Wearing two pairs of shoes: language teaching in Japan

Keiko Sakui

Situated evaluation views learning as a phenomenon which occurs in socioculturally specific contexts (Bruce and Rubin 1992). Its proponents recognize two forms of curriculum: one is a documented version, which proposes idealized teaching practices across various teaching situations; and the other is a realized version of curriculum implementation in actual classrooms. This paper explores how communicative language teaching (CLT) is understood and implemented by Japanese secondary school English teachers. In order to understand the successes and failures of curriculum implementation, we need to examine it in real contexts. The longitudinally collected data suggest that teachers have difficulty in integrating CLT and form-based instruction, although documented instructional goals imply a smooth integration of the two. Teachers also report that implementation of CLT is not simple because of various situational constraints.

Introduction

Situated cognition views learning as a phenomenon which occurs in socially and culturally-situated contexts, rather than in abstract, idealized, and decontextualized learning environments (Lave and Wenger 1991). In the field of education, this movement has offered an alternative view of evaluation, known as situated evaluation (Bruce and Rubin 1992). Situated evaluation theorists recognize two forms of curriculum; one is a documented version, which prescribes idealized teaching practices across various teaching situations, and the other is a realized version, which emerges from curriculum implementation in actual classrooms.

Advocates of situated evaluation theory claim that various factors influence curriculum implementation, and need to be taken into consideration when assessing outcomes. Of particular importance is the investigation of teachers, who interpret and execute the curriculum. The need to investigate teacher practices and beliefs derives from the notion that teachers are not transparent entities who fulfil curriculum plans and goals as prescribed by their authors, but who filter, digest, and implement the curriculum depending upon their beliefs and environmental contexts (Freeman and Richards 1996; Woods 1996).

The current study attempts to provide an understanding of curriculum realization through an investigation from a situated evaluation perspective of the practices and beliefs of Japanese teachers of English implementing communicative language teaching (hereafter CLT).
Existing research suggests the implementation of CLT is a complicated issue, involving various factors such as teacher beliefs and contextual constraints (Li 1998; Sato and Kleinsasser 1999). This study explores two specific research questions:

1. How do teachers define CLT?
2. How have they implemented CLT in their classrooms?

The study

Participants

This is a partial report of a two-year longitudinal study investigating a group of Japanese junior and senior high school English teachers. These teachers belong to a self-initiated study group of 30 teachers which was formed to help develop their own pronunciation skills and teaching expertise. This type of self-initiated study group for teachers by teachers is a common practice in Japan (Shimahara 1998). Among the total of 30 such members, 14 teachers, 12 females, and 2 males volunteered to participate in the study. Their teaching experiences ranged from 6 to 29 years. Thirteen of them taught in public schools, and one in a private school.

In the Japanese educational system, the school curriculum is prescribed by the Ministry of Education through an official document—The Course of Study—and textbooks are approved by the same governing body. A somewhat parallel curriculum drives the entrance examinations, which are heavily grammar-oriented, and act as critical gatekeeping practices in Japan. Most of the junior high school teachers in this study assume great responsibility for preparing their students for high school examinations. Two out of three high school teachers in this study stated that they need to prepare their students for university entrance examinations. One teacher who prepares her students for direct entry into the job market faces the pressure of preparing students for non-curricular English tests such as the TOEIC, which are advantageous for students' employment prospects.

Research data and analysis

The data for this report derive mainly from three sources to ensure triangulation and validity (Creswell 1998). One source is interview data from twelve junior and senior high school teachers. Each interview lasted between half an hour to an hour and a half. All interviews were conducted in Japanese, transcribed, and then translated into English by the author. I also conducted year-long classroom observations of three teachers out of the twelve. I visited each teacher once a week, on average, and observed two to three class periods on each visit. Also, in order to select participants for ‘purposeful sampling’ (Patton 1990: 169), I conducted one-day observations of an additional four teachers to ensure my sample included participants whose school contexts, teaching, and life experiences varied.

In addition, I collected classroom artefacts such as handouts, quizzes, and tests. These data were analysed by asking participants to determine which activities were communicative and which non-communicative. These three sources of data were analysed following grounded theory procedures to identify recurring and salient themes (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Keiko Sakui
In this section, the government curriculum goals and their actual classroom implementation are examined so that we can gain insight into the congruencies and discrepancies between the idealized instructional goals and their realizations. Then possible explanations for the situated practices will be explored.

The Course of Study prescribed by the government

The Course of Study (Monbusho 1989) prescribed by the Ministry of Education states that English education should foster students’ abilities to comprehend and express basic English, as well as foster interest in foreign languages and cultures. General goals include fostering learner motivation as well as developing receptive and productive language abilities in the four skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Specific linguistic activities are further prescribed within these four skill areas.

The suggested instructional practices for listening for the 1st year of junior high school, for example, are 1) accurate meaningful understanding at the phrasal and sentence levels, 2) listening to questions, commands, requests, and suggestions, as well as responding appropriately, and 3) comprehending the gist of several statements. The curriculum further specifies that appropriate linguistic content should be incorporated into the activities in order for students to attain these skills. Thus the curriculum privileges fostering communication skills as a primary goal, with linguistic content such as grammar and vocabulary playing a subordinate role.

Teachers’ practices

The teachers’ situated meanings of CLT paint a different picture from the government statement when they are actually implemented in the classroom. In overall actual classroom teaching, grammar instruction was central, and far more foregrounded than CLT. The language of instruction and class management was Japanese. Teachers spent most of the class time involved in teacher-fronted grammar explanations, chorus reading, and vocabulary presentations. Students attended to teachers’ explanations, learnt to translate at the sentence level, read the textbook aloud in choral reading, copied vocabulary items in their notebooks, and engaged in sentence manipulation exercises. CLT activities, in which meanings are negotiated in English, seemed to play a much smaller role. Overall, in the observed class periods taught by Japanese teachers, if any time at all was spent on CLT it was a maximum of five minutes out of 50.

One exception to this pattern occurred when team-teaching was implemented. Ms. Imasaki described her team-teaching instructional practice:

> For example, we practised a telephone conversation the other day. We extracted the simple phrases like ‘This is xx’, ‘Can I speak to yy?’ We repeated them several times. Then the students practised it several times. Then they role-played and wrote them down on a piece of paper. They performed the role-play in front of the class. This is the pattern I follow every time.

This was a class Ms Imasaki team-taught once a week, and the goal of the class was oral communication. She stated that she could not have done
this activity in her other regular classes, when she taught solo. But in this particular class, she was a guest teacher who did not have to be concerned about teaching grammar, and also did not have to consider the continuity from one class to another. She could include CLT throughout the year because of the unique team-teaching situation.

This finding was consistent with my other classroom observations; class time with a solo Japanese teacher was allocated to teacher-fronted grammar lessons. CLT was mainly implemented through team-teaching, and in all instances I observed, this consisted of a Japanese and an English native-speaker pair. Team-teaching instruction was mainly carried out using English, adopting different communicative activities such as information-gap, game activities, question and answer role-plays, and dramas. In most of these activities, teachers initially presented the target grammar features. The communicative activities were designed so that students comprehended and produced target grammatical items correctly, usually at the sentence level, through oral interaction tasks. These activities mostly resembled audiolingual practices.

The allocation of time for instruction led by a solo Japanese teacher or a team-teaching pair varied depending on the school, but in general the former consumed considerably more time than the latter. For example, teachers team-taught every four classes at one school, and every eight classes at another school. These team-teaching arrangements were initiated not only by teachers, but also through negotiations between the municipal government and the administrative staff at each school. In other words, classroom teachers were not the only parties who decided upon time given to team-teaching. Rather, this teaching situation was handed down, and at times perceived as forced on them, by administrative bodies.

Several teachers reported that these two types of English instruction—grammar-teaching and CLT—posed a dilemma. While believing in the importance of CLT, they felt the need to primarily conduct teacher-fronted non-communicative activities. This has led to a dichotomous curriculum realization consisting of two distinct methodologies. Mr. Fujimoto reported:

At the moment, I think English teachers in Japan, especially in high schools, are forced to wear two pairs of shoes. One is for the entrance exam ... At the same time, we need to teach English for communication. I find it difficult. But for my wish, I think English is a means of communication. I would like to achieve it.

Ms. Omoto further expressed a similar concern:

So oral communication is for fun, and the other is for studying for the test. So students wonder why there is a class for communication ... but I hope they think English for entrance exams and for communication are not separate. Ultimately it is the same thing. So I want them to think that if language is not correctly communicated, it won't be understood.
This practice is understandable when so much emphasis is placed on preparing students for grammar-skewed entrance examinations, and relying on textbooks that focus on targeted grammatical features. This suggests that contrary to the teachers’ aspirations to incorporate CLT into their teaching, they cannot ignore the demand to prepare students for entrance examinations. In addition to this hurdle, there were several other reasons why CLT was not implemented as The Course of Study prescribes.

‘Difficult…’
‘In fact, I don’t know much about it.’

One influence directing their teaching practices is their interpretation of CLT. When asked to define CLT in their own words, teachers often said that it was a difficult task. Even though wording varied, however, the underlying meanings and themes among the teachers were similar. The overriding themes include, for example, that there has to be a need for communication, self-expression, exchanging opinions in English, understanding English utterances, not worrying about grammar, guessing from contexts, and general comprehension. Teachers reported that CLT applies to all four skills, with the exception of one teacher who stated that CLT applies to conversational skills only. According to these interpretations there is congruence between these teachers’ understandings and The Course of Study, that the goal of CLT is to exchange messages in English, with little attention paid to linguistic forms.

In order to explore their philosophies of language teaching, I asked how they would teach English if they could teach the language in a hypothetical ideal situation without any constraints. The teachers’ responses revealed some incongruities with the above definition. Most teachers expressed their belief that learners need to receive some type of grammar instruction before they attempt any communicative tasks, as Ms. Hanada expressed:

Basic points. Communicative or oral communication, that’s what they say. But before they reach to a certain point, they need to know the basic sentences and expressions. In order to acquire them … they should be able to read and write. Then they can speak, but before speaking, they should be able to understand.

Mr. Fujimoto revealed his contradicting belief during the interview session:

Well, that’s a tough question. I will try to teach it in English as much as possible [in the ideal teaching situation]. We can have a native speaker, half the time, or most of the time. Well, difficult … Well, but I wonder about grammar … I said everything will be taught in English, but I don’t have confidence yet. Maybe I will start teaching grammar … So the grammar explanation will be conducted in Japanese at the beginning of the class.

Several teachers claimed that the pursuit of correctness could bridge the need to study for entrance exams, and also develop communication
skills. While these teachers’ earlier interviews suggested that they were not concerned with students making mistakes when they were communicating, these excerpts suggest a contradiction, since they reasoned that correctness was a bridge between form-focused instruction and CLT.

The interviews further revealed that most teachers thought they needed to teach grammar before giving learners opportunities to use and apply the target linguistic forms in communicative tasks. These data show that teachers’ understanding of CLT is more semantic than conceptual. In defining CLT, they reported lists of features which included exchanging messages and self-expression, but their definitions lacked the coherence of a methodology incorporating goals, planning, and tasks. In contrast, their philosophy of their teaching revealed a conceptual schema in which grammar instruction serves to build knowledge about language, and CLT consisted primarily of fluency building and grammar manipulation activities.

Social constraints on CLT

In addition to the pressures for entrance examination preparation and their interpretation of CLT, there are several additional reasons why CLT was not implemented. One factor was the teachers’ lack of confidence in conducting CLT. One teacher expressed a lack of confidence by saying that if she uses pair work or group work, the students may revert to conversing in Japanese. She said that she did not want to deal with classroom management issues while experimenting with different types of communicative activities. Therefore, she tended to allocate her time to listening exercises. This coincided with my observation that students were much easier to manage when performing pencil-and-paper exercises. When CLT was being implemented, however, classroom management and the orchestration of activities were more complex. Teachers needed to ensure that students understood the activity procedures, followed instructions, and successfully performed the activity.

Another claim was that CLT required considerable time. Teachers were in constant demand in dealing with many administrative and non-academic responsibilities. Ms. Kawamoto says:

> At least 3 or 4 times a week, we have meetings after school … I coach badminton club with another teacher so I attend student practice sometimes. I leave school around 7:00 but occasionally I stay until 10:00.

In general, teachers reported spending 50 to 60% of their time and energy for English instruction and preparation. Meetings, consulting with students about personal issues, homeroom duties, and so on, consumed the remaining time.

In addition, one teacher said preparation for team-teaching with a native-speaking teacher was very time consuming. This includes discussing different activities and preparing communicative activity materials, which were rarely recycled. CLT activities also consumed considerable class time when implemented. Another time constraint was that teachers
were expected to progress through the curriculum at a very rigid pace. At one school I observed that the teacher fell behind in her preparation for the mid-term and final term tests, so as exam time neared, the Japanese teacher used some of the team-teaching class periods for grammar lessons, and asked the native-speaker teacher not to attend these classes.

Discussion and conclusion

The participants in this study are enthusiastic and serious language teachers who are willing to devote considerable private time to become better teachers. All of the teachers claimed that they incorporate CLT to some degree, depending on their teaching environments. Situated evaluation theorists consider it axiomatic that curriculum implementation is not uniformly realized across various teaching situations. A documented curriculum takes unique shapes and colours as each classroom teacher introduces it into their own school. Each site of implementation needs to be extensively examined in order to gain a full understanding of how the curriculum is actually realized. The purpose of situated evaluation is not only to identify areas requiring improvement, but also to allow us to appreciate the complexity of the whole system through detailed descriptions. From this perspective, this study hopes to serve to encourage further examination of every educational institutional component, and all of the participants involved.

We see that the integration of grammar instruction and CLT is a serious challenge for these teachers. Some teachers are concerned that students only perceive CLT as fun, with few educational benefits, whereas grammar-focused English instruction is serious test-taking preparation. Other teachers are worried that even when students recognize the importance of communicative activities, they think that these activities and regular English instruction are very separate in nature. This dichotomous perception is amplified by team-teaching practices and solo-teaching styles. Having two teachers present, especially if one is a native speaker, makes CLT more salient both for teachers and students. It enables teachers to create an alternative environment, departing from their regular English instruction.

A survey study of Japanese university students who had gone through the Japanese secondary educational system provides some supportive evidence for the existence of dichotomous perceptions among students (Sakui and Gaies 1999). Although written goals emphasize the importance of CLT, in reality it loses its prominence as a ‘side-show’ (Howatt 1984: 279). Teachers in this study struggled to integrate and interweave these two aspects of teaching as smoothly as the documented instructional goals prescribe.

The difficulty in implementing CLT arises from different challenges deriving from both internal and social factors. One internal factor is the discrepancy between the teachers’ definition of CLT and the situated understanding of CLT. Teachers’ understandings of CLT includes some elements of a weak version of CLT (Howatt 1984), because a weak version proposes that linguistic structures should be integrated while communicative activities are performed. However, the teachers’ practices
were much closer to audiolingualism, in that the goal was the correct production of sentences.

Moreover teachers’ teaching practices are often driven and influenced by social factors. These factors encourage them to practise what they believe at one time, and to hinder them at other times.

In a way, working with another colleague forces teachers to transfer their beliefs of CLT into action. However, teachers frequently have to face constraining factors when implementing CLT. These external factors include grammar-oriented entrance examinations, time constraints, classroom management problems, and rigid curriculum schedules. Other studies have suggested similar difficulties (Li 1998; Sato and Kleinsasser 1999). These collective results suggest a growing call—at least in some teaching contexts—for the recognition of the complexity of CLT implementation, which is often overlooked in language pedagogy discussions.

This study has implications for teacher development and educational reform. Whether to interpret the construction of parallel goals derived from CLT and form-based instruction as a cause for alarm or a promising sign is a debatable question. On the one hand, it may be preferable for teachers to gain a thorough understanding of CLT at both instructional and conceptual levels before they can implement it effectively in their teaching contexts. On the other hand, educational reform is, more often than we imagine, driven by external factors handed down to teachers, rather than by internal factors such as changes in teachers’ beliefs.

As Kumaravadivelu (2001) claims, ‘Teacher educators function as external change agents whose job is not so much to change the teachers directly but to create the conditions necessary for change’ (p. 555). From this perspective, the external pressures of teaching language communicatively through team-teaching challenged the teachers in the current study to question their practices and forced them to address new challenges in their work place. Teacher education, which encourages reflective practices, can foster the clarification of teachers’ developing pedagogical theories and goals, which in turn will guide their navigation through new instructional environments.

Final version received February 2003

Note
1 All names are pseudonyms.

References


The author

Keiko Sakui is a language adviser at the English Self-Access Centre at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, where she is also a doctoral candidate in language teaching and learning. Her research interests include learner beliefs, teacher beliefs and practices, and academic writing.

Email: ksakui@hotmail.com