficiency. This is equivalent to the semi-first level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), 550 points in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), or 730 points in the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). MEXT (2003b) also provides teachers with domestic and overseas training programs for learning more effective teaching methods and developing their English proficiency. However, Butler and Iino (2005) argue that the guidelines MEXT gives are not sufficient to measure teachers' English abilities because the primary purpose of these tests is not to evaluate English proficiency of non-native English teachers but to measure general, academic, or communication abilities in English. This is not necessarily aligned with the English curriculum proposed by MEXT. More specific guidelines for teacher qualification need to be developed, including understanding and implementing communication abilities in English within the MEXT framework.

In addition to the attempt to improve English proficiency among native Japanese teachers, MEXT (2003b) promotes the use of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. This program began in 1987. ALTs are native English-speakers. They typically team-teach with Japanese English teachers and help to improve students' communicative competence (Cornwell, Simon-Maeda, & Churchill, 2007; Hiramatsu, 2005; Mahoney, 2004). They also represent cultural diversity.

However, Gorsuch (2002) reported that among 884 upper secondary

Japanese English teachers, 61 percent of them did not teach courses of English I or II with ALTs. These mandatory courses develop the balanced skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening determined by MEXT. Moreover, Mahoney's (2004) study demonstrated gaps between Japanese English teachers in the secondary level and ALTs with respect to their perceptions of responsibilities. While ALTs perceived their role and engagement in class to be teaching communicative abilities and sharing culture, Japanese teachers perceived the ALTs' role as cultural representatives and models for authentic English. On the other hand, the Japanese teachers saw their role as explainers and managers in class, whereas ALTs observed the Japanese teachers primarily involved in translation. The findings imply that more efforts toward developing communicative competence set by the MEXT guidelines should be pursued.

Additionally, in a case study with high school Japanese English teachers and ALTs, Hiramatsu (2005) revealed that Japanese teachers were timid about their communication abilities in English. One teacher, who taught several oral communication courses over many years while following the MEXT 1989 guidelines, shared his struggle with low self-esteem. He said, "I am not confident in my knowledge and competence in English, so I sometimes become incoherent when I am speaking in English, not knowing what to say..." (Hiramatsu, 2005, p. 120). Another example from Sato's (2002) study also showed teachers' lack of confidence in communicative abilities in English. In an interview, one Japanese teacher said, "...I have difficulty teaching oral communication classes in some ways. We Japanese are in charge of listening and grammar. So I manage the classes by using tapes, because I cannot speak English fluently" (Sato, 2002, p. 66).

Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) are generally appointed as part-time instructors. However, MEXT (2002) attempted to hire 300 full-time ALTs at the lower secondary schools from 2003 to 2006. It further plans to expand the number of full-time ALTs as regular teachers to 1,000 in both lower and upper secondary schools. In 2008, approximately 5,000 ALTs from over 50 countries are presently serving in the Japanese schools (JET programme,

2008). Yet, this number still does not provide all schools with ALTs (Matsuura, Fujieda, & Mahoney, 2004).

English in Elementary Schools

With the MEXT reform established to improve English communicative competence in secondary school levels, the English curriculum had been expanded to include elementary schools. MEXT (2002) advocated the introduction of English conversation activities into elementary schools for students from third grade and above in the New Courses of Study of 2002. These activities can be implemented during the periods for integrated study (Kanno, 2007). Homeroom teachers are encouraged to foster students' positive attitudes and motivation toward communication and to teach different cultures, instead of the behavioral learning style in which drills and teacher-centered lectures are emphasized. Examples of instruction in elementary schools include games, songs, and role-playing. However, Japanese elementary school teachers are not necessarily licensed in English. There are few workshops for professional development available to them (Butler, 2007). Consequently, MEXT began to send ALTs and Japanese English teachers from secondary schools to the elementary schools to support the English activities.

Currently, teaching English in elementary schools is controversial in Japan. Some scholars advocate the advantages in mastering English pronunciations and increasing motivation with communication based experiences at an early stage of school. On the other hand, others assert that an emphasis should be placed on developing the Japanese language, the foundation of students' thinking processes, rather than English (Otsu & Torikai, 2002).

Challenges to Entrance Examinations

High schools and post-secondary schools are now trying to develop their entrance examinations in order to accommodate the curriculum change toward communicative competence. It is said that, in reality, teaching and

learning English are almost only for passing entrance examinations, as opposed to the primary aim to teach and learn communicative English abilities (Gorsuch, 2000). The fact that the focus of those examinations is reading and writing tends to make teachers and students prepare only for these skills, neglecting components of speaking and listening. For example, Sato (2002), who interviewed Japanese English teachers regarding CLT, discovered that they taught for examinations and emphasized grammar explanation and translation. Sakui (2004) also supported Gorsuch's argument. In her longitudinal study to examine Japanese English teachers at secondary schools, Sakui (2004) found that the teachers struggled to improve students' communicative competence using CLT because they focused more on reading and writing through the grammar-translation method to prepare the students for entrance examinations. In the study, the following quote from a teacher illustrates this conflict: "I think English teachers in Japan, especially in high schools, are forced to wear two pairs of shoes. One is for the entrance examination...At the same time, we need to teach English for communication. I find it difficult" (Sakui, 2004, p. 158).

Additionally, Nishino's (2008) study about perceptions of Japanese English teachers in secondary schools was consistent with other studies. She explored seven various language components of reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, and *yakudoku* (grammar-translation), and discovered that the teachers reported reading, grammar, and vocabulary skills as the most influential and important variables for passing high school and university entrance examinations. They also claimed that the speaking variable was the least important for the examinations. However, they considered all the language components, except *yakudoku*, equally important for English learning in general. The findings of Nishino also revealed the teachers valued communicative competence in general, but they still placed stress on the traditional teaching method with reading, translating, and vocabulary for the entrance examinations. In another study, Taguchi and Naganuma (2006) also discovered that students claimed that they had little time for English speaking in high schools. One college student, reflecting back on high school English

classes, said, “I do not recall we had any conversation in English...We did not do any speaking” (Taguchi & Naganuma, 2006, p. 62).

Despite the circumstance described above, the change to include communicative skills in entrance exams is slowly occurring (Cornwell, Simon-Maeda, & Churchill, 2007). MEXT started to conduct a listening test for the University Entrance Central Examination in 2006. MEXT also encourages high schools to evaluate English abilities of prospective students with the results of external examinations as well as entrance examinations (MEXT, 2002).

IMPLICATIONS

After revisiting the concept of communicative competence and of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and depicting the present situation of English language education within the MEXT framework, it is now essential to consider how Japanese English teachers can implement more communicative skills in their classrooms. This discussion consists of three sections. First, reflecting on the model of communicative competence (i.e., Canale & Swain, 1980, Canale, 1983), this section evaluates the contribution of the model to the Japanese context. Next, pedagogical suggestions are offered for the teachers. The third section addresses arguments on aspects of culture.

Judging from the Perspective of Communicative Competence

This section embraces four elements of the communicative competence described earlier: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. It offers points for Japanese English teachers to become aware of the four features.

Grammatical Competence

Japanese English education has focused on the grammar-translation method

(Butler, 2007; Mantero & Iwai, 2005). Teachers explain how an English sentence can be structured, and students read a passage sentence by sentence and translate it from English to Japanese by using grammatical knowledge. Students break a sentence down and/or use their morphological knowledge to guess meaning of an unfamiliar word. Since the grammar-translation method is more teacher-centered and focused on linguistics, it doesn't seem to be an effective way to teach students communicative competence or develop their communication skills. Recalling a high school English learning experience, one Japanese university student made the comment: "When I was in high school, emphasis was placed on accurate and precise translation of each sentence..." (Taguchi & Naganuma, 2006, p. 64).

Nevertheless, students can benefit from learning English with grammar-based approach because most of the time they get directions from Japanese English teachers who can clearly explain why English sentences are structured as they are and can anticipate what common mistakes students may make (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). In the Japanese context, English is not used outside of schools, and students have fewer opportunities to use, hear, and see English, unlike students who learn English in English speaking countries, such as the United States. In this context, it is challenging for Japanese students to make phrases or sentences without understanding basic English grammar knowledge. Therefore, grammatical competence needs to be taught in order to facilitate their communication skills (Shumin, 2002). Indeed, Savignon (1972) discovered that teaching grammar in a more situated context assisted students to improve their communication skills.

Sociolinguistic Competence

As advocated in the previous section, learning linguistic knowledge is not enough to develop communicative competence. Sociolinguistic competence focuses on appropriateness of the language use in different situations. Students need to consider the appropriateness of language in different situations. For example, formal and informal settings and relationships to

others influence speakers and how they communicate. Ordering a drink at a restaurant and asking one's mother for a drink at home have different degrees of formality. The former would be "I would like a coffee." or "May I have a cup of coffee?" whereas the latter would be "Mom, I want a coffee." or "Give me a drink!" Nakamura (1999, p. 99) asserts that "students are required to perform appropriately with spoken English in each context." This notion is one of the indispensable factors in speaking, for not only are they encouraged to learn speaking proficiency per se but they are also supposed to understand how to appropriately communicate in a variety of contexts.

Discourse Competence

As the third element of communicative competence, discourse competence should also be included to improve students' English communication skills. Students have to understand intentions of people speaking to them. What does it mean when one says, "It's cold here, isn't it?" Meanings of this particular sentence can vary, depending on the context. The following dialogues illustrate some examples of different situations:

Example 1

A: It's cold here, isn't it?
B: Let's go to a coffee shop.
A: That's a good idea.

Example 2

A: It's cold here, isn't it?
B: Let me close the window.
A: Thank you.

Example 3

A: It's cold here, isn't it?
B: This refrigerator does a good job.
A: I love it.

Example 1 shows that person A implies that it is cold outside, so he wants to go to a cafe to get something hot to drink. Person B, understanding the connotation without any specific details, responds to person A and suggests directing to a coffee shop to get drinks. However, in example 2, which has the same words from person A, person B interacts differently. Person B understands that it is cold in a room, and person A indirectly asks for a window to be closed. Further, example 3 demonstrates that person A is in a store to buy a refrigerator and is checking the temperature inside. Person B, a seller, recommends that particular refrigerator to person A. As the examples above indicate, there are several ways to interpret messages of the speaker, depending on the context.

Halliday and Hassan (1976) discussed the importance of cohesion and coherence. Cohesion involves the surface linguistic knowledge of the texts, whereas coherence deals with interpreting the meaning behind the texts (Kern, 2000; Martin, 2001; Stubbs, 2001). “A very small pink cow ate a big wooden chair yesterday” is grammatically correct, yet it does not make sense. Also, a phrase or sentence can entail different meanings in various settings. Coherence is a key component to proper dialogue. Students need to understand what their partners mean in each situation and reply appropriately by thinking and using their experiences and background knowledge. This may avoid students having a misunderstanding during the conversation.

Furthermore, the concept of Discourse seems to be a key element for discourse competence. Kramsch (1998, p. 127) explains that Discourse, with a capital D, includes “ways of speaking, reading and writing” and “behaving, interacting, thinking, valuing, that are characteristic of specific discourse communities.” Gee (1999) states that Discourse occurs when others recognize people by putting language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together. From this perspective, communication is viewed as a dynamic process. Addressing a sentence correctly does not simply indicate delivering a message. Rather, conversation and communication with people have a wider perspective. Students are encouraged to foster this notion, which will assist them in understanding that perfect linguistic

performance is only a part of successful speaking proficiency.

Strategic Competence

Within the three aspects of communicative competence, strategic competence needs to be developed among Japanese students. It indicates both verbal and non-verbal language to support communicators' insufficient abilities. Nonverbal behaviors, including gestures and facial expressions, are of use in understanding conversation (Brown, 2000). Even when a listener does not completely understand a speaker's words or sentences, physical expressions can assist conveying thoughts. Is a person talking about something serious, happy, or sad? What does his gesture indicate? Jenkins and Parra (2003) point out that speakers with active kinesic performance were rated better by evaluators than those who were with plain physical expressions. This implies that communication with non-verbal elements can convey speakers' intentions better than without them. Putting stress on a particular word in a sentence can be also useful to listeners in understanding what a speaker's main point is. The same sentence with a stress on a different word would imply a different intention of the speaker.

Moreover, Sueyoshi and Hardison (2005) conducted a study regarding the effectiveness of body language on English listening among Asian students, including Koreans and Japanese. The study compared listening comprehension abilities of the participants from an English lecture among three groups: one with audiovisual with face and gestures, one with audiovisual with face only, one with audio only. It was found that the subjects in groups of audiovisual with face and gestures and of audiovisual with face demonstrated higher levels of listening comprehension than the other group. The authors concluded the significant contribution of kinesics, such as gesture and facial cues, to listening comprehension. As studies showed, verbal and nonverbal elements are encouraged to be included in teaching communicative skills so that students clearly deliver their messages.

Teacher's Dimension

Teachers are the keys to improving students' communication skills, especially when students are engaged in tasks. Through working on tasks, students are effectively challenged, which results in enhancement of their English language skills. Vygotsky (1978) affirms the importance of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p.86). Teachers know their students' present levels, set appropriate goals, provide tasks that bring out students' abilities with assistance of mentors, advanced peers, or themselves, and evaluate outcomes through these tasks.

Moreover, it is highly recommended to teach students how to communicate with others in English in varied contexts. Thus, setting tasks for conversations in authentic situations in a classroom is valuable. Some recommended activities are role play, group discussion, and interviews. In role play, students have opportunities to speak as different characters. This motivates them to be engaged in communication. They can also practice discourse and strategic competence, such as what words to stress, where to pause, how to make eye contact, and what gestures to use. This activity is useful since it can be similar to situations outside of the classroom (Crookall & Oxford, 1990). In group discussion, students are asked to express their opinions on a certain topic. In this process, they need to research the subject and support their argument (Green, Christopher, & Lam, 2002). They also need to interact with others in English. Another suggested activity to facilitate students' communicative abilities is interviewing. Topics and interviewees may vary, depending on purposes for practices. Students may be engaged in developing interview questions, rehearsing, and interacting with interviewees. The students have opportunities to exchange dialogues in meaningful ways. These pedagogical activities described in this section assist students' communicative competence.

Not only are authentic tasks effective for students, but integrated tasks are

also important. Since language education is no longer viewed as separating reading, writing, speaking, and listening from the point of the balanced literacy, students are encouraged to learn more effectively with tasks including diverse language skills. Individual communication skills should not be taught in isolation. Students benefit from combined tasks as these foster their communication skills as well as other elements in integrated language arts literacy events.

Another argument is the significance of teacher training. Lamie's (2000) study with high school English teachers in Japan revealed insufficient opportunities of professional development. In order for the teachers to equip effective pedagogy for communicative competence within the framework of the MEXT guidelines, it is advisable to deepen knowledge on methodologies and master useful instruction. Hiramatsu (2005) calls for more opportunities, such as seminars and workshops, for the teachers to reflect on their instruction and develop knowledge and professional and effective CLT approaches.

Cultural Dimension

Many students learn English in the Japanese setting, which does not allow them to be exposed to an English-speaking world in their daily lives. The way they think, behave, and communicate is heavily influenced by their Japanese education, which can result in some specific difficulties. For example, in the Japanese culture, people value harmony with others and have respect for the elderly. When teachers ask students to demonstrate their communicative performance, students hesitate to break the silence of an entire classroom. There is a Japanese saying, 'Silence is gold'; silence is valuable in the Japanese culture. Out of respect for peers, oral performance in front of the class requires an enormous effort by the students to overcome this conflict.

Additionally, respecting older people is a traditional principle in the Japanese culture. Students' veneration for teachers implies keeping quiet, while looking up to teachers in another culture -- the United States, for

example-- does not necessarily mean remaining silent. In Japanese schools, students bow to their teachers at the beginning and end of each class to show their respect. By living in such a culture and learning other subjects with this concept, it is challenging for Japanese students to adapt themselves to active conversational interactions, especially when they only happen in English class.

Another aspect of Japanese culture is that people interact with one another in the high context. Opposed to this framework, Hall explains that the Western culture is based on the low context. Hall (1981, p. 69) compares the former as “one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person” to the latter as the one in which “mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.” In other words, Japanese people as listeners infer speakers’ real intentions with a limited amount of oral utterance or their non-verbal behaviors. The Japanese word, *ishin-denshin*, thought transference or tacit understanding, demonstrates this unique communication style. Conversation in the Japanese language is conducted with this format. People guess and interpret what speakers mean “based not only on what has been said but also on what has not been said” (Takanashi, 2004, p. 9). In the Japanese culture, in which cooperation with others, respectful behavior, and implicit communication are highly considered as virtues, English teachers experience difficulty with cultivating their students’ conversational skills in English and encouraging them to use English in the classroom. In this context, teachers need to foster students’ cultural awareness along with their language skills. Understanding cultural differences and teaching these elements will help students learn English from a wider perspective (Ike, 1995).

CONCLUSION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an effective approach to develop communication skills in meaningful contexts. As the Canale and Swain (1980) model of communicative competence suggests, it is important

to consider embracing all components of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategies competence so that Japanese students can develop their authentic communicative competence in English. Teachers are encouraged to view English language teaching in terms of the balanced literacy, not focusing on individual speaking skills in isolation but putting other language components together with an effective interaction with ALTs. Understanding the Japanese cultural characteristics and encouraging students to practice orally in more realistic settings will facilitate students to improve their English. It is significant to consider Japanese-English is one of many varieties of Englishes and how that particular English can be effectively improved in the Japanese context. These elements would promote the students to develop their English communicative competence in the Japanese setting and help them become Japanese citizens as international individuals in a global community.

THE AUTHOR

Yuko Iwai has recently received her Ph.D. from The University of Southern Mississippi, USA. Her research interests include English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL), teacher education, literacy, reading, and educational policies. She has published several articles on those areas.

Email: yuko.iwai@usm.edu

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