Creating a New Discourse Community among Japanese Teachers of English

--- *A Reflection on Japanese Teachers of English as Language Learners* ---

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「英語が使える日本人」の育成には、英語教員自身が英語を道具として使うコミュニティーを形成することが重要である。 1987 年に導入された JET(Japan Exchange and Teaching)プログラムもその環境整備の一環であった。しかし、インターネット等のＩＴ環境と同様、その活用状況は学校・教員により様々である。本稿では、日本人英語教員が英語を使うコミュニティーを形成することの必要性とその方策について、平成 16 年度「コーディネーター育成講座（英語コミュニケーション能力育成）」受講者の声を参考にしながら論じる。

Abstract

To develop "Japanese with English Abilities" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2003), it is imperative for Japanese English teachers themselves to form a discourse community where English is used as a common language. The JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) program, which was initiated in 1987, was part of the government's efforts to help establish such infrastructure. However, both the JET program and the more recent contribution of IT (Information Technology) are being utilized to varying degrees by individual schools and teachers. This article, drawing upon sociocultural perspectives and a case study of a teacher- training seminar, explores ways to develop an English-speaking community among Japanese teachers of English. It concludes by arguing for discourse awareness, a discourse-based syllabus for teacher seminars, and the Education Center English Web Page.

Background

Educational Policies

There has been a strong need --- primarily from the standpoint of the national interest --- for Japanese people to participate in a global discourse community where English is used as a tool for communication. However, despite the officially advocated objective of nurturing communication ability among students, many Japanese people, after ten years of school education (from junior high school to university), have great difficulty in communicating in English.

In an effort to respond to this long-standing criticism, the Japanese government has administered several policy changes during the past few years. First, it introduced new Courses of Study for English in 2002 (for junior high schools) and in 2003 (for senior high schools). Second, it required teachers to adopt a four-perspective assessment system which incorporated authentic assessment. Thirdly, it issued statements that clarified specific attainment goals, both for students and teachers, in terms of scores on the TOEFL, TOEIC, and STEP (Society for Testing English Proficiency) tests. In the *Action Plan* to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities" (2003), for example, the goal of senior high school graduates is set at the pre-second level on the STEP test, while teachers are expected to have an English proficiency of at least 550 on the TOEFL and 730 on the TOEIC tests. Many municipalities throughout Japan (including Kanagawa Prefecture) have launched large-scale, compulsory English teachers' seminars based on this *Action Plan.*

Dilemma and the Underlying Issue

Although being fully aware of the need to develop communicative competence in their students, Japanese English teachers at the junior and senior high school level are caught in the entrance-examination-vs.-communication dilemma. Wada (2003), based on his survey of Japanese high school teachers in Chiba Prefecture, reports that teachers at vocational schools attend more in-service seminars and express more interest in communicative methods than their counterparts at college preparatory high schools. Wada explains that this is because vocational school teachers are less constrained by the grammar-translation methods, which tie in well with college entrance examinations.

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This superficial dichotomy, however, conceals a more significant problem behind the present teaching practices. Regardless of the level of English being taught, be it examination English or daily conversation, the English taught in class is rarely "recycled" or used in meaningful communication, and the students' output does not develop beyond the sentence level. In either kind of school, English is not yet used by students or by teachers as a tool for exchanging thoughts and feelings. The issue, therefore, is not of grammar vs. communication but of teaching English as an object of study vs. teaching it as discourse --- namely, as *language in use*.

Diversifying Students and
the Need for Sociocultural Perspectives

Traditionally, psycholinguistics has greatly influenced language education. With all the shades of difference in theories, the main target of inquiry of psycholinguistic SLA (Second Language Acquisition) is the learner's brain --- a "black box" which processes information through input, output, and interaction. "*How language is acquired or learned*" is the researchers' primary concern. The assumption here is that the analysis of first and second language acquisition will lead to more efficient language teaching and learning.

However, despite the many valuable findings applicable to classroom teaching --- negotiation of meaning, focus on form, schemata, tasks, etc. --- teachers are often at a loss as to how to apply these insights to their students. In the classroom, the students' learning is strongly governed by diverse interests, personal backgrounds, social influence, identity, and motives. Thus, there has been an emergence of sociocultural SLA research, which regards language learning as socialization, or participation in a new discourse community (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Duff, 2003). It is participation in this community which motivates language learners.

Larsen-Freeman (2002), comparing both psycholinguistic and sociolcultural SLA perspectives (summarized in Table 1), proposes a larger framework to encompass both stances. She argues that language is a complex system which has both "rigidity" (unchangeable aspects) and "flexibility" (changeable aspects) and therefore both perspectives are important in language learning and teaching.

While there may be much to be desired in the way basic linguistic components (phonology, syntax, grammar, etc.) are being taught in Japan, preparing students to participate in a global discourse community needs to be addressed urgently. Teachers must change their traditional

view of language learning, and must teach --- and learn for themselves --- English not only as "*acquisition of grammatical structures*" or "*mastery of native speaker performance*" but also for "*participating in a new discourse community*" or "*expanding a repertoire of communicative contexts and discourse patterns.*" Because teachers' behavior has a powerful influence on students' motivation (Dörnyei, 2001), they must first demonstrate that English is a tool for communication and that it is fun and worthwhile to exchange thoughts and feelings in English.

Table 1: *Comparison of Views of Language Learning between Psycholinguistic and Sociocultural SLA* (summarized from Larsen-Freeman, 2002)

	Psycholinguistic SLA (Acquisition)	Sociocultural SLA (Participation)
View of language	a system to be acquired	a process in which to be engaged
View of grammar	a set of generative rules to be mastered	a temporal phenomenon which is renegotiated in speech
View of language learning	acquisition of grammatical structures	expansion of a repertoire of communicative contexts
Criteria for success	mastery of native speaker performance	participation in a certain community (there is no point at which it could be said that the learning of a language is complete)

Teacher Seminars as a Discourse Community

Kanagawa Education Center 2004 Coordinator Seminar

In-service teacher training seminars serve as a great opportunity for creating an English-speaking community among Japanese teachers of English (JTEs). The "2004 Foreign Language Education Coordinator Seminar," one of the English teacher seminars offered by Kanagawa Prefectural Education Center, was an endeavor to provide such a platform for the participants. Seven junior high school teachers and 15 senior high school teachers, most of whom had around 10 years of teaching experience, were enrolled in the 10-day seminar (spread over several months, from May to November). The seminar was designed to train participants to become leaders in promoting English education in their respective schools or school districts in

Kanagawa Prefecture by 1) developing communicative competence in English, 2) acquiring knowledge on methodology, and 3) engaging in action research projects.

They were encouraged to use English as much as possible throughout the seminar, and were required to submit five assignments in English. The seminar included lectures by English education specialists, and presentation tutorials at a famous Japanese electrical manufacturer, as well as an overnight workshop during the summer, where they worked in teams on a video-making project and a debate tournament. On the ninth day, they gave poster presentations on their action research projects. The seminar offered a variety of situations where the participants engaged in different types of both spoken and written discourse. They were also encouraged to proofread their assignments with the help of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) at their schools.

Motivation as a Central Issue (Preliminary Report)

Prior to the seminar, the participants were asked in a written survey to "list five problems they had while teaching English." Judging from their reports, the problems can be categorized into four major areas (Table 2):

A. Problems arising from students' language learning aptitude

B. Problems arising from the teacher's lack of knowledge or skill

C. Problems regarding motivation

D. Problems regarding the teaching environment

As can be seen from the table, the problems further down the list are more closely connected with "sociocultural" issues. Problems in categories C and D are less concerned with communicative competence or methodologies than motives, values, culture, social influences, and identity. The frequency of mention for "motivation, discipline (14)," and "unwillingness to speak (12)" indicates the gravity of the issue of motivation in the participants' English classrooms.

It is also important to notice that problems in categories A and B must be considered in conjunction with those in categories C and D. For instance, "knowledge on communicative teaching (9)" will be of little use if the students are not motivated to study English.

Thus, teachers need to be constantly reminded that teaching English is more about creating an English-learning environment, or a new discourse community, and less about imparting abstract rules to students. The teachers, therefore, should establish a discourse community into which they can invite their students.

Table 2: *Classification of Problems in Japanese Junior and Senior High School English Classes*

Psycholinguistic Level
(Acquisition, learning, skills, etc.)

A. Student Aptitude
- low retention rates of what has been taught (2)
- lack of basic skills / knowledge (1)
- lack of knowledge of learning strategies (1)

B. Teacher's Lack of Knowledge or Skill
- knowledge of communicative teaching (9)
- confidence in oral communication (7)
- skill in teaching reading (7)
- skill in teaching grammar (6)
- skill in teaching vocabulary (5)
- skill in teaching writing (3)
- command of English articles, noun countability, synonyms (3)
- assessment methods (2)
- research skills (1)
- syllabus design (1)
- skill in teaching debate (1)
- skill in using newspapers /magazines (1)
- skill in teaching without translation (1)
- skill in team-teaching (1)
- skill in using IT (1)

C. Motivation
- motivation, discipline (14)
- unwillingness to speak (12)
- students' lack of confidence (2)
- students' reluctance to study at home (1)
- students' reluctance to stand out (1)

D. Teaching Environment
- multi-leveled classes (9)
- lack of preparation time (7)
- lack of opportunity to share ideas with other teachers (4)
- large class size (3)
- (difficult) entrance exams (3)
- lack of class hours (1)
- disparity between the students' level and that of the textbook (1)
- difference in information between the ALT and the textbooks (1)
- use of Japanese in class (1)

Sociocultural Level (motives, values, culture, social influence, identity, etc.)

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate the number of teachers who mentioned this problem.

Discourse Community and Conflicting Motives

Having argued that teachers need to establish a new discourse community for their students to join, there is one important issue to be considered. Just as every student has a different set of beliefs, values, and motives in learning English, so do individual teachers in teaching it. If the discourse community that the teachers established did not reflect the students' beliefs or values, the students would not be motivated to participate in it. The community must be one which students wish to emulate and one that represents the common interests of both teachers and students.

Schumann (1997), based on the work of Scherer (1984), argues that "people's action in the world are guided by their stimulus appraisals" and that "they generally approach that which they appraise positively and avoid agents, objects, and events that they evaluate negatively" (p.32). In other words, people's motivation is controlled by how they appraise the stimuli.

According to Schumann, stimulus appraisals control human learning and occur in five phases:

1. Novelty (degree of unexpectedness)
2. Pleasantness (whether the stimulus is attractive)
3. Goal/Need significance (whether the stimulus is helpful in satisfying needs or achieving goals)
4. Coping potential (manageability of the task)
5. Self- and social image (whether the event is compatible with social norms)

If teachers can offer an invitation to a community which elicits students' high appraisal ratings on the above five aspects, it may lead to a solution of the motivation problems that many teachers share.

Binding Force for the Seminar Community (Post-seminar Report)

Despite differences in motives and preferences, the participants in the 2004 Coordinator Seminar replied almost in unison that meeting and sharing ideas with other teachers was one of the most useful elements of the seminar. In response to the question "What did you find most useful (about the seminar)?" many of the respondents mentioned "getting acquainted with other teachers," describing their colleagues as follows:

・friendly, cooperative and having a sense of responsibility
・teaching English not just to teach knowledge
・working hard in difficult situations
・enthusiastic and always trying to create new ways of teaching
・talented and dedicated

Although all of the lectures had high ratings, specific seminar contents that were mentioned as especially useful included debate, presentation tutorials, the action research workshop, poster presentations, pronunciation practice, and TOEIC tests.

These responses seem to suggest that mutual respect among group members and a sense of engaging in some kind of skill training together can be regarded as a binding force for the seminar community.

Possible Breakthroughs
Discourse Awareness, Discourse Syllabus, and the Education Center English Web Page

Throughout the year, the authors of this paper have been involved, or rather "learned together," in the Coordinator Seminar both as participants and observers. Because the participant teachers in this seminar are would-be leaders, they may not represent the English teacher population in Japan as a whole, or even that of Kanagawa Prefecture. However, their voices may well reflect those of other Japanese teachers who strive to improve English education in Japan. Based on our review of the seminar reports, direct talks with the participants, and on their self-reflections on their own weak points, several hints emerge for creating an "English-using discourse community" among Japanese teachers of English.

Discourse Awareness on the Part of the Teachers

For teachers who received English education in Japan, learning English tends to mean mastering vocabulary, syntax, and colloquialisms. The problem with this framework is the assumption that English is a body of knowledge to learn. However, the younger generation needs to be able to use English as a tool for global communication. For communicative purposes, a variety of discourse is no less important than a variety of vocabulary or syntax. Reiterating the importance of "exposure to language" in language learning, Willis (1996) exemplifies sources of different discourse types (Table 3).

Table 3: *Sources of Different Types of Discourse*

Sources of Spoken Language	
Face to face	Recorded
(out of class) social interactions, projects, visits, interviews	TV, radio, film, video, audio-songs, cassettes, CDs (Language teaching materials)
(in class) teacher, student, visitors	audio, video, CD-Rom

Sources of Written Language	
Unpublished	Published
(Personal) letters, e-mail	books, stories, magazines, computer games, newspapers, brochures, adverts
(Word/Study) Internet, notices, reports	(Language Teaching Materials) textbooks, readers, computer programmes (CALL)

(Adapted from Willis, 1996, p.66)

Awareness of the variety of discourse types and willingness to explore different ones will enable teachers to gain confidence in, and have access to, a variety of language use situations. Teachers whose English comes from various sources are better equipped to provide students with exposure to authentic discourse.

Discourse-based Syllabus Design for Teacher Seminars

The perfectionism embedded in the traditional framework of language learning can become a major hindrance in creating the proposed discourse community. It is not only impossible but also inappropriate to try to carry on a casual conversation with the precision applied to answering grammar questions on TOEFL tests. Setting guidelines as to the level of accuracy or fluency for different discourse types will help overcome perfectionist inhibitions. Table 4 shows a list of discourse types that a Japanese teacher of English might encounter and example guidelines for accuracy / fluency focus.

Table 4: *Different Discourse Types for Teachers with Accuracy / Fluency Guidelines*

	Discourse Types	A	F
S	Classroom English (directives)	*	
P	Telling students personal stories /anecdotes		*
O	Small talk with ALTs/students		*
K	Discussion/Debate at teacher seminars		*
E	Presentation at seminars/conferences		*
N	Discussing Lesson plans with ALTs	*	*
W	E-mail		*
R	Writing up action research reports	*	
I	Formal letters, forms, and documents	*	
T	Comments on students' writings	*	
T	Course syllabuses, student handouts	*	
E	Exams, assignments, employment contracts	*	
N	TOEFL essay writing	*	*

Note:　A = Accuracy　　F = Fluency
　　　　Asterisks (*) indicate the relative focus

The integration of these types of discourse into the teacher seminar syllabus design will equip the participants to use different types of English in their professional lives. It will also promote information exchange between Japanese teachers and their native speaker colleagues. It should be noted however, that fluency training alone will not improve one's level of English. For areas where accuracy is required, a step-by-step approach must be applied so that the teacher can reach new heights of proficiency. In such an instance, a native speaker (or a web concordancer), as well as a good writing manual, can be an important source of information.

The Education Center English Web Page

According to data obtained by Kanagawa Prefectural Education Center, the percentage of prefectural education centers that have an English web page is still only 19 % (as of October, 2004). In the next few years, the situation will change for the better. Considering the amount of information on the Internet (Warschauer et al. 2000), it is important that Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) improve their awareness of IT. Therefore, the authors of this paper have created an English Web page blueprint, hoping that increased use of the Internet will result in greater interest among JTEs. The following is an overview of the current framework into which contents will be uploaded:

1. Classroom Material Downloads
2. Best Practice Reports
3. English Conversation for Teachers
4. Seminar Reports
5. News from the Center

The "Best Practice Reports" and "Seminar Reports" will be compiled from the Coordinator Seminar participants' successful lessons at school and their seminar reports. The above framework also derives from participants' opinions about what is needed for the Education Center English Web page. Their other requests included:

・classroom-tested lesson plans, activities, and materials
・up-to-date English expressions and usage tips
・information about methodology reference books
・sample English formats for report cards, notices, applications, letters of recommendation, etc.
・bulletin boards for teachers to exchange information
・information on elementary school English

The final Web Page design needs to wait for the skill of IT specialists, but it is hoped that collaboration between Japanese English teachers, web designers, and

native speakers can be formulated into a coherent and useful teaching and learning tool.

Conclusion ---*Discourse as Tacit Knowledge*

This paper has discussed sociocultural perspectives of language learning, arguing for the necessity of creating an English-speaking discourse community among Japanese teachers of English, and proposing possible breakthroughs for creating such a community. The underlying assumption is that language learning involves an exchange of discourse and that this knowledge about discourse is tacit by nature. Most knowledge of discourse is transferred through actual human communication, and even IT cannot completely transpose it. Therefore, language teachers should first acquire this tacit knowledge by forming a community where different types of discourse are used.

In her seminal book on knowledge management, Dixon (2000) mentions three major shifts of mindset necessary for effective knowledge transfer within an organization:

1. A shift from thinking of experts as the primary source of knowledge to thinking that everyone in work tasks has knowledge
2. A shift from thinking of knowledge as residing within individuals to thinking of knowledge as embedded in a community
3. A shift from thinking of knowledge as a stable commodity to thinking of knowledge as dynamic and ever-changing

These shifts coincide with the one from the "acquisition metaphor" to the "participation metaphor," where teachers and learners learn together by participating in a new discourse community.

Breaking an old habit is challenging, especially when many teachers suffer exhaustion and have discipline problems, paper work, club activities, and so on. However, a little change can make a big difference. For example, once Japanese teachers create reusable material in English, the ALTs can help JTEs in their classes and this will also allow collaboration for improvement. When created digitally in English, lesson plans, schedules, and handouts can be used repeatedly, saving a lot of preparation time for JTEs. Many research findings which normally circulate only in the academic arena can become accessible if the day-to-day discourse of teachers is shifted to English. Until Japanese English teachers see the need to instill strong communication skills in themselves as well as in their students, the old habits will persist.

As Yoshida (2002) points out, the need for Japanese citizens to interact with people from foreign countries is increasing both inside and outside of Japan. This need has further increased with the fast-paced globalization created by the Internet.

The English teacher's job in Japan has long been to impart linguistic knowledge to students. This must change. By creating an English-speaking (or rather multilingual) discourse community among themselves, Japanese teachers of English should be able to teach their students not only *what* to learn and *how* to learn it, but also the *why* of learning it, which the authors believe is the basic underpinning of all learning.

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