

Concrete Proposals on the Development of Communicative Competence in “Communication English” Classes

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Two years have passed since the new Course of Study was introduced to schools in Japan. This new Course of Study brought us the new English language goal of “Communication English” and “English Expression” for the purpose of developing students’ communication abilities. This drastic change was caused by inevitable pressure from both domestic and international sources. External pressure in the past forced these internal educational reforms to finally take place. The final decision, however, has caused a storm in the tranquil climate of English education in Japan. The conventional grammar-translation method has been criticized due to the claim that the teaching style has not contributed to the development of students’ communicative skills.

This paper’s focus will be directed to 1) how Communication English I or II has contributed to the enhancement of students’ communicative competence, 2) how this subject has affected the learning environment, teaching styles and student accomplishments, and 3) what kinds of problems the introduction of this new subject has triggered in English education at Japanese high schools.

新学習指導要領が導入されてから二年の月日が経った。この新学習指導要領によって、“コミュニケーション英語”および“英語表現”という科目が新たに導入されることになった。その目的は、生徒一人ひとりの英語による運用能力を身に付けさせることにある。この劇的ともいえる変化は国内外の様々な圧力によって引き起こされたものであり、待ったなしの状態である。外的な圧力によって日本国内の教育改革が強いられることは過去を振り返れば容易にわかることだが、この決断は言ってみれば日本の英語教育の静けさの中に嵐を起こしたとも言える。伝統的ないわゆる“訳読方式”は、今までさんざん批判されてきており、その理由は従来の教授法では生徒が英語によるコミュニケーション能力を身に付けることができなかったことにある。

この報告書では、1) コミュニケーション英語 I および II という科目のなかで、生徒がいかにコミュニケーション能力を向上させてきたか、2) この科目がいかに学習環境や教授法そしてまた生徒の学習達成度に影響を与えてきたか、3) この新たな科目が導入されてから日本の高等学校における英語教育にどのような問題を引き起こしてきたか、について触れていく。

I) Introduction

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students' communication abilities. This drastic change was caused by inevitable pressure from both domestic and international sources. External pressure in the past forced these internal educational reforms to finally take place. The final decision, however, has caused a storm in the tranquil climate of English education in Japan. The conventional grammar-translation method has been criticized due to the claim that the teaching style has not contributed to the development of students' communicative skills. This paper's focus will be directed to 1) how Communication English I or II has contributed to the enhancement of students' communicative competence, 2) how this subject has affected the learning environment, teaching styles and student accomplishments, and 3) what kinds of problems the introduction of this new subject has triggered in English education at Japanese high schools.

II) Aims of “English Communication I”¹

1. Objective

To develop students' basic abilities such as accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas, etc., while fostering a positive attitude toward communication through the English language.

2. Contents

- (1) The following language activities, designed for specific language-use situations in order to encourage students to apply their abilities to understand and convey information, ideas, etc., should be conducted in English.
 - A. Understanding information, ideas, etc., and grasping the outline and the main points by listening to introductions to specified topics, dialogues, etc.
 - B. Understanding information, ideas, etc., and grasping the outline and the main points by reading explanations, stories, etc. Reading passages aloud so that the meaning of the content is expressed.
 - C. Discussing and exchanging opinions on information, ideas, etc., based on what one has heard, read, learned and experienced.
 - D. Writing brief passages on information, ideas, etc., based on what one has heard, read, learned and experienced.
- (2) To effectively conduct the language activities stated in (1), consideration should be given to the following instructional points:
 - A. Listening and speaking with due attention to the characteristics of English sounds, such as rhythm and intonation, speed, volume, etc.
 - B. Reading and writing with due attention to phrases and sentences indicating the main points, connecting phrases, etc.
 - C. Understanding and conveying matters, distinguishing facts, opinions, etc.

3. Treatment of the Contents

- (1) Based on general instruction to develop basic communication abilities given in lower secondary schools, the four areas of language activities should be interlinked

for comprehensive learning, while incorporating appropriate language activities involving speaking and writing about content heard or read.

- (2) Consideration should be given so that students master the items introduced in lower secondary schools and upper secondary schools through repeated instruction in accordance with students' circumstances, while experiencing various situational language activities.

III) Integration of Four Skills

In the new Course of Study, teaching English while integrating the four skills of “listening,” “speaking,” “reading,” and “writing” into the classroom is strongly emphasized as a big element to improvement, but it would be unnatural if these four areas of language skills were respectively taught through different settings and approaches. In retrospect, each area of language activity was treated for the convenience of instruction, not for the benefit of learners. It is not appropriate to compare language acquisition of the first language and that of the second language; instead, language acquisition is enhanced through listening, mimicking (speaking), understanding through visual aids (reading) and expression in written forms (writing). My long-term teaching experiences have taught me that language acquisition is nothing short of parroting, despite the ideas presented by professionally and academically distinguished scholars through established theories of second language acquisition. A generation or two ago, the terms “Reader” and “Grammar” were used as the name of English subjects without any dispute from teachers, but ultimately this distinction of treating English as reading comprehension and grammar acquisition came to an end.

Now, the integrated approach of teaching English, as anticipated, has caused a myriad of questions to the secondary educational system. For instance, these questions include “How should English be taught?” “How are students’ academic achievements measured and evaluated?” and “How effectively is team-teaching implemented?” These questions are integral to English education in Japan. The answers for these imminent problems are extremely difficult to solve, but each teacher has to squarely face this reality and come up with their own solutions. We should not reach the methodological solutions completely short of overhauling the whole English education system in Japan.

IV) CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)

How can English teachers teach English in a holistic manner? A new terminology for a method of teaching English, CLIL, has been coined. CLIL stands for Content and Language Integrated Learning. As long as English teachers focused on teaching English vocabulary, structure, and grammar, they were able to complete their missions as English teachers. Teaching the content of reading materials in reading class and language mechanisms in grammar class was the teaching approach in the past, whereas recent English education has been trying to combine these two elements into one. By so doing, students acquire knowledge through language and language through knowledge. In the former case, students learn language as a means for communication, while in the

latter case they can increase vocabulary or syntax through reading materials. When we take a look at the content of the textbooks used in Communication English classes, we find that the topics are comprehensive, ranging from liberal arts and social sciences to natural sciences. This requires English teachers to be in possession of general knowledge from all the academic subjects so they can share their knowledge with their students. Few students are aware that the reason they cannot speak English is because of a lack of knowledge on these academic topics, not because they are not good at English. Comprehensive and profound knowledge acquisition, reinforced by an interdisciplinary academic approach, is the foundation for developing English skills. Learners should realize that one academic interest fosters another, thus intertwining these academic webs together in order to strengthen their intellectual competence. Learning Western culture and ways of thinking through English was emphasized in the Meiji Era in order to import Western culture. This has been replaced by a more communication-oriented method, which has gained more popularity in English education. In this rapidly evolving state of English education, each English teacher needs to be more sensitive to every minute change and revolutionize themselves to develop better teaching approaches. Sensitivity and readiness to adjust to the evolving environment are strongly recommended and respected.

V) What Can We See From Learners' Beliefs?

1) Research Method

The questionnaire in the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI; Horwitz, 1987) was conducted among 70 Japanese high school student subjects at Kanagawa Sohgo High School who took English Communication I.

2) Research Aim

Students at our school demonstrate more advanced communicative skills and higher motivation than other students at other schools in general. On the other hand, they are not as strong in grammar acquisition and linguistic analysis, which are considered to be conventional methods for learning English. This research aim focuses on how this imbalanced learning approach will affect the consequence of their future learning and their learning attitude.

3) Research Questions and Results

* I feel that these were directly translated from Japanese; the translations are not natural for survey responses in English. Based on the Japanese answer choices and more natural English survey choices, a closer translation would be “5 = Strongly Disagree” “4 = Slightly Agree” “3 = Somewhat Agree” “2 = Generally Agree” “1 = Strongly Agree”.

5 = not at all for this reason	全然違う
4 = slightly for this reason	少しその通り
3 = generally for this reason	概してその通り
2 = very much for this reason	その通り

1 = absolutely for this reason 全くその通り

(Difficulty in Learning Language)

5. I believe that I will be able to speak English well.

1. 28% 2. 28% 3. 28% 4. 8% 5. 4%

34. Reading and writing English are easier than speaking and understanding it.

1. 15% 2. 22% 3. 42% 4. 17% 5. 2%

(Aptitude in foreign language learning)

1. It is easier for children to learn English than for adults.

1. 40% 2. 33% 3. 18% 4. 9% 5. 0%

2. Only some people have special ability to learn foreign languages.

1. 13% 2. 24% 3. 20% 4. 27% 5. 13%

6. People in my country are good at learning foreign languages.

1. 0% 2. 20% 3. 27% 4. 29% 5. 24%

10. It is easier for those who speak a foreign language to learn another.

1. 13% 2. 33% 3. 31% 4. 20% 5. 2%

(Traits of Language Learning)

8. It is necessary to know about the culture of the country where English is spoken in order to learn English.

1. 33% 2. 44% 3. 16% 4. 6% 5. 0%

12. It is the best to learn English in English speaking countries.

1. 36% 2. 51% 3. 11% 4. 2% 5. 2%

17. The most important thing in learning foreign languages is to learn vocabulary.

1. 4% 2. 40% 3. 36% 4. 13% 5. 6%

23. The most important thing in learning foreign languages is to learn grammar.

1. 0% 2. 20% 3. 44% 4. 27% 5. 8%

27. Studying foreign languages is different from studying other school subjects.

1. 22% 2. 42% 3. 20% 4. 11% 5. 4%

28 It is important to learn how to translate my own language into English

1. 11% 2. 31% 3. 33% 4. 24% 5. 0%

(Learning/Communication Strategy)

7. It is important to speak English with wonderful pronunciation.

1. 17% 2. 49% 3. 24% 4. 6% 5. 1%

9. We should not speak English until we speak it correctly.

1. 0% 2. 6% 3. 6% 4. 27% 5. 58%

13. It is fun to practice speaking English with Americans.

1. 38% 2. 38% 3. 11% 4. 4% 5. 6%

14. You should guess unknown words from the context.

1. 22% 2. 35% 3. 27% 4. 13% 5. 2%

21. I have no confidence in speaking English.

1. 35% 2. 29% 3. 16% 4. 8% 5. 8%
22. Once beginners are allowed to make mistakes, it is difficult for them to speak correct English later.
1. 13% 2. 31% 3. 33% 4. 22% 5. 0%

(Motivation/Expectation)

24. I would like to learn English to know about America well.
1. 16% 2. 17% 3. 44% 4. 20% 5. 4%
29. If I study English hard, I have more chances to get a good job.
1. 27% 2. 48% 3. 22% 4. 2% 5. 0%
31. I would like to learn how to speak English well.
1. 48% 2. 38% 3. 6% 4. 4% 5. 2%
32. I would like to make American friends.
1. 42% 2. 33% 3. 15% 4. 6% 5. 2%

34 responses

4) Research Results*(Difficulty in Learning Language)*

Our students demonstrate that they have the potential to become fluent in English in the future. This belief is supported by the fact that almost 100 percent of English language classes are conducted in English, and that many returnee students who study together with those who have never lived overseas boost the motivation of non-returnee students. It is found that, despite their exposure to the English language in classrooms, quite a few students have less confidence in speaking and comprehending English.

(Aptitude in Foreign Language Learning)

It is very interesting to note that Japanese people in general are not suitable for learning foreign languages. In addition, most of the students think that in terms of foreign language acquisition, the earlier they start to learn foreign languages, the better the results. According to major newspapers in Japan, more elementary schools have decided to start foreign language education at an earlier stage. Also, more private middle schools have incorporated English as a required examination subject alongside Math, Japanese Literature, Social Studies and Science. There are pros and cons regarding this issue, but we have come to the conclusion that an earlier foreign language education pays off in the end. Interestingly, in regards to the aptitude for learning foreign languages, the students agree and disagree in roughly equal numbers. The success of foreign language acquisition depends on learners' motivations and efforts. Particularly, in our school, where returnee students and non-returnee students study together, there is more incentive for the students who have studied here in Japan to learn foreign languages. Moreover, the survey has shown us that when students are given opportunities to learn other foreign languages besides English, it enables them to understand the positive effects of knowing other foreign languages on the acquisition of English.

(Traits of Language Learning)

One of the things that should be emphasized about this survey is that our students think that pronunciation is more important than mastering grammar and vocabulary in terms of getting their points across. This attitude reflects how they are trying to work on learning languages, leading most of our students, if not all, to intuitively take English as a collection of sounds. Even in class, this propensity has been witnessed. Disappointing is the fact that the acquisition of English grammar and vocabulary, which is essential to foreign language learning, tends to be less prioritized. At first, the students can intuitively understand English, but as an English teacher I would like them to realize that they will eventually be confronted with a big wall. Additionally, the survey has shown that the students thought that foreign language learning differed from learning other academic subjects. We have not received any detailed description of the differences, but they tend to take English class as a Physical Education class in which they use their bodies, consequently contributing to the reinvigoration of their communication skills. **Might need another sentence or two to explain this concept; not clear on the connection between a Physical Education class and an English class.* Another thing is that their strong motivation to master communication skills does not necessarily engender their confidence to use English. This situation is explained by the fact that Japan or Japanese culture is not structurally well prepared to cultivate foreign language education.

(Learning/Communication Strategy)

This area reflects the students' ideas about what communication means. Many students are strongly interested in picking up great pronunciation, whereas there are some students who think that they have only have to try to speak it. This attitude can be witnessed among our students, leading them to believe that messages (content) are more important than forms (grammar). It was also found that when they come across unknown words or phrases in class, they tend to figure them out from the context. More students are interested in directly communicating with English-speaking people like Americans than expected.

(Motivation)

More students responded that there is a correlation between their future careers and motivations for learning English. The employment of English as a lingua franca in more companies, the globalization of Japanese companies, and the holding of the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020 are major factors in their motivations for learning English. Unfortunately, they are more likely to easily connect the acquisition of English skills to the path of working at prestigious companies. From the perspective of an English teacher, I have no other choice than to wonder what a score of 990 on the TOEIC means. Taking the TOEIC as a motivational factor has some significance, but getting a high score on the TOEIC itself has become its own end, which helps spawn more English-learners who have no clear-cut goals of learning the English language.

VI) The Reactions of Students and the Roles of Teachers In the Early Stages of Learning

This is the second year that teaching English through English has been initiated in Japanese high schools. Compared to the previous year, students' reactions are basically the same. It was found that students had been taught in various ways in their junior high school days. Some junior high school teachers were trying to conduct class only in English whereas some were sticking to the traditional ways of teaching where students were asked to translate English sentences into Japanese. Especially for the students who were less exposed to English, teaching English only in English turned out to be very shocking. In the early stage, they spent all their energy on listening, being cut short of expressing their opinions or ideas. In order to tackle the lack of communication skills, teachers needed to come up with effective tasks to improve their listening competence. To name a few, students are encouraged to be exposed to English on a daily basis, to interact with foreigners as much as possible or to make use of various IT resources. More important than the introduction of these listening materials is how teachers speak English by controlling their vocabulary in the early stage so that students can more easily comprehend their words. However, speaking English at a level equivalent to the vocabulary and grammar students have already learned is more difficult than imagined. As mentioned earlier, the focus should be on having students use their English, so it is meaningless for only teachers to keep speaking English. Interactive communication through the medium of English is of particular importance. The roles of teachers in the early stage of teaching English through English lie in comprehending what students are trying to say even when they utter only a few words while sharing their messages with the whole class, creating a productive learning environment. Speaking English is psychologically stressful to the students, therefore we English teachers are required to exert an effort on reducing their psychological pressures and barriers.

VII) The Meaning of Expressive Communication

A special report designed for researchers issued by the Benesse Education and Research Institute (http://berd.benesse.jp/berd/center/open/berd/backnumber/2006_05/fea_suzuki_01.html) featured the interview of Dr. Takao Suzuki, professor emeritus at Keio University, titled “An English education aiming at developing expressive communication skills and a changing concept for English-English at school should be an elective subject and it should be removed from learning British and American culture.” I would like to introduce and share Dr. Suzuki's ideas on English education in Japan and also add my own personal comments.

(Dr. Suzuki's first proposal)

To be able to undertake a solid communication with other countries in an international community on an equal footing, Japan needs to understand other countries and at the same time be understood by them. International understanding, as a matter of fact, should be a “mutual” understanding in which nothing short of the language is the best

means. English, which is now the lingua franca instead of British and American language, is worth using for that reason. English is not for the sake of knowing England and America, but for using as a tool for communication. In other words, we need to shift from English education for input to English education for output.

(Kiichi Sugawara's Personal Comments)

The traditional goals of English education were aimed to learn the culture and ways of thinking of British and American people who speak our target language, to have their ideas and express them. As Dr. Suzuki suggested, English is now a lingua franca, a tool for making Japan known to the world. Historically speaking, there was a time called the Meiji Era, when Japanese intellectuals learned English to comprehend Western ways of thinking, but presently we do not have to learn English only for that category. Of course, we cannot deny the fact that there are students who study English for that reason. College entrance examinations are a big stumbling block to introducing English as a communication tool, and they are conventionally used to defend the traditional ways of teaching English. Written exams should be more communicative and output-oriented so that students and teachers can react to them in a more productive manner. What matters is how we English teachers make use of written exams.

(Dr. Suzuki's Second Proposal)

Superb English competence refers to an ability in English to express your own ideas or Japanese ways of thinking from historical and cultural backgrounds when necessary. Japan, competing on an equal footing with Western countries in technology and the economy, needs to develop an English ability suitable to export Japanese culture to them. Like an analogy to describe how English has been taught, we used to drink tea with a Western teacup. Now, we serve Japanese green tea to them. In other words, we should insert something Japanese as content although we use a foreign product as a cup. There are many things in Japanese culture that impress people from overseas. The same thing can be said about history. When visitors to Japan are told that there is no other country than Japan, in which we have lived in the same territory and have spoken the same language for nearly 1400 years since the establishment of a centralized government during the Taika Restoration, they will be surprised. On the contrary, when we Japanese people start to talk about Shakespeare or Mark Twain, they will be bored.

(Kiichi Sugawara's Personal Comments)

There is no room for discussion regarding the importance of what to talk about over how to say it. Actually, there are many students and teachers who think that the latter is more important than the former, although we need to meet the minimum condition of our pronunciation that will not damage our ability to communicate. The metaphor Dr. Suzuki quoted was very interesting. As he suggested, I agree that Japanese people should base the content of our conversation on what we can confidently convey. We need to make the most of our "soft power." In order to do so, we have to be well-versed in Japanese history and culture.

(Dr. Suzuki's Third Proposal)

Through being widely spread over the globe, English has become a means for communication among peoples with linguistically, culturally and socially different backgrounds from Western ones. The process of the internationalization of English has become “de-Americanized” and “de-Anglicized”, consequently changing from the language dominated by Americans or British to an international language.

(Kiichi Sugawara's Personal Comments)

Dr. Suzuki's remark is understandable among the Japanese, but unfortunately there is a correlation of “English=American/British=upper-class society.” As Dr. Suzuki suggested, the Japanese still suffer the spell that English is predominantly controlled by the American or the British people. I hope that the Japanese to be aware of the de-Americanization of English and to have a good command of English as an international language. Looking back at my high school days, my teacher recommended that we should read British or American writers such as Orwell, Russell or Maugham. I used to swallow what was written in their books and confidently show off what I had learned from them to others. I understand that there was a time when we needed to absorb everything we learned through reading authors from more culturally progressive countries such as America and Britain. However, nowadays, many books written by Japanese authors such as Haruki Murakami have been translated into a myriad of languages. Also, the English translation of Japanese classics such as “The Tale of Genji” and “Wild Goose” helps the appeal of Japanese culture to spread all over the world. I strongly believe that the ability to discuss the appeal of Japanese literature is the authentic English competence we should aim to attain in this globalized community.

VIII) The Meaning of Teaching in an Integrated Manner and its Concrete Ways

I will introduce and share the concrete ideas on how to teach in an integrated manner with the readers.

1) Introduction of New Words

The classical ways of introducing new words have been very simple and mechanical. First, the teacher pronounces new words. Next, the students repeat after the teacher. The teacher checks the meaning of each new word. This monotonously mechanical method does not contribute to creating what students are encouraged to do only in classroom settings. The teacher needs to provide a learning environment in which students are encouraged to learn together. Of course, it is important to make sure the correct pronunciation of each new word and its Japanese meaning. Most importantly, students are expected to make conversation using new words. Suppose that one of the new words is “culture.”

Student A: “What do you think Japanese culture is?”

Student B: “I think when we say ‘Japanese culture,’ it means anime or sumo.”

The content of their conversation seems to have nothing to do with the topic of the

lesson. However, that is not so important. My focus is on getting students to use new words in their conversation. If they can continue to carry on their conversation, this activity is successful as a communication activity.

2) Reading Comprehension

The issue at hand is how to undertake the task of reading comprehension in a four-skill integrated manner. Here is an example.

(Excerpt from Lesson 8 of the textbook “Element”)

Part 4

8 Today, many scientists look at nature to get hints about new technology. Some scientists, for example, are studying a lizard in the desert. It drinks water little by little through its feet and spikes. Scientists think it possible to develop technologies for getting water in dry regions.

9 Let’s take another look at nature. Nature has solved various problems with surprising systems and designs. Living things in nature have survived through hard times. Those that have survived millions of years have been successful because of their designs. Nature is a good designer that has built up effective systems without damaging the environment. We should guard this treasure of ideas and learn about those systems. How about looking around for hints of new technology hidden around you?

First,

- (1) Have students read the passage.
- (2) Have them ask questions about the content of the passage.
- (3) Have them come up with questions using interrogatives such as “who”, “where”, “when”, “why.”
- (4) Have them say what they have learned from the passage.
- (5) Have them write a summary of the passage in ONE sentence after having them orally say a summary.

When we think about how the four skills are developed in each activity above, (1) focuses on “reading.” (2) covers “speaking” and “listening.” (3) again reinforces “speaking” and “listening.” (4) mainly emphasizes “reading” and “speaking.” Finally, (5) aims to enhance “speaking” and “writing.” Now, we will see what kinds of questions should be effective in making language activities more active and interactive. The following questions are some examples.

- 1) How did scientists come up with the idea of providing water in dry areas?
- 2) “Nature is a good designer that has built up effective systems without damaging the environment.” What does this sentence mean?
- 3) What is the best title for this passage?

Just finding or copying the answers from the passage will help increase the number

of students who turn out to be lazy thinkers. In other class subjects, it would be difficult to pose questions that lead students to develop their critical thinking skills. How can we define the questions that facilitate students to think? Personally, I believe that there is no precise definition. Questions that cannot be immediately answered only by reading the passage are ones that can be called thought-provoking questions. I would like to check the three aforementioned questions. For the first question “How did scientists come up with the idea of providing water in dry areas?” students cannot just copy the answer from the passage. For the second question “Nature is a good designer that has built up effective systems without damaging the environment. What does this sentence mean?” students need to exercise their paraphrasing skills. This task requires a fairly high level of English competence, so it is necessary to introduce this activity in gradual stages. And for the last question “What is the best title?” students cannot come up with suitable titles without understanding the whole story. These three questions are not impeccable examples in eliciting ideas or opinions from the students. The important thing is to have the students think by themselves. Teachers tend to impose their opinions or ideas on their students, but it is crucial that teachers and students share them with each other, in a way that helps strengthen students’ reading comprehension of the lesson. Historically, students had been well-trained to believe that teachers’ answers were perfect. Presenting student answers to other students as a model answer is inspiring not only to the student who gave the answer, but also to other students sharing the learning environment with the student. Teachers’ primary mission should focus on drawing something from their students, as etymologically “to educate” means “to elicit,” not to impose what teachers think is right for their students.

ix) The Introduction of Discussion

Activities students can do only in classroom settings in order to develop their communication skills are now more strongly demanded than ever in the past. There are pros and cons to the conventional way of teaching English, where teachers check the answers from students. However, nowadays, students are not quite satisfied with this monotonous and teacher-centered method. It is not certain whether the vacillation between the conventional way of teaching and the communication-oriented ones reflects society’s demand toward English education, but a teaching style where teachers explain from one side and students just passively listen from the other is out-of-date.

I have decided to incorporate a debate activity into my class for the following reasons:

- Students can develop their thinking skills.
- Students can listen to various opinions.
- Students can compare and share their own opinions with others.
- Students can learn together.
- Students can appreciate a sense of participation in class by expressing their own opinions.

1) The Development of Critical Thinking

Japanese people are not good at developing critical thinking skills. This phenomenon has something to do with distinctive Japanese culture. Most of the students, if not all, believe that learning is where students copy and memorize what they are taught in a mechanical way. Unfortunately, there are some teachers who think in the same way. In order to survive in today's global society, it is unbeneficial to simply have students swallow what they are told. We must instead confirm whether or not they have truly learned from their teachers in the classroom, and what exactly they have learned. The importance of this attitude has been emphasized for a long time. Kiyoshi Miki, a well-known author at the beginning of the Showa era, expressed the same opinion in an essay, titled "About Students' Lowering Intelligence." He mentioned, "For example, for high school students, college entrance exams are a big problem. Therefore they devote most of their time to preparing for the exams. Because of this, the time for reading itself will be limited. The college preparation helps boost students' academic achievements, but does not enhance their intellectual level. Many pieces of accumulated knowledge do not lead to the establishment of true knowledge. The lowering of their intelligence levels has something to do with the lack of their theoretical consciousness. The theoretical consciousness refers to not only the mind for accumulating thought or ideas in a well-organized manner, but also the critical mind."

This quote's main purpose is not to criticize college entrance examinations. Surprisingly, the intellectuals even in this time had already recognized the lack of critical thinking minds in high school students, and the same criticism can be made about current high school students. My reasons for incorporating debate into classes are the following: My mission as a teacher, instead of categorizing English into one of the school subjects as a foreign language, is to have students recognize the importance of developing theoretical consciousness and the mind for accumulating knowledge, while expressing their thoughts and opinions based on various kinds of knowledge gained through other school subjects. In this sense, they should realize that English is a tool for communication.

The amount of information gained by young people such as high school students is incomparable to that of the past. They are inundated with information on a daily basis without the ability to control the overwhelming, constant flow of required knowledge. Through discussion, they can develop critical thinking skills to examine the flood of information with a critical mind.

2) Learning Comes from Sharing

The second advantage of implementing discussions in class is that discussion contributes to the qualitative improvement of learning through sharing information with others. In order to produce active discussions, teachers have to become good facilitators in class. The idea that teachers should teach and students should learn from teachers is subconsciously ingrained in the minds of both sides. This subconscious obligation tends to deter students from practicing speaking English in class. While students have group discussion, teachers need to walk around in the classroom, observe how students

communicate with other students and give appropriate comments or suggestions if necessary to make the flow of discussion smooth and productive.

The biggest goal of discussion lies in sharing information among participating students. We need to bear in mind what Mr. Miki suggested in his quotes. Only cramming pieces of knowledge into students' brains contributes to the increase in the amount of knowledge they gain, and does not lead to the actual application of knowledge. Without application of knowledge, they cannot acquire real knowledge. Discussion is an effective means to cultivating critical thinking spirits, consequently enhancing the quality of learning.

3) How to Implement Discussion in Class

The biggest stumbling block to having students involved in discussions is the lack of students' vocabulary to express their opinions and ideas. When and how should useful expressions for conducting discussions be introduced in class? The most common way of introducing discussions in class is usually for teachers to make handouts with a lot of useful expressions for various situations; for instance, expressions for agreement or disagreement. Of course, it is important to introduce these expressions prior to the implementation of discussions, but I think that this method puts more emphasis on the form than the content. The idea comes first, and then the words to express that idea should follow after. Some students will struggle with words to express themselves at first and this situation will prevent them from participating in discussions as they would like. As time goes by, however, students will eventually learn the appropriate expressions through experience and practice. Teachers can teach expressions, but students have to create their own ideas. There are many reference books regarding discussions, but instead of only utilizing them, teachers should create more opportunities where students can share their ideas with other members. Completing a successful discussion is important, but it is equally important to foster communication between students and teachers after each discussion. During feedback time, teachers can check what kinds of expressions students used, what they discussed and give out comments on their performance. In order to successfully address any comments or questions from the students beyond the teachers' ability, teachers need to develop their linguistic skills as well as acquire comprehensive knowledge.

4) The Effects and Problems of Discussion

I will touch on the effects of discussion. There are tangible and intangible effects. As for the former, it is easier to gauge its effects because we can check the improvement of writing skills in assessment such as essays. Giving students quizzes and tests on a regular basis also helps teachers to keep track of their improvements. Teachers can accumulate objective data on students. On the other hand, intangible effects are hard to evaluate. For example, how can teachers gauge students' motivations for speaking English? Apparently, teachers can observe their participation in class. Despite some difficulties arising in the evaluation of students' communication skills in discussion based activities, it is very much appropriate to say that discussions have played a significant role in enhancing students' motivations in expressing their own ideas,

consequently enabling them to become independent learners with critical thinking skills.

Notes

¹ It should be noted that this entire section was directly quoted from a MEXT webpage (http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/04/11/1298353_9.pdf), retrieved on April 24th, 2016.