

Japanese SHS English Teacher's Implementation of MEXT's Communicative Approach

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ABSTRACT

This case study is anchored in Japan's attempts to improve the English communication skills of its students. It analyzes the gap between the Ministry of Education's (MEXT) policy of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the implementation of that policy in Japanese high school English classes. Using a single instrumental case study design, this research was conducted in a Japanese senior high school in the Chubu region. Evidence was gathered from classroom observations, document analysis, and teacher interviews. Based on the findings, the most obvious lessons are drawn: policy-practice gaps persist, especially in high-stakes exam cultures; teacher agency plays a central role in mediating curriculum reforms; supportive structures like professional development and collaborative teaching are key to effective CLT implementation; cultural and institutional norms must be acknowledged and addressed for sustainable pedagogical change; and hybrid practices reflect adaptation, not failure, and can serve as transitional models toward more communicative classrooms. The results suggest that MEXT should develop policy intents that are a better fit for Japan. Multiple sites, student experiences, and the long-term effects of hybrid pedagogical approaches should all be included in future studies.

Keywords: *EFL in Japan, Teaching English in Japan, communicative approach, case study, Japan.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has repeatedly updated its English education policies to ensure that they meet the demands of our current, globalized society (Kim & Cho, 2023). Their most recent guidelines not only advocate a movement away from traditional grammar-translation methods but also promote a far more radical idea: that all English language education in Japan should be based on a communicative language teaching (CLT), which is unclear whether approach or a method (Flinn, 2024), whereby teachers and students use "meaningful interaction" and "authentic language" in a "student-centered" learning

environment. But research (Smith, 2025; Rubrecht, 2024; Bartlett, 2021; Ito, 2022; 斎藤裕紀恵 & サイトウユキエ, 2022) indicates that there is a major disconnect between these policies and the reality of English education in Japan.

This case study investigates the interpretation and implementation of MEXT's communicative approach in a Japanese high school English teacher's classroom. It looks at what the teacher does, his instructional strategies, and tries to understand his challenges and how he addresses them sometimes by adapting and sometimes by outright defying MEXT's policies in service to his students. This study also intends to contribute to the ongoing discussions regarding

English education in Japan by examining the seeming gap between MEXT's policy and the practical experiences of Japanese English teachers in the classrooms. Findings in this study may also provide insights to educational administrators, legislators, teachers, and researchers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study used an instrumental single-case study design, which is particularly amenable to in-depth examination of a complex phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). A case study approach allows the holistic investigation of how a Japanese high school English teacher implements MEXT's communicative approach in his classroom. Since the way policies are implemented can hinge on individual teacher beliefs, institutional constraints, and student needs, a single-case study can provide the type of rich, detailed insights that are a hallmark of qualitative research. This method is justified because it enables a context-sensitive exploration of how national educational reforms translate into classroom practice, with implications for both policymakers and teachers.

Participant of the Study

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select one Japanese high school English teacher who met the following criteria: active teaching role (currently employed in a Japanese public high school and teaching English as a foreign language); familiarity with MEXT's Communicative Approach (aware of and is expected to implement MEXT's communicative approach in his lessons); willingness to participate (open to being observed in his classroom and to being interviewed about his teaching experiences); and minimum teaching experience (with at least three years of teaching English in a high school, which ensures his familiarity with both traditional and communicative approaches).

Instruments

Classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis were utilized to gather comprehensive data on the teaching practices and perceptions of the participant. Classroom Observations of the participant's classes took place to document his teaching methods, interaction patterns, and alignment with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This observation method made it possible to gain direct insights into teaching behaviors rather than relying on self-reported practices. The participant participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews that focused on experiences, challenges, and perspectives related to the MEXT's Communicative Teaching Approach. This interview method provided the participant with the needed flexibility to express his thoughts and concerns; at the same time, it ensured that key topics were addressed. The document analysis allowed the researchers to analyze relevant lesson plans, instructional materials, and curriculum development documents. Analysis made possible the gaining of insights

into how the participant interprets policy directives and uses them in his lesson planning.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process followed a structured approach. Before data collection, the researchers sought informed consent from the participant and obtained approval from the school principal. An initial interview was conducted to gather background information on the teacher's experiences and perspectives regarding MEXT's communicative approach. During data collection, classroom observations were conducted over four weeks, focused on lesson delivery, teacher-student interactions, and communicative techniques. Interviews were conducted at different stages to explore the teacher's reflections on his practices and any challenges that arose during observation. Lesson plans and materials were collected and analyzed in relation to the observed teaching practices. After data collection, a final interview was conducted in which the teacher reflected on the overall experience and discussed any adjustments made in light of the observations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024), which is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. The steps followed are: 1) Familiarization with Data (classroom observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents were read and re-read many times to gain an overall sense of the data); 2) Coding (open, initial coding was performed to identify key themes that related to teaching strategies, policy interpretation, and implementation challenges); and 3) Theme Development (codes were grouped into broader themes under which the key codes clustered).

Data Trustworthiness

To guarantee the study's trustworthiness, strategies were utilized built around the pillars of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ahmed, 2024). We ensured credibility through triangulation with multiple data sources (observations, interviews, and document analysis), which gave us a rounded understanding of this case. Transferability helped us provide a thick description of the teaching context and the participant's experiences, enabling other educators and researchers to assess the applicability of the findings to their settings. Dependability ensured systematic documentation of the research process. Clear steps in data collection and analysis were followed, which ensured consistency. Confirmability was ensured by conducting member checking, which allowed the participant to review and validate key findings.

Ethical Considerations.

This study followed ethical research principles to protect the rights and ensure the well-being of the participant, who was given a detailed consent form that outlined the purpose of the study and the procedures involved.

The study was explained to the participant, and it was made clear that he had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without it affecting him in any way. The identity of the participant and his school were both kept confidential. All data collected was kept in a secure location. Moreover, the study was designed in a way to minimize any and all potential stress or negative feelings that the participant might have. Preparations were made to ensure that participating in the study did not interfere with the participant's professional responsibilities. Before any data were collected, permission was requested and received from the school administration.

RESULTS

The findings from this case study provide insights into how a Japanese high school English teacher interprets and implements MEXT's communicative approach in their classroom. The data, drawn from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis, reveal key themes below related to teaching strategies, alignment with policy, implementation challenges, and teacher adaptations.

Teaching Strategies and Classroom Practices

Pair and Group Work: Encouraging Interaction

The lessons observed emphasize how systematic activities can propel students to work together. The first part of the lesson had students working in pairs. However, the only talking in the pairs was reading, as each student was just reciting half of a model dialogue. Not much interaction in the manner expected between students when they were working together. Then, a very teacher-oriented part of the lesson with no student-to-student interaction occurred most of the time during the lessons. Why was the teacher not having the students interact more and in a conversational way?

Yet the teacher's reflection shared in the interview was that students were hesitant to converse without a script. They feared making mistakes and therefore unwilling to speak. This led them to rely on their native language and checking of textbooks to assist them in conversation.

Classroom observations confirm the teacher's reflection. In addition, although the typical lesson plan for the teacher includes group discussions, the highly structured nature of these discussions offers limited opportunities for spontaneous conversation. Instead of fostering a natural dialogue, the students are confined to filling in pre-written dialogues that may not encourage as much authentic communication or critical thinking as was previously assumed.

Task-Based Learning: Bridging Theory and Practice

The task-based learning (TBL) is also used by the teacher in her English language classroom. The classroom activity of having students plan a foreign trip for tourists and then present it to the class serves as a real-world simulation of

sorts and is meant to enhance students' language skills in more practical, less classroom-like settings. Yet the reliance on written notes during the presentation is a good indication of how spontaneous speaking is not exactly a strength for these students.

The issue the teacher observes is common in language learning: the push and pull between accuracy and fluency. Students appear to put a lot of emphasis on being grammatically correct, almost to the point of stunting their growth toward being more natural language users. This is made clearer when we look at the analysis of the student worksheets. These reveal that many students write and rewrite to the point of exhaustion before they will even try to speak out loud. They are not using the language more instantly or spontaneously. *"It's difficult to get them to speak freely. They want to be correct rather than fluent"* the teacher shared in the interview.

This underscores the importance of creating an atmosphere in which students feel at ease taking risks with their language use and where they feel encouraged to work toward fluency and natural communication, as well as toward accuracy.

English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI): Balancing CLT and Comprehensibility

The teacher had difficulty when he tried to put into practice English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) within the framework MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan) has set. The teacher's effort trying to deliver lessons exclusively in English reflects the intent of the policy, but the student responses during the observation raise questions about the effectiveness of such a sweeping decree.

For instance, the teacher defined the term "landmark" in a travel vocabulary lesson by stating: "A landmark is a famous place that helps people recognize a city." For instance, the landmark in Tokyo is... The teacher said in Japanese as the students were still silent: "ランドマークとは、東京タワーやスカイツワーのような箇印のたどね。" (A landmark is a structure like the Skytree or Tokyo Tower.)

The interview allows for a glimpse into the teacher's thinking about EMI and the complex situation that it creates for both teachers and students. "MEXT wants us to use English only, but if I don't use Japanese sometimes, many students feel lost. I try to balance both."

The teacher intended to use English for instructions, but added Japanese translations in handouts, according to the lesson plans' document analysis. This suggests a practical approach to EMI rather than rigorous adherence.

Persistence of Traditional Grammar Instruction

It was observed that the teacher's lessons frequently become teacher-centered instruction although CLT

strategies were incorporated, especially for grammar. The teacher in one of the observed lessons used the conventional “presentation-practice-production” method, which consists of a lecture on grammar rules, textbook drill exercises, and limited speaking practice (students reading aloud sample sentences).

In the interview, the teacher acknowledged the challenge of keeping a balance between CLT and grammar education. He said: “Students expect grammar explanations. They become irritated if I simply ask them to talk without first teaching them grammar.”

Also, the fill-in-the-blank and translation exercises were heavily emphasized in the textbook and worksheets, according to document analysis, which supported a form-focused approach rather than communicative output.

Alignment with MEXT's Communicative Approach

Grammar and Vocabulary Instruction Dominated

As observed in the classroom lessons, a gap exists between MEXT's recommendations for prioritizing communicative competence and the traditional, grammar-focused instruction that remains prevalent in practice. The teacher's pedagogical approach characterized by explicit grammar explanations and controlled practice exercises, aligns more closely with established pedagogical methods than with the communicative language teaching (CLT) model advocated by MEXT. Key observations include the following:

Direct Grammar Teaching.

The teacher used methods of grammar translation, supplying literal translations and grammatical structure explanations. This method places a heavy weight on rule-driven types of language exercises, with far less attention to the kinds of exercises that promote meaningful language production.

Minimal Communicative Practice

There was a small bit of communicative practice attempted, such as reading answers aloud, but it was next to nothing. There was a lack of opportunities for students to truly converse within the framework of this lesson. While there might be some indication or attempt at a communicative focus, the reality of the classroom dynamic is that this is an insufficient amount of practice for the students.

Expectations of Students

The teacher's reflection indicates a principal factor: student expectations for grammar explanations. This seems to suggest that learners may consider grasping grammatical rules to be more of a priority than developing skills in communication, which could constitute a serious obstacle to fulfilling the mandate of MEXT.

Document Analysis

The lesson plans and worksheets support the clear focus

on grammar accuracy. They lead students through a series of translation and controlled exercises that make up the bulk of their language learning. This is not a curriculum that allows students to play with the language. It is not a curriculum that challenges students to operate in the language. Instead, it forces them through a series of mechanical drills.

Limited Student Autonomy in Speaking Activities

Observations of communicative activities confirmed that the students participated in structured conversation activities. But the opportunities for spontaneous or unstructured dialogue were few. Thus, the speaking activities are usually controlled where students strictly follow their scripts or prewritten sentence patterns.

In one lesson for instance, students were provided with sentence starters that they needed to fill in like: “*In the morning, I usually _____. After school, I like to _____. On weekends, I often _____.*” They worked in pair as they completed the dialogue by reading their answers aloud. However, no elaboration was done like follow-up questions. But when some of them tried to go beyond the given structure, their partners were confused leading to moments of silence of switching into Japanese.

Document analysis of lesson handouts and activity sheets revealed a pattern of guided responses rather than spontaneous conversation or open-ended dialogue.

Although MEXT's communicative approach encourages spontaneous conversations among the students, the speaking exercises primarily reinforced formulaic language production rather than promoting genuine conversational skills.

Exam Preparation Influence on Teaching Priorities

The observed lesson is typical of how many teachers deal with the ever-present pressure to prepare students not just for the kinds of materials that they will encounter in the exam itself, but also for the kinds of skills that the exam does not test.

The teacher's reflection shows a familiar predicament: balancing the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with the demands of standardized tests. He shared in the interview: “*Speaking skills are important, but in reality, university entrance exams don't test conversation. Parents and students expect me to focus on grammar and reading.*”

The lesson plans provide further evidence of this issue. They indicate that even though speaking tasks are sometimes included, the main thrust of instruction is still aimed at reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar exercises that more or less conform to the formats of the exams. “*It is hard to see how a communicative approach could flourish in an environment where so much time and energy go into preparing students to succeed on standardized tests*” lamented by the teacher.

Barriers to Implementation

Institutional Constraints: A Rigid Curriculum and Textbook-Driven Learning

The curriculum, after the observation and analysis of the school lesson structure emphasizes textbook-based instruction over communicative activities. Usually, lessons are organized and follow a predetermined sequence. This sequence follows vocabulary acquisition, grammar explanations, translation exercises, and reading comprehension—all supposedly designed to lead to successful performances on school exams.

In one particular lesson on global warming, the teacher took a very structured approach. Students read passages aloud. Then, they translated vocabulary into Japanese, followed by grammar explanations given in their native language. Finally, they answered comprehension questions. This method included some English input, but was predominantly text-dependent, which limited the opportunities for spontaneous communication among the students.

A significant concern was brought to light in the interview with the teacher; the curriculum is too inflexible, they said, and to make matters worse, the textbook has too many units to get through in a single semester. As a result, the teacher feels pressed to get the students through each unit and certainly through each one of its sections (to which more than one class period is normally devoted) in order to keep up with the school's calendar.

The problem is also substantiated by an analysis of the lesson plans. They reveal that the teacher was given minimal leeway to adjust lesson pacing or to foster discussions that would drive students to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Student Proficiency Levels: Hesitation in Open-Ended Tasks

It was observed during classroom observations that students lack confidence when it comes to speaking, especially in unscripted, spontaneous conversations. Students often took time to reply, showing they were not entirely sure of their ability to express themselves without additional guidance.

When there was a vocabulary problem, the tendency was to go back to Japanese. Offering brief, non-detailed answers such as "Alright" or "Affirmative" shows a hesitancy to venture into more profound discussions and a large fear of saying the wrong thing.

The teacher's reflection highlights the conditioned psychological barrier of fear that students have when it comes to making English spoken errors. He shared: "Students are afraid of making mistakes. If I ask them to speak freely, they just stay quiet or revert to Japanese."

Also, studying students' written assignments reveals a disparity between students' written and oral proficiency.

Although students show very good grammatical control in their written work, their oral responses were notably less fluent and less spontaneous. This observation lends support to the idea that confidence has a lot to do with the successful employment of a second language.

Cultural Expectations: Passive Learning Norms

Japanese cultural norms in education influence the success of communicative teaching. This is witnessed during the class observations. The Japanese students are accustomed to passive learning and they expect their teachers to give them clear instructions rather than making themselves involved in the interactive activities or collaborative decision making.

In one of his classes, the teacher asked the class: "What do you think about Japan's role in global environmental issues?" Students looked to the teacher for guidance rather than starting a conversation. Before speaking, the students waited for a model response, avoided expressing personal ideas in favor of succinct, objective answers.

"Japanese students expect the teacher to be the authority," the teacher clarified in the interview. They hesitate when I ask for their opinions because they believe there is a "correct" response.

This tendency was mirrored in lesson plan papers, as discussion activities frequently contained pre-formulated responses or language structures that restricted students' ability to generate their own thoughts.

It took constant encouragement to overcome this tendency, according to the teacher: "I try to tell them, 'There's no wrong answer in conversation,' but they still feel nervous."

Assessment Practices: The Standardized Test Dilemma

It was apparent across document analysis, interviews, and class observations that standardized testing greatly influences the teacher's teaching preferences. "Since the focus of university entrance tests is on grammar, translations skills, and reading, we often regard speaking as secondary in our teaching or assessment methods," the teacher shared in the interview.

In one of his classes, the focus was on translating complex English sentences into Japanese, reconstructing jumbled words to make the correct sentences, reading comprehension, identifying grammatical errors, and transforming present tense sentences into present progressive or from passive to active.

Thus, the speaking activities were limited and the students were engaged in individual tasks or teacher-led explanations. The teacher shared: "Speaking skills are important, but my students need to pass entrance exams first. If I spend too much time on speaking, they might not be prepared or ready for the university test."

A review of the school's exam format further reinforced

this issue. The English test included: Grammar multiple-choice questions, reading passages with comprehension questions, translation exercises. There were no spoken interaction or oral exam component.

Because high-stakes exams did not assess communicative ability, students were not motivated to develop speaking skills, making the implementation of CLT challenging.

Teacher Adaptations and Workarounds

Hybrid Teaching Approach: Blending Traditional and Communicative Methods

The observations indicated that the teacher was integrating communicative elements within a structured, textbook-driven framework and not adopting an entirely communicative approach. For example, in a lesson on past tense verbs, the teacher followed this structure: Grammar Explanation: The teacher introduced past tense rules using a traditional lecture format and providing examples like, "Yesterday, I went to the park." Controlled Practice: The students completed fill-in-the-blank exercises in their textbooks. Speaking Integration: Instead of moving directly to the next grammar topic, the teacher introduced a pair activity: Students asked each other questions using pre-written prompts such as: "What did you do last weekend?" "Did you watch a movie?" Stimulated by these questions, students were encouraged to give full-sentence answers, around the theme of past tenses, and so for both groups.

The lesson had a strong grammatical focus, with more than 30 minutes of explicit grammar instruction. The tasks, although very controlled and thus having limited potential for student-initiated language, were considered by the teacher to be opportunities for students to apply language in a communicative way.

In the interview, she explained this hybrid approach: "I know CLT means more free communication, but I have to follow the textbook. So, I add small speaking tasks within the grammar lesson."

Analysis of lesson plans supported this, as communicative elements were included but often as supplementary activities.

Scaffolded Activities: Step-by-Step Support for Communicative Tasks

Also highlighted in the observations was the scaffolding the teacher provided for the students. In a debate preparation lesson, the teacher had the students work in three stages: Sentence Frames: The students were given sentence starters to guide their responses. Guided Pair Practice: The students practiced short exchanges with their partners using the sentence starters as guides. Free Expression: Once comfortable, the students were encouraged to express their own opinions (without the use of the sentence frames) in a kind of debate.

The teacher stated, "If I ask them to debate without

preparation, they freeze. But if I give them a structure, they feel safer. Then, I slowly remove the support." Document analysis of handouts affirmed this more systematic approach to easing students into communication.

4.3 Code-Switching as a Strategy for Comprehension and Confidence

A key observation was the deliberate use of Japanese to support comprehension in an English-speaking context. For instance, in a lesson on giving directions, the instructor conducted a listening exercise where students were to follow English instructions regarding a map. Students struggled and the instructor took it as a cue to provide some language help in Japanese, explaining, for example, that 'turn left' means 左に曲がる.

The teacher explained in the interview that: "*The students might miss the essence or the meaning of the sentence if I explain everything in English. So, using Japanese does not only save our time but also help the students feel less disappointed, helping them try again in English.*" The use of Japanese in this instance was not a failure of immersion, but instead was several steps through what a good bridging move looks like.

Informal Speaking Opportunities: Encouraging English Beyond the Lesson

When students are hesitant to speak in structured English activities, what can a teacher do? The participant recognized this problem and decided to create informal, even spontaneous, opportunities for his students to use English outside the formal English classes. One very noticeable thing was the way he would greet students as they came into the room before each lesson. Some students answer with one-word English, while the others try to answer with longer sentences.

This was explained in the interview. He said: "I strongly feel that if speaking English happens only in the lesson, it feels forced. But if I talk to them naturally, some students try to speak more."

Although these interactions were brief and optional, observations showed that some students responded with increased confidence over time.

Teacher's Perception of MEXT's Communicative Approach

MEXT's communicative approach is supported by the teacher, but there are major challenges in applying it. In practice, the lessons are heavily weighted toward the use of textbooks and test preparation, which makes it hard to promote real conversation. Even though students are given communicative tasks, they often stick to memorized notes because of exam pressure. The teacher mentioned a lack of practical training, saying most workshops are way too theoretical and do not really help with implementing communicative methods. Speaking tasks were noted to be limited and not well-integrated. Finally, the teacher

emphasized that systemic reform is needed; current exams and curricula still prioritize grammar and reading, which seems to discourage both teachers and students from focusing on spoken communication.

In the interview he said: *“In my opinion, if students’ main goal is to pass English tests, Eiken, or university entrance tests, then, what we are doing now is okay. But, if our goal is to build Japanese citizens with strong English Communication skills, especially in conversation, I believe we have to overhaul our approach in teaching English.”*

DISCUSSION

This case study explored how a Japanese high school English teacher interprets and implements MEXT's communicative approach, revealing a complex interplay of pedagogical intentions, classroom realities, and systemic constraints. The discussion below integrates each major theme with relevant theories and studies, offering a deeper understanding of the teacher's instructional practices within Japan's unique educational context.

Teaching Strategies and Classroom Practices

It is clear that the teacher is making an effort to use communicative language teaching (CLT) strategies to promote learner-centered, participatory English instruction. However, observed classroom practices continued to primarily rely on traditional grammar-focused instruction, leading to the creation of a hybrid model. It confirms the findings of Smith (2025) regarding the challenges in English language education in Japan. He states that the goals of the policy and the realities of the classroom are far from aligned. Although communicative skill is encouraged by policies, only 15% of classroom activities place an emphasis on it. He added that teachers' goals and teaching strategies are shaped by examination-oriented curriculum, which continues to be a major obstacle (Smith, 2025).

The combination of CLT and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) indicates a shift toward authentic communication and learner motivation (Cutrone & Beh, 2024). However, the actual classroom scenarios tell us that the students are dependent on their notes, like written preparation or scripts, which hinder them from speaking spontaneously. This indicates that fluency and authentic interaction are not fully achieved despite the fact that communicative activities are offered.

The teacher's scaffolding strategy, which includes offering structured support such as model dialogues and sentence structures to students who are just a little bit above their current level, is explained by the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a part of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Tzuriel & Tzuriel, 2021). However, the framework was still heavily regulated, which may have prevented students from becoming independent language users. Ideally, support should be gradually reduced to allow students to communicate more freely.

Ratunil et al. (2025) assert that cultural factors, such as respect for the teacher's authority and a fear of making mistakes, also affect classroom dynamics. Teachers may favor structured activities to maintain order and reduce student anxiety. As a result, while CLT techniques are being adopted, they are often adapted to satisfy local expectations. To increase the effectiveness of CLT and create classroom environments that support more confident, fluent English use, better resources, increased teacher training, and modifications to evaluation protocols are needed.

Alignment with MEXT's Communicative Approach

Even though the participant's lessons showed how the CLT can support MEXT, only a partial alignment was seen in the actual classroom implementation. The teacher placed a tremendous amount of emphasis on grammar focus, sentence pattern mastery, vocabulary drills, and preparations for college entrance exams. This indicates that the policy's goals to promote communicative competence are still not being effectively implemented in the classroom. Rubrecht (2024) and Ito (2022) imply that the realities of local classrooms, like teacher beliefs and institutional expectations, not to mention the pressures that come from the high-stakes tests, have a significant impact on how policies are interpreted and implemented. The teacher also shared that he feels forced to prioritize the content that will be tested, which tends to emphasize accuracy, reading comprehension, and translation over spoken fluency.

All the observed classes had a few common activities: model dialogues, scripted speaking, and sentence pattern practice. At first glance, these seem like good communicative activities. But they are not since they lack the unpredictable nature and real-time meaning negotiation that we often associate with genuine interaction (see Mitchener, 2021).

The tension between innovation and tradition is a broader problem in Japanese English education, underscored by this discrepancy between policy and practice (see Smith, 2022). Even though MEXT's curriculum revisions aim to foster global communication skills, these efforts are typically derailed by the substantial force of university entrance exams exerting influence over English education and many teaching methods that could best be described as traditional (Paxton et al., 2022). If we hope to improve the alignment of policy and practice, we need to make some serious and substantial improvements to our support systems. Curriculum redesign, teacher training, and assessment adjustments need to happen if we hope to achieve anything close to the ideal communicative English education that MEXT's policies call for.

Barriers to Implementation

A variety of contextual challenges blocked MEXT's Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method from being carried out successfully. The most serious of these was institutional rigidity, which manifested itself in

the ongoing reliance on a standardized curriculum and textbook-driven instruction (Ito, 2022; 斎藤裕紀恵, & サイトウユキエ, 2022). This supports the idea of institutional inertia (Faghih & Samadi, 2024), which implies that schools resist pedagogical change because of systemic shortcomings, authoritarian supervision, and a lack of teacher autonomy. Because of this, even if they personally back communicative goals, teachers often feel they must place a higher priority on consistency and test-related content than on creative practices.

The students also posed a significant challenge. Many of them showed a lack of confidence and a lack of proficiency in English that was particularly evident when they spoke. They were hesitant to speak or do any sort of activity that was open-ended. This is very much in line with what Krashen postulated with his Affective Filter Hypothesis and investigated by Kiruthiga and Christopher (2022), who found that language learners will only pick up a language when they are motivated to do so. In the recent study of Guerra Ayala et al. (2024), enjoyment is explored as a significant factor in learning English. In their study, they demonstrated that enjoyment has a major impact on students' oral competency in studying EFL. According to the results, enjoyment is a strong predictor of oral competence, and encouraging enjoyment during the teaching and learning process can be an effective strategy to support the development of English communication skills (Guerra Ayala et al., 2024). Therefore, addressing the learners' positive and negative emotional variables is an essential part of the language teacher's main goal.

CLT was put into action with great difficulty because it ran counter to the many cultural norms surrounding classroom behavior and learning. Because Japan's classrooms very much reflect Hofstede's theories of cultural dimensions (Alqarni, 2022), one finds a strong power-distance and collectivist value system in the Japanese classrooms that we observe. A vast majority of the Japanese students are extremely obedient, but they are also very timid and very much restrained when it comes to being creative with language or taking risks with language in front of their peers. This is truly a society in which everyone values precision, peace in the group, and, most of all, a society in which everyone respects the instructor and his or her opinions.

Finally, the exam-oriented assessment culture in Japan reinforces these barriers. Standardized testing places very little weight on speaking or the communicative use of the language and much more on vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. The high stakes associated with these tests impact what and how teachers teach (Smith, 2025; Bartlett, 2021; Kim, T. Y., & Cho, 2023; Ito, 2022). Therefore, it can be challenging to fully integrate CLT without further systemic change when test preparation seems to take precedence over the activities that are consistent with such an approach.

Teacher Adaptations and Workarounds

Educator adaptations and workarounds are the strategies the teacher employs to bridge the gap between the dictates of curriculum policy and the daily realities of classroom life. His most profound experiences with these adaptations came when teaching English frequently required him to modify lesson plans, simplify materials, or adjust teaching styles to align with the students' actual proficiency levels and the kinds of resources that were available to him. Most of these adaptations emerged from the practical necessity of making his teaching not just manageable, but also effective, within a set of constraints that included large class sizes, very limited instructional time, and a just as limited set of assessment formats that seemed, at times, to serve the motivators of student learning quite well.

This behavior is closely linked to bureaucracy theory (for a sample bureaucracy theory in English education, see Aburizaizah, 2021) explaining how workers like teachers exercise discretion in enacting policy to suit their real-world contexts. Teachers become policy interpreters rather than mere implementers. Studies by Rubrecht (2024), Smith (2025), and Ito (2022) have shown that while MEXT policies push for communicative language teaching (CLT), many teachers revert to grammar translation methods or hybrid lessons to guarantee student performance on high-stakes exams. These workarounds, though sometimes viewed as resistance, are actually acts of professional agency or teacher's agency (Neupane, 2024; Tao & Gao, 2021). Acts of agency make sense within a framework of pedagogical integrity. Teacher adaptations are not technical fixes to problems created by policy underdetermination. They are context-responsive decisions that arise from a confluence of individual beliefs, institutional culture, and systemic pressures.

Teacher's Perception of MEXT's Communicative Approach

The teacher had differing opinions about MEXT's communicative approach (CLT), which frequently reflects a conflict between the ideals of the policy and the realities of the classroom. Even though MEXT's curriculum changes have placed a strong emphasis on the development of communicative competency, the participant is still doubtful about its viability. The seeming discrepancy between CLT principles and Japan's exam-focused educational culture is one major worry (Rubrecht, 2024; Smith, 2025; Ito, 2022). Successful policy implementation necessitates both clarity and support, according to implementation theory (Nilsen, 2020); nevertheless, participant claims a lack of resources and training to properly execute CLT strategy. This disparity adds to a feeling of uncertainty and disappointment.

Furthermore, the participant believes that the communicative method, which emphasizes fluency and spontaneous dialogue, undermines their confidence in their ability to speak English and departs from their conventional teacher-

centered responsibilities. However, he sees the policy as a chance to advance their pedagogy and progressively implement more student-centered activities, especially when accompanied by cooperative instruction with Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). This variation can be explained by the theory of planned behavior (Conner, 2020; Ziaabadi et al., 2023), which holds that instructors' attitudes, sense of control, and subjective standards affect whether they accept or reject CLT. Even skeptic teachers can discover meaningful ways to employ communicative approaches with the suitable support, according to recent studies (Smith, 2025; Rubrecht, 2024; Bartlett, 2021; Ito, 2022; 斎藤裕紀恵 & サイトウユキエ, 2022) that demonstrate professional development and reflective practice can positively transform perspectives.

Nevertheless, Japan has long been known as a place where English-speaking confidence is held in low regard, yet here we have MEXT with a policy that practically begs for high levels of confidence in order to implement it. Indeed, not all Japanese teachers see the situation in this light. In any case, many do feel that the push for a more spontaneous and fluent kind of interacting in English is putting into serious question their own interactive capability in English, as well as the viability of the kinds of teacher-centered, interactive question-and-answer routines that have long been the sine qua non of English classrooms when the students have not yet achieved a significant level of fluency.

Synthesis

The conflict between pedagogical goals and classroom realities was highlighted in this case study, which looked at how a Japanese high school teacher interpreted and implemented MEXT's Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) policy. Grammar-focused exercises influenced by entrance exam pressures continued to dominate instruction even though the teacher included CLT components like role-plays and pair work. Actual classroom implementation showed limited and fragmented communicative practice, even though the policy was aligned at the goal level. Opportunities for genuine connection were restricted by obstacles like test-driven assessment systems, cultural norms, student fear, and institutional rigidity. The teacher's adjustments, which strike a balance between traditional and communicative approaches, demonstrate both professional agency and systemic limitations. Even though they occasionally deviate from the policy, these modifications show careful attention to the needs of the situation. Better support structures are needed, as teacher's views on CLT were influenced by his training, beliefs, and classroom experiences. All things considered, the study confirms that comprehensive change, including professional development, cultural sensitivity, and assessment reform, is necessary for the successful use of CLT in Japan.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex realities of educational reform, where policy and practice often diverge. The

persistence of traditional methods within a reformed curriculum reflects a philosophical tension between idealism and pragmatism. True communicative competence cannot be mandated through policy alone, it must be nurtured through systemic change, cultural understanding, and empowered pedagogy. The findings support a critical realist view that educational change must account for the interplay of structure, culture, and agency.

The following are some of the lessons learned from the case study. Policy-practice gaps persist, especially in high-stakes exam cultures. Teacher agency plays a central role in mediating curriculum reforms. Supportive structures like professional development and collaborative teaching are key to effective CLT implementation. Cultural and institutional norms must be acknowledged and addressed for sustainable pedagogical change. Lastly, hybrid practices reflect adaptation, not failure, and can serve as transitional models toward more communicative classrooms.

Limitations

This study is based on a single teacher's case in one institutional context, limiting its generalizability to broader populations. Observations were conducted over a limited time period, which may not capture the full range of instructional practices. Additionally, the study focused on the teacher's perspective, with less emphasis on student feedback or longitudinal learning outcomes.

Directions for Future Studies

Future research may adopt a comparative or longitudinal design involving multiple schools, teachers, and regions to explore diverse implementations of CLT across Japan. Including student voices and tracking learning outcomes over time would offer deeper insight into the impact of hybrid teaching models. Investigating the role of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and school leadership in shaping classroom practices would also be valuable.

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