

# Examining the Challenges Concerning Communicative Competence Within Japan

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## Background

Communicative competence summarizes ones' ability to communicate effectively through the congruence of linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competence (Ellis, 2015). However, while an idealistic scenario would maintain a balance of these components, in Japan linguistic competence is emphasized above all in order to prepare students for high-stakes tests such as entrance tests, TOEIC, and Eiken (Bouchard, 2017). As a result, it is common to find Japanese English learners who struggle to navigate simple conversations despite extensive knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Despite interventions by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (MEXT) to promote an approach known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the aforementioned tests continue to influence English pedagogy on the local level (Tsushima, 2013). Although these circumstances are unfavorable, there is an opportunity at the university level to correct students' communicative deficiencies as students are no longer imposed by the pressure of entrance tests as well as TOEIC and Eiken becoming more individual pursuits (In'nami & Koizumi, 2017). Accordingly, university teachers can carry out the CLT goals set out by MEXT which concur with the opinions of Ellis (1991) to create language users instead of language learners (Tsushima, 2013). In this paper, each component of communicative competence will be juxtaposed with the Japanese English education environment and discussed where deficiencies will be revealed. Subsequent discussion will utilize research by Schmidt (1983), Xue (2013), and Gilmore (2011) to offer pedagogical suggestions to university teachers and used as a foundation for the formulation of potential research questions which are designed to promote communicative competence within the Japanese university context.

## Components of Communicative Competence Within the Japanese Environment

### Linguistic Competence

Linguistic competence entails the knowledge of grammar, lexis, and phonology. It is the common focus of mainstream English programs around the world including those in Japan. However, it is important to note that without other forms of competence, even language users with high linguistic competence struggle to know when and how to use language appropriately as well as how to deal with communication breakdowns (Ellis, 2015). Ellis (2015) discusses that mainstream English programs

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“typically fail to recognize that the process involved are social and external as much as they are mental and internal” (p.349). This is especially true in Japan where studying and teaching for tests such as Eiken, TOEIC, and entrance tests are highly emphasized. Kubota (2011) discusses this phenomenon as ‘linguistic instrumentalism’ where linguistic competence is given precedent as good outcomes on the aforementioned tests can result in future economic success. To give an example of the prominence of linguistic competence in Japan, a study by In’nami and Koizumi (2017) on 28 private universities revealed that approximately 60% of them were awarding credits for speaking and listening courses to students who scored highly on external tests despite “gaps between skills targeted in courses and those measured on tests” (p.274). This seems to show that the capabilities of linguistic competence are misunderstood and overvalued while numerous parties are involved in a negative cycle of promoting and developing English as a commodity (Kubota, 2011).

### **Sociolinguistic Competence**

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the appropriate use of linguistic forms in certain situations. Ellis (1991) describes sociolinguistic competence as “both knowledge of what is appropriate in meaning and what is appropriate in form” (p.105). Furthermore, Gilmore (2011) adds naturalness and cultural references to his definition of sociolinguistic competence. While there is some doubt towards the development of sociolinguistic competence in classroom environments, it is more the case that specific classroom interventions can acquire some progress, yet perhaps not to the degree that extended exposure to natural and colloquial experiences within society can have (Compernelle & Williams, 2012; Gilmore 2011). Given that Japanese classrooms are often focused on vocabulary and grammar, it can be assumed that associating linguistic tools with their social uses and settings are rarely addressed or practiced. Furthermore, within Japanese society, the monolingual environment does not offer much in terms of opportunities to gain exposure to authentic English encounters. The implementation of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) has been done purposefully where native speakers from around the world are placed within schools across the country as cultural representatives of their home countries as a means to provide English opportunities to Japanese learners (Warkwick & Leung, 2017). While these opportunities for interaction with native speakers could be beneficial, the previously stated negative washback of entrance examinations causes both Japanese English teachers and JET teachers to act pedagogically in a way that still emphasizes linguistic competence (Nakatsugawa, 2011).

### **Discourse Competence**

Discourse competence has been associated by The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a component of pragmatic competence; it is described as, “knowledge on the principles by which messages are a) organized, structured and ordered . . .” (Rosadoa, Aparicib & Perera, 2014, p.72). Context alters how oral and written discourse should be approached by requiring language users to use a wide range of knowledge to create coherent language and overall cohesion (Gilmore, 2011). This can be made easier through “cross-linguistic transfer” (p.72) which is noted by Rosadoa, Aparicib and Perera (2014) as an aid for discourse competence to develop as those who have similarities in their L1 to English are often inherently benefited by shared sociocultural and contextual

knowledge. Unfortunately, Japanese and English do not share many similarities; for example, a differentiating essay structure proves difficult for Japanese people to initially understand as a concept. Furthermore, the production of discourse is not often given much focus as anecdotally even well-known private high schools only require their high school students to write a maximum of 60 words per essay. Discourse can sometimes be approached at length through reading. However, any gains made in this area are most likely implicit as textual analysis in classrooms is often linguistically focused. Furthermore, Bachman (1991) goes on to discuss how some aspects of discourse competence cannot simply be taught due to their complexity or lack of knowledge which may also suggest the potentially low discourse competence Japanese students may have (Bachman, 1991). With schools so focused on entrance exams, it is difficult to imagine that much time is given to the intricacies of turn taking, broken speech, body language, etc., as these elements would have to be implemented into the curriculum where L1 discourse tendencies in Japanese would need to be examined and compared to those in English (Rosadoa, Aparicib & Perera, 2014).

### **Strategic Competence**

Strategic competence has been associated with how to deal with breakdowns in communication as well as the means for enhancing dialogue (Fiksdal, 1992; Gilmore, 2011). Also, Ellis (1991) discusses the importance of teaching communication strategies for particular situations, for example accepting or giving compliments, however he describes the Japanese learner as one who “leaves school with knowledge about the language but with little or no idea of how to use this knowledge in communication” (p.121). From this we can derive two important deficiencies of communicative competence practice within Japanese English classrooms. First, opportunities to practice communication breakdowns are rare and during those few times where opportunities to communicate are present in the classroom, students may often resort to L1 translations. Also, opportunities to learn communication strategies may also be lacking in society due to the monolingual aspect of Japan. Furthermore, Wang, Lai, and Leslie (2014) add an additional exacerbating factor where they discuss how level-appropriate curriculums fail to produce communicative benefits unless addressing skills such as strategic competence explicitly. They emphasize that language knowledge and language abilities are not the same and both require specific pedagogical approaches to develop (Wang, Lai, & Leslie, 2014). As a result, strategic competence may be the most deficient component of communicative competence for Japanese learners.

While the above components of communicative competence can interweave and develop simultaneously under certain circumstances, it is important to note that without proper conditions, some components can remain unchanged entirely while others continue to develop (Schmidt, 1983). This can be entirely situational, which seems to be the case within Japan where often only linguistic competence seems to be focused on, as well as case by case where some learners are more adept at certain components than others (Schmidt, 1983). This suggests that educators need to be aware of how each component of communicative competence is used and developed in order to allow for their simultaneous development so that one area does not become stagnant and fossilized (Ellis, 2015; Schmidt, 1983; In'nami & Koizumi, 2017). This is shown in a notable longitudinal study by Schmidt (1983) who examined the communicative competence of a Japanese artisan, Wes, who had emigrated

to Hawaii. In Wes's situation, Schmitt (1983) hypothesized that his linguistic competence would be able to improve implicitly while living in Hawaii due to the immersive nature of his situation. However, while Wes improved in other areas, such as strategic, discourse, and sociolinguistic competence, his linguistic competence remained relatively unchanged over the years. Schmidt (1983) determined this as fossilization and supposed that Wes's low aptitude for linguistic features and personality traits may have resulted in relatively few improvements. While much progress has been made to understand communicative competence more since Schmidt's (1983) study, Gilmore (2011) has discussed that there is much more to understanding how each of the components of communicative competence develop and relate to one another. Further research is required which will be important for educators as they will gain useful knowledge about communicative competence and how to include it into curriculums where its development can be monitored to advance pedagogical methods.

As an example of how to improve communicative competence, a study by Xue (2013) showed gains across grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence where the effects of group work on Chinese university students studying abroad were examined. First, while this study involved native speaker participants in the form of L1 native speakers who participated in the groups, Xue (2013) elaborates on the Chinese teacher-centered pedagogical models, which are similar to Japan, and emphasized that group work should be used to overcome "cultural shock" (p.7) when interacting with groups that include native speakers. Furthermore, Xue (2013) notes that the benefits that group work can have on communicative competence and therefore advocates for less teacher-centered teaching as well as more research in this area. Beaver and Tuck (1998) also discuss overcoming cultural differences for international students who study abroad in New Zealand as they struggle to get used to classroom environments. As discussed earlier, "cross-linguistic transfer" (p.72), seems to be important here, however in this instance it may be more non-verbal than verbal communication and that students require time to become familiar with new experiences before they are confidently able to express themselves linguistically (Ellis, 2015; Rosadoa, Aparicib & Perera, 2014). Fushino (2010) addresses this by examining communication confidence where she discusses that through building confidence during L2 group work, more learning opportunities seemingly become available to the learner as they begin to interact more with others. Thus, while group work should also be included into classrooms, cultural differences also need to be addressed as knowledge of cultural norms can equate to developments in communicative competence (Fushino, 2010). Finally, considering the results of Xue's (2013) study, there are questions surrounding the benefits of native English speaking exchange students and whether they are an underutilized resource at universities.

Furthermore, research into the naturalness of textbook dialogue has shown that textbooks often fail to provide students with authentic examples of language despite claiming "real-life communication skills" (Wong, 2002, p.55). This in turn can negatively affect students' sociolinguistic and discourse competence as they may gain incorrect knowledge about the kinds of language and how they are used in real life circumstances. This phenomenon is well known by learners as well where it is common to be asked by students, "nobody actually introduces themselves by saying, "my name is . . .", they say, "I'm . . .", right?". In Wong's (2002) study, conversation analysis was used to compare textbook telephone calls and real life telephone calls where the intricacies of natural dialogue are addressed

which indicates the difficulty that textbook creators have when recreating natural dialogue (Wong, 2002). Gilmore (2011) further provides evidence for the importance of authentic materials where his quasi-experimental study showed that communicative competence was shown to improve over eight different metrics compared to textbook materials. Considering the unnaturalness of textbook dialogue as well as the lack of opportunities within Japan to be exposed to authentic English, it seems to be increasingly important that teachers aim to provide as many realistic examples in their classrooms as possible.

## **Discussion**

From the above studies and discussion on communicative competence within Japan, it can be concluded that authentic English examples and interaction in English are basic concepts that are required to develop components other than linguistic competence (Schmidt, 1983; Wong, 2002; Xue, 2013). However, before students reach university in Japan, the learning environment seems to only focus on linguistic competence due to linguistic instrumentalism (Kubota, 2011). Conversely, research by Schmidt (1983) has shown that communicative competence components can develop independently of each other. As a result, building on what linguistic foundations students have is important for university teachers where knowledge on what exactly communicative competence is and how each component develops needs to be improved so that it can be effectively implemented into curriculums. However, there is still much to be understood regarding the development of communicative competence in Japan; for example, sociolinguistic competence has been shown as difficult to develop in the classroom and Japan lacks opportunities for it to develop through authentic English encounters in society (Compernelle & Williams, 2012; Gilmore 2011). Furthermore, measuring strategic and discourse competence has shown to be difficult which makes justifying the success of curriculums with communicative competence aspects troublesome. Also, while Xue (2013) discussed the effects of group work with native speakers on communicative competence, further examination into the effects of group work among groups who share the same L1 is required. While there are many questions that require answering, two in particular seem to be of high priority considering the above. Firstly, universities in Japan are often populated with exchange students. Therefore, in what ways can communicative competence develop through interactions between exchange students and Japanese learners of English? For example, if dual language classes or language exchanges were beneficial to both parties, they could be core aspects of their curriculums. Secondly, considering that communication breakdowns are often resolved by L1 translations, how beneficial can group work be for communicative competence when participants share the same L1? By answering these questions, university teachers can gain knowledge about how to improve their students' communicative competence.

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## ABSTRACT

While The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (MEXT) in Japan continues to promote Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), approaches to English on the local level remains relatively unchanged as linguistic knowledge is given focus instead of communicative competence which can result in language ‘learners’ instead of language ‘users’ (Ellis, 1991; Kubota, 2011). Through an examination of the components of communicative competence within the Japanese English language system, high stakes testing seems to be the cause of a negative and controlling washback effect where linguistic competence is shown to be the major, if not only, developmental focus (Kubota, 2011). Furthermore, unlike European countries, Japan is isolated geographically and does not share similar sociocultural norms found in English speaking countries which can also hinder the development of other components of communicative competence, such as sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Rosadoa, Aparicib & Perera, 2014). While these conditions present challenges that are not easily solvable, Japanese universities are in a position where they are outside the influence of high stakes testing where it is possible to utilize their students’ linguistic knowledge as a foundation and develop their weaker areas. Three studies by Schmidt (1983), Xue (2013), and Gilmore (2011) are discussed where they reveal that the components of communicative competence are shown to be separate in their development, benefit from group work, and are hindered by the use of textbooks instead of authentic materials. While these studies act as pedagogical suggestions for English teachers to correct student imbalances, further investigation is required to examine communicative competence more specifically at the university level. Thus, this article proposes research into communicative competence through investigations into communication breakdowns within group work settings where participants share the same L1 and how interacting with exchange students can benefit aspects of communicative competence for Japanese learners.

**Key words:** Communicative competence, second language acquisition, Japan

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