

Practical Suggestions for Secondary School Students to Improve Their Communicative Competence in English

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give practical suggestions to students in secondary schools in Japan as to the improvement of their communicative competence. I will first examine the seven characteristics of communication which are related to the four areas of communicative competence. Then I will discuss developing communicative competence inside as well as outside class. Finally, I will argue specific opportunities where students can use English in order to improve their communicative competence.

1. Communicative competence and its significance

Before I discuss communicative competence, it might be useful to look at what communication is. It is understood that there are numberless definitions of communication, but here communication is examined through the seven characteristics proposed by Canale (1983, pp. 3-4) as follows:

- (1) Communication is a form of social interaction.
- (2) Communication involves unpredictability and creativity in form and message.
- (3) Communication takes place in discourse and sociocultural contexts.
- (4) Communication is carried out under psychological and other conditions such as memory constraints and fatigue.
- (5) Communication always has a purpose.
- (6) Communication involves authentic language.
- (7) Communication is judged as successful or not on actual outcomes.

Though each one of us has his or her own definition of communication, I claim that these seven characteristics really elucidate what communication is and that they help teachers who focus on communicative activities in class. If communicative activities lack some of the seven elements, those communicative activities should be reconsidered and enriched.

Then how about communicative competence? Again I resort to its theoretical framework which Canale (1983, p. 6) suggests: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. It can be said that the seven characteristics of communication listed above and the four areas of communicative competence are naturally and closely related to each other. For example, (1) and (3) with the sociolinguistic competence, (3) with the discourse competence and (6) with grammatical competence, etc..

It is of interest to note what MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) say about communicative competence. There is a definition of communicative competence by the Promotion Conference of Communication Education (2011) referred by MEXT. The Conference was held on August 28, 2011 to discuss the cultivation of general communicative competence of children, and the definition is not confined to language education as in the case of Canale. An English translation of the definition of communicative competence by the Promotion Conference of Communication Education may go as follows:

“An ability, in a group of people with varied sense of values and backgrounds, to deepen mutual relationship, to create human relationship and team work sympathizing with other people, to share information through dialogues, to reach mutual agreement, and to solve problems, which are new or do not have ‘correct’ answers, through thinking deeply by oneself as well as together.” (Translation is mine.)

Then on August 26, 2016, the Division of Curriculum of the Area of Elementary and Secondary Education of the Central Council for Education (MEXT, 2016, p. 252) issued the Report of the Summary of the Deliberation So Far Oriented to the Next Course of Study, etc. with the following words:

“Based on the definition given by the Promotion Conference of Communication Education (2011), taking into consideration special features in foreign language education, the working group understands that communicative competence in foreign languages is an ability to understand and communicate information and ideas properly depending on the purposes, situations, circumstances, etc. of communication while deepening the understanding of foreign languages and cultures behind them, respecting others, and considering listeners, readers, speakers, and writers.” (Translation is mine.)

Though the words above include important elements of communicative competence, they do not seem to be the final definition of communicative competence in foreign language education in Japan. They may change through the further deliberation. Besides, it is also true that there is no specific definition of communicative competence in the current Course of Study for English education in secondary school nor in elementary school (MEXT, 2010, 2011). Therefore, I will focus on the four areas of communicative competence by Canale (1983) comparing them to the current Course of Study (MEXT 2010, 2011) for junior high school English. It is my evaluation that the Course of Study in question, in its comparison with the Course of Study for junior high school English in 1977 (National Institute of Education Policies), by far includes more elements from Canale’s (1983) ideas about communicative competence. First of all, the goal of the 1977 version does not include the phrase, communicative competence, while the current version does. Secondly, the description of the 1977 version is mostly grammatical or about grammatical competence, including grammatical structures and a list of more than 500 words to be studied in three years. On the other hand, the current version includes not only the grammatical structures but also functions of language such as promising and inviting reflecting sociolinguistic competence. Thirdly, the current version pays attention to the abilities to summarize what is said or written and to speak and write using paraphrases reflecting discourse competence. Finally, stress, intonation, and pauses are emphasized reflecting strategic competence. Similar differences between the 1978 and 2008 versions of the Course of Study for senior high school English (National Institute of Education Policies) can be observed.

I personally agree with the description of the current Course of Study which incorporates the four areas of communicative competence by Canale (1983). Teachers are expected to make utmost efforts to foster communicative competence of the students they teach. It should be mentioned that communicative competence is developed through learning English and practicing and using it in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

2. Developing communicative competence of students inside and outside class

It goes without saying that communicative competence can and should be developed inside and outside class.

2.1 Developing communicative competence inside class

Traditionally, the teaching method of PPP (Presentation, Practice, and Production) has been adopted for a long time in Japan. PPP can be included in CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), which is a

broader and popular umbrella concept meaning teaching how to communicate through communication, if every single P is implemented in class.

However, in reality, even though in junior high schools all the P's are carried out in general, in many senior high schools, the last P is not carried out fully for various reasons such as insufficiency of time, difficulty of textbooks, preparation for college entrance examinations, etc.. Therefore, it is urgent that every single P be utilized in every junior and senior high school to develop communicative competence of students. In the last P, students are required to use English that they have learned in so-called communication activities in natural or semi-natural settings.

It is also vitally important for teachers to use English in conducting their classes (See Appendix 1). The current Course of Study for senior high school English stipulates that in principle English should be taught in English (MEXT, 2010, 2011). From 2020, English is to be taught in principle in English in junior high schools as well (MEXT, 2013). "The single most important and desperate need is for JTEs to use English as the language of teaching and learning in their classrooms," emphasizes Porcaro (2004, p. 83).

At the same time the teacher needs to be a role model of using English naturally in class so that it encourages students to use English in class, which is also an important intention of MEXT. Gorsuch (2002, cited in Porcaro, 2004, pp. 85-86) also refers to research that indicates "of all the influences that can be accounted for, teachers' previous educational experiences have the greatest influence on teachers' eventual instructional practices' (p. 9)." One possible reason why some teachers hesitate to teach their classes basically in English may be that they did not have a role model when they were students.

When I participate in meetings with school teachers, I ask them whether their teachers conducted their class principally in English, and the answers are often negative. This means current teachers should show models so that their students are able to know how to conduct class in English when they become teachers in the future.

As to the importance of actual use of English, theoretically I espouse usage-based approach:

"Usage-based theories hold that the acquisition of language is exemplar based. It is the piecemeal learning of many thousands of constructions and the frequency-based abstraction of regularities within them....The regularities of language emerge from experience as categories and prototypical patterns. The typical route of emergence of constructions is from formula, through low-scope pattern, to construction. Frequency plays a large part in explaining sociolinguistic variation and language change." (Ellis, N. C., 2002, p. 143)

I believe that abundant input through the use of English both by the teacher and students help students themselves to improve their communicative competence. Of course, it goes without saying that in in-class teaching and learning, rule teaching and practice is crucially important; my point here is to emphasize the importance of input. Also, It is not of my opinion either that output is not important; on the contrary, output is important to improve fluency and accuracy (Oozeki, 2010, p. 65; Shirai, 2008, pp. 148-149). In order to improve accuracy, it is not possible to evade making mistakes. It seems that mistakes are the key to the improvement of accuracy, though it sounds paradoxical.

Language learning is impossible without making mistakes. Brown (2007, p. 257) says, "Learning is fundamentally a process that involves the making of mistakes." (See Appendix 2) In order to lessen mistakes, it is indispensable to review the mistakes and correct them later using dictionaries and grammar books as much as possible. I say "as much as possible" because all the mistakes may not be remembered.

2.2 Developing communicative competence outside class

As mentioned in 2.1, it is crucially important for students to use English communicatively to develop communicative competence. The question is, "How can students use English communicatively outside class in Japan, where English is normally not used for everyday life. It means if students just wait, no opportunities to use English come to them. Rather, students have to try to find "English using opportu-

nities” through their own initiative positively. How can they find them? Where are those opportunities?

Here let us look at the situations in other countries: how are students using English outside class voluntarily abroad? In his dissertation, Stövring-Nielsen (2006) surveyed the use of English outside school of eleven Swedish 8th graders, and according to the Swedish students, they encounter English in “TV shows, books, when travelling, computer games, radio, acquaintances from other countries, music, movies, in manuals for using technical equipment.” (p. 17) Another study in Sweden, *The National Evaluation of Compulsory School, English* report (2003, cited in Stövring-Nielsen, 2006, p. 12), found out the similar results that secondary school students use English in their spare time in chatting on the computer, writing letters, surfing the Internet, reading books and technical texts, listening to and understanding English song lyrics, television programs and videos in English. The report also found out an interesting phenomenon among secondary school students in that they think that they learn more English outside of school than they do in school. Another interesting phenomenon, according to Stövring-Nielsen (2006, p. 21), is that those eleven students surveyed said that they use English when speaking Swedish. This phenomenon may have something to do with the fact that English and Swedish are cognate languages as both belong to the Germanic language family.

Another country looked into is South Korea. There is a survey on the use of English outside class of senior high school students in Korea and Japan (Benesse, 2008). According to the survey, Korean senior high school students by far read more English books other than textbooks, listen to more English news on television and radio, read more news in English, and listen to more weather forecast in English than Japanese counterparts.

Specific information is necessary as to the actual use of English outside class by Japanese secondary school students, but even though there is limited information in Benesse, 2008 as discussed in the previous paragraph and there is information as to the study of English at home (Benesse, 2014), I have not been able to find any more specific information as to the actual use of English outside class. It may mean that many secondary high school students think that English is for studying and that they may not have a clear image about English as a tool for communication, getting information, entertainment, etc. in real life.

2.3 Finding opportunities to use English outside class

As mentioned at the beginning of 2.2, it is of crucial importance for students to try to find opportunities and situations outside class. In this section, I will discuss five possible areas in which students can use English naturally. They are English camps, video conferences, English speech contests, Internet sites, and creating a newspaper.

2.3.1 English camps

One of the most vivid and realistic situations where students can use English spontaneously as well as with preparation exposing themselves to a lot of input is English camps. In English camps, basically from the time participants wake up and to the time they go to bed, they use English in order to lead their lives taking part in various activities, eating meals, talking freely, etc.. I understand that Mie Prefecture began English camps for primary and secondary school students in 2014. On December 26, 2015, I visited an English camp to observe it. One of the activities for secondary school students was to prepare a presentation to introduce interesting places to visitors from abroad. The activity was timely as the Ise-Shima G7 Summit was to be held in May 2016 in Mie Prefecture. Students were working on a presentation talking and writing in English with the help of native speaker teachers as well as volunteer university students. Another interesting activity was the self-introduction of the nine or ten native speaker teachers in front of all the participating students. It was characteristic that the native speakers used several large drawings about their hometowns and themselves so that beginners like elementary school students were at least able to enjoy the pictures and try to match the English spoken to some aspects of pictures. In

this self-introduction, it was also important for beginners to keep listening to the native speaker teachers even though they did not understand much: To realize the difficulty of listening English makes a very good start to learn English for them. I understand that Mie Prefecture plans to have two English camps in 2016, one in summer and one in winter so that many more students can experience using English. Fukui Prefecture has been conducting English camps since as early as 2012 (Fukui Prefecture). Also, it is my understanding that some schools in Japan have their own English camps, which is very encouraging. I really hope that the time will come when all the students experience the English camp at least once when they are studying English at school.

2.3.2 Video conferences

Another vivid and realistic situation where students can use English is videoconferencing. With the advent of advanced technology in communication, it is rather easy for Japanese students to have video conferences with a group of students in other countries. Now there is a simple and easy way to connect two classes (or even more classes) in different countries. The technological environment has changed greatly since 1998 when with a colleague of mine I began videoconferencing between her class and a class of an American university using three ISDN lines; at that time the sound and image were occasionally and suddenly cut off for technical reasons. When the sound was severed and only the image was on in one video conference, students improvised “a movie title guessing game” gesturing salient images from movies. Now I hold video conferences with two American universities and one Spanish university throughout the year. Shown below are pictures from two video conferences.



Scenes from video conferences in 2014 (left) and 2015 (right)

Currently, there seems to be many English classes across Japan, though there is no specific data that I know of, which take advantage of videoconferencing to give opportunities to students to put into practice English they have been learning. For example, the Board of Education of Tsu city, Mie prefecture, has begun a program in which elementary and junior high schools in the city participate in videoconferencing with schools in other countries. One such attempt was carried out on May 19, 2016 between a municipal junior high school and a school in Australia (The Chuchichi Newspaper, 2016).

One big issue is how to find a partner class. The method of the Tsu Municipal Board of Education is to send emails to possible schools in other countries (Personal information, the Tsu Municipal Board of Education, September 7, 2016). This is one sure way to find a partner school even though it is necessary to keep sending emails to find schools interested. When I started video conferencing in 1998, I was lucky as Mie University and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington began a videoconferencing program together with two more Japanese universities: Mie Prefectural University of Nursing and a university in Iwate Prefecture. In this respect, it might be a good idea to try to find a partner school through international exchange relationships at school, city, and prefecture levels. There is also a useful Internet site with the list of organizations to help creating partnership between classes: CONNECT ALL SCHOOLS (<http://www.connectallschools.org/node/132295>). There are also schools who ask agencies to

find partner classes. One of them is CCC Project (<http://cccproject.or.jp/>), but their site is under construction as of October 2, 2016. However, their address and telephone number are shown on the site.

2.3.3 English speech contests

Though only a limited number of students can take advantage of the opportunity, participating in a speech contest is fully recommended. In a speech contest, each participant can express their ideas and opinions to the audience. According to Shirai (2013, p. 125), real output is what is conceived in mind, and in a speech contest, a speaker can give real output, though it is not spontaneous and is prepared in advance.

2.3.4 Internet sites

There are useful sites for secondary school students to develop their communicative competence in terms of English listening skills. More than that, with these sites students are able to know what is happening domestically as well as internationally and it means they are actually using English for real purposes, and among many useful sites I will discuss three of them which are suitable for secondary school students in terms of the level of English used.

(1) English News to Read Easily (http://www.eigo-net.jp/easy_reading/)

This site is for students for whom regular news sites are rather difficult. According to the site, all the news, which is about Japan and the world, are written in about 1200 words learned in junior high school. In this site students can listen to news viewing or without viewing the news manuscript with the help of a bilingual glossary. The shortcoming of this news site is that new news is put up on the site only once or twice a month.

(2) NHK daily English news on radio

The news is broadcast from two o'clock in the afternoon every day on R2 NHK, for 15 min from Monday through Friday and for 10 min on Saturday and Sunday covering domestic as well as international news. I remember that when I was a college student in the late 1960's, there was a five-min English news program in the evening on R2 NHK. I recorded it in a tape-recorder and listened to in again and again. Now in 2016, the NHK news program, and other programs for that matter, can be downloaded automatically to a smartphone every day and can be listened to as often as possible.

(3) CNN 10 (<http://edition.cnn.com/studentnews/>)

CNN 10, which is a 10-minute news program covering domestic as well as international news, is mainly geared at high school students in the U.S., but the site must be also geared at students around the world as the news for any particular day can be viewed from around 9 a.m. in Japan, where the new day begins (On one October day of 2016, I was able to download the news at 6.30 a.m.). It means all the interested students in other countries can enjoy the news by the time when they get to school in the morning. Since the program is made for high school students, it appears that news items which interest them are chosen and the language used by the newscaster is leveled at them.

2.3.5 Creating a newspaper

Creating a newspaper is another way to use English students have studied. For example, the students of the English Speaking Society of a senior high school in southern Mie prefecture created an English newspaper introducing various aspects of the Prefecture mainly through interviewing related people. The topics cover a carpenter specializing in preserving the architecture of the Ise Grand Shrine, the governor of the prefecture, *Ise-bi* lobsters, the *ama* (woman) divers, cultured pearls, Matsusaka beef, ninja, and more. The paper was opportune because it was published just before the G7 Ise-Shima Summit held in May 2016. This newspaper is an example introducing local areas to people from other countries. Students may also attempt to create a newspaper about their classes or schools.

Conclusion

With the purpose of giving practical suggestions to students in the secondary schools in Japan as to the improvement of their communicative competence, I have first examined the seven characteristics of communication followed by the four areas of communicative competence. Then I have discussed developing communicative competence inside class and outside class. Finally, I have presented specific opportunities for students so that they can use English in order to improve their communicative competence. I really hope that secondary school students will have more opportunities to use English as a language for some specific purposes.

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Appendix 1: Why I teach my classes in English

First and foremost, I teach my classes in English because I want my students to improve their English and also want them to teach English in English when necessary upon becoming English teachers. I don't think I can show my students how to teach English in English by teaching English in Japanese. I may find myself in awkward situations where I cannot use English appropriately and I may be able to avoid those situations if I conduct my classes in Japanese. However, I teach English in English to show my students that we improve English going through and overcoming those awkward situations.

I am keenly aware that in video conferences with American and Spanish students, many of my students are often in predicaments when they encounter difficulties in organizing and expressing their ideas more or less spontaneously, and again, they can improve their English floundering in those plights.

Secondly, I fully admit the decisive significance of input. Everything—grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation—comes from input unless one newly creates their own. Output is also indispensable at least for enhancing accuracy and fluency and for eliciting more input useful for one's own output. It is said that one of the major responsibilities of language teachers is to provide students with ample opportunities for input and output.

The third reason for teaching my classes in English is related to the tolerance of ambiguity. I have been asked many a time if my students understand the class. I may not be able to say that my students understand the class 100% all the time, especially at the initial stage of the semester. (Do students understand the class 100% all the time if it is conducted in Japanese?) Then do I need to switch back to conducting classes in Japanese? The answer is “nay”; one of the most salient features of language learning is that of ambiguity, but with the tolerance of ambiguity, students will understand the class increasingly. This is exactly what they say at the end of the semester and this is also what teachers say after taking, in English, my whole-day seminar for renewing their teaching licenses. Movies in English are the same; when a movie begins, we are in the dark—in actuality and metaphorically, but gradually we get used to the parlance of the protagonist and the other characters. Before I end the third reason, I hasten to add that a textbook is used in each class of mine and that what I talk in my lecture is based on the content of the textbook. It is not that I talk in my lecture about how to make an omelet while students read in the textbook about how to make cockroaches good pets. When they read about how to make cockroaches good pets in the textbook, I talk about how to make cockroaches good pets in my lecture. It means that if students read the textbook carefully at home, they are ready to understand my lecture in many respects. Also, I write important points on the blackboard as I explain them *viva voce*. Additionally, if they do not understand me, they are always welcome to ask me to paraphrase what I say. It is my intention to make my classes equipped with these layers of scaffolds in order to lessen ambiguity as much as possible.

There are also fringe benefits of conducting classes in English. I have had three British English teachers from Saint Joseph Joshigakuen (SJJ) in Tsu City in English Teaching Methodology class. They were required by the Board of Education of Mie Prefecture to take several courses related to teacher education in order to keep teaching at SJJ. They were all cooperative in making comments from their teaching experiences and in discussing with Japanese students.

Appendix 2

Interpretation at a labor standards supervision office (LSSO) on March 17, 2016

I worked as an interpreter between a Spanish speaking person and a person in charge at LSSO. My duty was to interpret what the Spanish speaking person said in Spanish into Japanese and what the person in charge said in Japanese into Spanish. The major problem lied in the interpretation of what the person in charge said in Japanese into Spanish. First, simply there were too many technical terms in Japanese whose Spanish counterparts did not come out of my mouth in interpretation, even though I had learned many of those technical terms in Spanish in advance. I did

not have time to recall them because I had to interpret the utterances continuously one after another. Therefore, I used rather everyday conversational words and expressions, but I am sure that I was successful in conveying what the person in charge wanted to say to the Spanish speaker. Second, I was able to notice that I was making a lot of mistakes in grammar and word usage through ongoing consecutive interpretation, but again I am sure I was successful in the interpretation. One big reason why I think I was successful is as follows: the person in charge wrote in Japanese through my interpretation everything what the Spanish person said during the session and at the end of the session I translated what was written in Japanese into Spanish and the Spanish speaker agreed that it was what he said.

What I learned from the experience

- (1) Learning technical terms in Spanish in advance does not always help the interpreter use them in the actual ongoing interpretation. In order to be able to use them, the interpreter should be able to recall them instantly. How can it be done? One main way should be to experience similar interpretations many times. The list of technical terms both in Japanese and Spanish at hand may be of some help too.
- (2) When pressed by time, it is so easy to make mistakes in grammar and word usage. But again, in order to be able to speak appropriately without making mistakes, it is essential to have opportunities to speak communicatively.