This paper will examine to what extent Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is compatible with Japanese English education. In the first and second parts of the paper, I will discuss the degree of compatibility of CLT with local teaching and learning cultures in Japan. This will be illustrated by examples of obstacles to conducting CLT in practice in English classes at junior and high schools in Japan. In the third part of the paper, I will observe some modifications that may be necessary to implement communicative principles in Japanese English education. In the last part of the paper, a brief summary of my conclusions will be provided.

The degree of compatibility of CLT with the local teaching and learning culture in Japan

As Kawai, Chin, Nakanishi, Hayashi and Yoshikawa (2005) state, Japanese learning culture, historically, adopted passive and self-enlightening attitudes towards learning English. This is because the concern in learning English in Japan was to understand and follow good examples of advanced Western culture and thought, through translating books written in English. Therefore, in the 1970s, teacher-centered instructions and the ‘Grammar–Translation Method’ were regarded as very important aspects of English learning in Japan, and English conversation skills were undervalued. In a similar way to the traditional learning–teaching culture in China, repetition, practice and memorization
were emphasized in traditional English teaching in Japan, and respect for teachers’ authority and a collective spirit were often valued (Ferguson 2008).

With an increasing awareness of the great importance of developing communication abilities in English, the Japanese Ministry of Education introduced a new curriculum, with a strong emphasis on the ‘Communicative Approach’, in 1989 (Torikai 2007). Subsequently, ‘Communicative Approach’ instructions and preparation for university entrance examinations were often incompatible in English teaching in Japan. The university entrance examinations were heavily focused on reading and grammar in English and paid little attention to English communicative skills. In consequence, many teachers in formal school continued to focus on teaching grammar and reading.

For about ten years, the content of current English instruction in Japanese schools continued to be greatly influenced by the content of university entrance examinations. Under these circumstances, the Japanese Ministry of Education proposed an *Action Plan* (2003-2008) to improve Japanese ‘communicative competence’ in English, in response to repeated criticisms that most Japanese people do not have sufficient communicative skills in English (Butler and Iino 2005). Importantly, the goal of CLT is to develop ‘communicative competence’. Canale and Swain (1980) identified four dimensions of ‘communication competence’: ‘grammatical competence’, ‘sociolinguistic competence’, ‘discourse competence’ and ‘strategic competence’. The explanations of the four characteristics are as follows.

‘Grammatical competence’ refers to sentence-level grammatical forms. It is the ability to recognize the syntactic, phonological, lexical, and morphological features of a language and to make use of those features to interpret and form words and sentences (Celce-Murcia 2001). ‘Sociolinguistic competence’ implies an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the information shared between speakers and the communicative purpose of their interaction (Richards and Rodgers 1994; Celce-Murcia 2001). ‘Discourse competence’ is concerned with the interpretation of individual message elements and the connections between
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them and how meaning is shown in relation to the whole discourse or text (Richards and Rodgers 1994; Celce-Murcia 2001). ‘Strategic competence’ represents the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, end, maintain, repair and redirect communication (Richards and Rodgers 1994; Celce-Murcia 2001).

However, in most cases, it seems that CLT can be implemented primarily through team-teaching in actual classrooms at junior and high schools in Japan. Few solo Japanese English teachers have carried out CLT in formal school. In general, team-teaching is performed by a Japanese English teacher and an ALT (assistant language teacher).

Through CLT, teachers adopt different communicative activities in English, such as role-plays, game activities, dramas and information-gap in classrooms (A. Tajino and Y. Tajino 2000). In most cases, the target grammar features are initially presented by teachers before conversational practice, so that students can understand and produce the target grammatical items correctly, usually at sentence level, through communicative interaction tasks (Sakui 2004).

However, A. Tajino and Y. Tajino (2000) and Richards and Rodgers (1994) point out that there are some issues in carrying out team-teaching. In fact, most ALTs are young college graduates with little or no teaching experience and come to Japan through the JET (Japanese Exchange and Teaching) Programme. As A. Tajino and Y. Tajino (2000) observe, most ALTs are not appropriately trained to lead classes and have little in-depth knowledge of English teaching. At the same time, few Japanese English teachers provide ALTs with information on how classes should operate, and some teachers regard ALTs as a ‘human tape recorder’, acting as a pronunciation model for students, and think that ALTs are too young to take on any responsibility (A. Tajino and Y. Tajino 2000).

According to a case study of team-teaching conducted by Sturman (1992), Japanese teachers of English and ALTs often have different definitions of ‘a good teacher’. For example, if Japanese teachers complain that ALTs ignore the importance of the examinations or that ALTs do not spend enough time on grammatical rules
and explanations, ALTs complain that Japanese teachers do not know enough about communicative teaching or that they spend too much time lecturing (Sturman 1992). Under the circumstances, as Sturman (1992) points out, it becomes difficult for them to respect each other’s qualities as English teachers until they understand the different situations they work in and the pressures they work under.

**Obstacles to implementing CLT in actual English classrooms at junior and high schools in Japan**

In spite of the growing emphasis on oral communication in curricula, many Japanese teachers of English in junior and high school still assume great responsibility for preparing their students for the high school and university entrance examinations. This is because English scores have usually been given the greatest weight in passing university entrance examinations. Therefore, as Sakui (2004) and Butler and Iino (2005) demonstrate, most Japanese English teachers in formal school still tend to put a great emphasis on grammar, reading and writing rather than oral communication.

Sakui (2004) examines how CLT has been understood and actually implemented by Japanese secondary school teachers in real contexts, on the basis of interviews and one-year classroom observations. According to Sakui’s investigations, most Japanese teachers have had difficulty in integrating CLT and form-based instruction in actual classrooms. In the Japanese educational system, school curricula in the junior and high schools in Japan have been controlled by guidelines decided by the Japanese Ministry of Education (Butler and Iino 2005). Therefore, school teachers have had limited control over these curricula (Butler and Iino 2005).

According to Sakui’s classroom observation results, most Japanese teachers of English in junior and high school still spend most of the class time focusing on teacher-led grammar instruction. For example, students mainly listen to teachers’ explanations, learn to translate at the sentence level, read the textbook aloud in choral reading, copy vocabulary items in their notebooks and attend to sentence manipulation exercises.

The claim is also supported by evidence from my own teaching experience of English at a cram school. Because of the great demands from my students and their parents to prepare for the university entrance exams, my English instruction at the cram school had to focus on grammar and reading. It is true that Japanese English education has been changing gradually, and some cram schools have incorporated listening exercises in their English classes in response to the introduction of listening test sections in the entrance examinations for universities. However, it still seems that preparations for listening tests for the university entrance examinations at formal schools and cram schools put a great emphasis on paper exercises such as circling correct answers after listening to native English speakers’ conversations.

Moreover, a number of Japanese English teachers in elementary, junior and high schools are still struggling to cope with the ‘Action Plan’, which has a strong emphasis on the communicative approach in actual English classrooms in Japan. Although one of the features of the ‘Action Plan’ is the goal that English should be taught almost entirely in English in classrooms, as Sakui (2004), Torikai (2007) and Okuno (2007) demonstrate, under the present circumstances, English instruction and class management are still carried out in Japanese at many junior and high schools.

In addition to the pressures for entrance examination preparation, there are several other reasons why many Japanese teachers of English in junior and high schools still hesitate to incorporate CLT into their teaching without team-teaching.

According to the interview data examined by Sakui (2004), most Japanese teachers were lacking in confidence in conducting CLT because of the deficiency of their high ‘communicative competence’ in English. It was also revealed that teachers thought that CLT was a difficult task and that it required considerable time. As a matter of fact, it should be noted that Japanese teachers have to deal with many administrative duties, such as meetings after school and homeroom duties, and non-academic responsibilities, such as consultations with students about personal issues and coaching sports clubs after classes. In addition, owing to ‘the relaxed education policy’, teachers do not have enough
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time to carry out CLT in many cases.

Torikai (2007) suggests that in order to develop the four ‘communicative competence’ skills, each communicative competence skill should be taught separately, according to the level of formal education in Japan.

Specifically, she suggests that, first of all, at junior high school level, the development of ‘grammar competence’ abilities, such as a knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure and linguistic semantics, should be highly valued (Hedge 2000; Torikai 2007). This is because it is important to acquire a fundamental knowledge of English, with a great emphasis on familiarity with English phonetic sounds and accents, at junior high school level.

Secondly, at high school level, she claims that improving ‘discourse competence’ abilities is essential. ‘Discourse competence’ includes being able to appreciate and produce contextualized written texts in a variety of genres, use cohesive devices in reading and written texts, and cope with authentic texts (Hedge 2000). For example, Torikai (2007) demonstrates that students may start with reading good quality literature through both ‘skill reading’ and ‘intensive reading’. Then they may create short sentences, do presentations on a topic which relates to their interest or books they have read, write their own opinions on the topic in English and voice their opinions to others.

Thirdly, she insists that developing ‘sociolinguistic competence’ abilities should be particularly emphasized at university level. ‘Sociolinguistic competence’ includes using a range of communication strategies and learning the language required to engage in some of these strategies. For example, students may be able to learn how to use politeness expressions according to situations and people, and increase their awareness and understanding of different cultures.

Another important point to note is that Torikai (2007) and Okuno (2007) cast doubt on several elements of the ‘Action Plan’. Firstly, although English activities have been introduced at elementary school through the ‘Action Plan’, as a matter of fact, many elementary school teachers who are responsible for the English activities have become
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confused about the intention of the policy, because of the ambiguity concerning the relationship between ‘international understanding/cultural studies’ and English education set by the ‘Action Plan’ (Butler and Iino 2005). According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, English at the elementary school level is not meant to be a means of beginning English language education at an earlier stage but is intended rather as a means for conducting experiential learning activities which are appropriate for elementary school students (Butler and Iino 2005).

However, some researchers such as Torikai (2007) and Okuno (2007) question whether teachers in most elementary schools often focus only on playing English games and singing songs in English with students. Torikai (2007) points out that it is more important for elementary school children to start by acquiring the basic knowledge required to understand different cultures and communication strategies in Japanese than to spend much time playing games in English.

Under the circumstances, Torikai (2007) also suggests that, at elementary school level, ‘strategic competence’ should be learned in Japanese and English. It seems that what Holliday (1994) calls ‘the learning group ideal’ is often difficult to implement in Japan. Unlike the Western and American English-speaking classes, where immigrants learn English for communicating with native and other competent English speakers in daily life, CLT in Japan often conflicts with factors such as pressures from high school and university entrance examinations, large class sizes, cultural beliefs about teachers’ and students’ roles, Japanese teachers’ limited expertise in creating communicative activities and students’ low motivation. Therefore, as Bax suggests, the ‘Context Approach’, which includes an understanding of students’ learning needs, styles and strategies as well as textbooks, local conditions, classroom cultures, school cultures and national cultures within a framework for generating communication, may be desirable for Japanese English education.

In conclusion, taking those things into consideration, although it is true that Japanese English education has been changing through the ‘Action Plan’ introduced by the
Japanese Ministry of Education, many Japanese teachers of English have been struggling to deal with CLT and the pressure to prepare for the university entrance examinations. It seems that few solo Japanese teachers can carry out CLT in practice in their classes, and in many cases CLT can be implemented through team-teaching. As Torikai (2007) points out, in order to develop Japanese ‘communicative competence’ effectively in English, it may be necessary to learn each communicative skill according to elementary school, junior high school, high school and university levels.

<References>

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