

Yamiko Matsuya

California State University, Fullerton

English Teaching in Japan

I. Introduction

Although enthusiasm for English education continues to grow in Japan, Japanese students' reputation for English ability is fairly low. The average score of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is close to the lowest in the world, and conversational skills of Japanese people are also poor. A number of aspects, such as the national isolation policy in the Edo era and geographic isolation can be considered as reasons for such poor results. After WWII, linguists and English teachers have been trying to identify the problems of English education in Japan, and the improvement of the educational system has been one of the biggest goals today among people involved in the educational system.

In response to the problems regarding English education, the Ministry of Education put forth to establish an appropriate teaching method for Japanese junior and high school students. The teaching guidelines, which are issued by the Ministry of Education, change every time a new teaching theory is introduced, and the past fifty years have seen drastic changes. However, sufficient consideration should be given to examine if the new method really solves the problems in English education. This study investigates how English education has changed in Japan and how problematic situations can be improved by looking at the teaching guidelines and Japanese students' thoughts for English education.

II. Changes in English Education

In accordance with changes in Japanese society, English education has also changed in the past 50 years. Many methods were introduced and then challenged by educators who found a newer method. The changes of the teaching guidelines in each decade can be

explained by social changes and needs.

1) 1950s

Social changes, such as the introduction of electronics in the world, the high economic growth of Japan after WWII, and the return of researchers from the United States to Japan, brought great influences on English education. According to the teaching guidelines issued in 1956 for high school education, the objective of English education is divided into two parts -- *Functional Objectives* and *Academic Objectives*. Functional Objectives are subcategorized into listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills. The teaching guideline gives detailed teaching methods to improve these four skills. For example, it states simple teaching materials should be used for listening and speaking skills in order to increase students' phonological knowledge, such as intonation and stress. Short stories are suggested to enhance reading skills. In addition, a wide variety of writing styles is recommended to enhance students' grammatical knowledge. On the other hand, Academic Objectives are explained as cross-cultural understanding and emphasize "students' attitude to enhance Japanese culture" (Kameoka p.5).

2) Late 1950s

The principle of English education became "practical English." The foundation of this principle was established by people who had studied structuralism in the United States. Among a number of methods, "pattern practice," proposed by C.C Fries, had a great influence. Pattern practice was introduced in many textbooks for junior high schools and high schools. Nakamura (1980) states that pattern practice consists of functioning units which did not just conflict with each other. Rather, pattern practice has fixed patterns, and the patterns formed a systematic structure. Following this principle, pattern practice was fully implemented in junior high schools and high schools. However, educators found that although learners could speak if the sentence was a memorized pattern, they could not create

new sentences if the situation was different from the memorized patterns. Lightbown and Spada (1999) explain “students also need to deal with ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ material if they are eventually going to be prepared for language use outside the classroom....Restricting students to step-by-step exposure to the language extends their dependency” (p.168). Thus, pattern practice was criticized because it was considered not to fit the original principle of “practical English,” and it disappeared in about 10 years.

3) 1960s

In 1964, the Olympics were held in Tokyo, and the demand for “practical English” increased even more. At the same time, the necessity of English education for adults also increased. In response to this necessity, *The American Conversational English Book* was introduced and “70,000 books sold in the year of the Tokyo Olympics” (Nakamura p.116). This demonstrates that Japanese people had a strong interest in practical English.

On the other hand, teaching guidelines after 1958 strictly controlled the curricula and prescribed many rules. The overall objective was to enhance students’ understanding of native speakers’ viewpoints, in addition to enhancing four skills -- listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In response to the teaching guidelines, the Ministry of Education recognized that teaching materials are the most important factor for English education and stated that teaching materials “function well when a topic is provided and organized precisely” (Kameoka p.6). The guidelines provide further suggestions for the teaching materials, and the following aspects are emphasized:

- a) intonation
- b) sentences
- c) vocabulary
- d) grammar

These emphases indicate that English education in the 1960s was form-focused, and structuralism had a strong influence on the teaching method. For example, for sentences b), textbooks showed sentence patterns, such as S+V and S+V+AD and suggested that students memorize the pattern. Thus, many differences were not found from the methods of the 1950s. The teaching guidelines also emphasized that the contents should include topics regarding lifestyle, culture, stories, and the history of English speaking countries. Although people were enthusiastic about learning “practical English,” it seems the enthusiasm was not reflected in school education.

4) 1970s

There was a significant change in English education in the 1970s. Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structure* was introduced in Japan, and the focus of English education started to change from structuralism to transformational grammar. This change started because of teachers’ beliefs that pattern practice could not enhance the practical use of English. With this change, the concept of the Ministry of Education also started to change. The teaching guidelines published in 1968 reduced the amount of vocabulary, and they recommended changes to teaching approaches according to students’ skills. The most significant change was that “teaching material” was replaced by “language activity” as the most important factor in the teaching guidelines. This was the beginning of the method which focused on communication skills. The main focuses of the teaching guidelines were:

- a) language activity
- b) language material

The purpose of language activity was “to understand language holistically and to use skills for expression” (Kameoka p. 10). The teaching guidelines stated that language activity should be encouraged comprehensively, and it should help the practical use of language. Hence, language activity was considered as the basis of communication skills. The focuses on

transformational grammar and communication skills started at the same time in this period.

5) 1980s

Competition for the entrance examination for high schools became severe in the 1980s, and excessive competition became one of the biggest concerns. The Ministry of Education started to reduce the amount of study and stated that each school should design its teaching plan according to the students' preference. In other words, the ministry would make the basic study plan, and each school would make detailed plans. Due to criticism regarding the amount of the study and severity of competition for the entrance examination, a large amount of the learning material for junior high school ended up being reduced, and the reduction was transferred to the high school's curricula. The following are examples of the reduction in junior high school.

- a) New vocabulary was reduced from 1000 to 900
- b) Grammatical items were reduced from 21 to 13
- c) Required vocabulary was reduced from 610 to 490 (Kameoka p.14)

About 20% of the previous curriculum was reduced. Although students could learn vocabulary on their own, many grammatical items required classroom instruction. Therefore, materials that students learned in school drastically decreased.

Another important change at this time was the establishment of The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET). A number of native speakers were invited by the Ministry of Education as teaching assistants in English classes in the junior high schools and high schools. With this program, students had opportunities to learn English from native speakers.

3) 1990s~present

A number of Japanese companies extended their business to foreign markets, and more and more people came to enjoy oversea trips. In addition, many manufacturers hired foreigners. With these situations, the focus on communication skills in English education

became more emphasized. The proposal submitted in 1998 suggested an emphasis on communication skills. This was the beginning of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Japan, which was considered to be an innovative way to teach English. Teaching materials, course descriptions, and the teaching guidelines introduced “communicative competence” as a goal. In the teaching guidelines, the Ministry of Education explained that the objective was “to develop students’ ability to understand and to express themselves in a foreign language, to foster students’ positive attitude towards communication in a foreign language, and to heighten their interest in language and culture, thus deepening international understanding” (Wada 1994, p.1). The basic goal was to prepare students to cope with rapidly occurring changes toward a more global society. Teaching guidelines today recommend that Japanese teachers place much more emphasis on the development of communicative competence in English with the help of assistant teachers who are native speakers.

As for the teaching materials, possible situations, such as telephone conversations, hospital visits, and shopping, are listed and are introduced in textbooks to develop students’ communicative competence.

III. Teaching Methods in Japan

With the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, a number of methods were adopted to create optimal learning environments. The major change in the past 50 years was that form-focused instruction was replaced by the CLT. Although English education was just learning foreign words and patterns in the beginning, a number of methods developed based on various fields, such as applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, because educators believed that language learning is related to a number of fields.

Since it is difficult to determine the best method, the teaching methods for English education used today are influenced by many different theories. The following are the major methods used in Japan in the past fifty years.

a) The Oral Method

The oral method was originally introduced by Harold E. Palmer (1926). His emphasis was teaching English through structured lessons and conversation. Palmer preferred the use of the oral method in which language was taught through oral exercises and language immersion rather than through a “direct approach” involving “bookwork and writing, with a minimum of oral work” (viii). He advocated “a rational technique and a systematic and graded program” (viii) to keep students from being overwhelmed by the complexity of English. He recommended that sounds should be taught using the following speech learning habits.

- 1) Auditory imitation: learning based on auditory observation. Children who are not skillful in auditory learning may often be taught by the visual look-and- say method.
- 2) Oral imitation: following the auditory observation, the child must learn to say orally the sounds which he/she has heard. He/She also observes circumstances under which the words are used and learns when to apply them.
- 3) Catenizing: Mmking the necessary coordination of successive movements. The motions must be made habitual by practice. Sounds that are difficult for adults are not difficult for children, before the ages of fourteen or fifteen. Young children must learn certain sounds and words by rote. This may be done through poetry, rhymes, proverbs, short prose selections, and stories.
- 4) Semanticizing: fusing the word to its meaning. Children are also keener at this process than adults. It must be done for words, phrases, and entire sentences.
- 5) Composition by Analogy: Grammar is not the best way to teach a language according to Palmer, but through the direct method of usage comes correctness of form, knowledge of structure, inflection and decision. Conversations, changing from active to passive, and correction of the children’s mistakes as they occur will enable

him/her soon to use the language successfully for themselves. (Palmer 1926)

Using these five steps, students can learn English as children acquire their first language, and students can be exposed to natural situations. In addition, students enhance their listening comprehension as the methods focus on speech sounds. Palmer's oral method was widely accepted in Japan as an ideal teaching method. However, teachers involved in English education believed that students would not have many chances to learn actively because teachers always took initiative in class. Moreover, the lessons could lack variety in situations, especially for younger students who did not know a wide variety of vocabulary. Although many ways were tried to eliminate these drawbacks, the oral method disappeared in the late 1950s.

b) The Oral Approach

In the 1940s, structuralism and behaviorism had a strong influence on English education in the United States. Observing various theories, C.C Fries developed the oral approach, and it was soon introduced in Japan as well. The linguistic theory behind this method was a version of structural linguistics known as American Structuralism or Descriptivism, founded by the American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield. He believed that the separation of the levels of linguistic representation and emphasis of speech over the written form of the language were important. Contrastive linguistics and the scientific approach to language analysis enhanced the scientific approach to foreign language teaching and learning. The founders, such as Fries, not only possessed a convincing and powerful linguistic theory but also worked under the influence of a prominent school of psychology— behavioral psychology. The psychology of learning, according to Fries' viewpoint, disregarded intentions, thinking, conscious planning and the internal process of the learner.

Fries believed that language mastery was represented as acquiring the assets of appropriate language stimulus-response chains. Foreign language learning was basically

considered to be a process of mechanical habit formation. The focus was on the mastery of phonological and grammatical structures, and the sequence is assumed to start with the phonological level and end up with the sentence level. The learning principles included habit-formation, aural-oral, and cultural context.

The Ministry of Education in Japan adopted this theory and created teaching materials following “pattern practice,” which was introduced by C.C Fries and other founders of the theory. The following are examples of practices in textbooks for junior high school students.

a) Substitution

Basic sentence: I like apples.

(Orange): I like oranges.

(Tom): Tom likes oranges.

b) Conversion

Basic sentence: I like apples.

(Question): Do you like apples?

(Yes): Yes, I do. I like apples.

(No): No, I don't. I don't like apples.

c) Expansion

Basic sentence: I like apples.

(Very much): I like apples very much.

(Akashi, p.2)

In these patterns, stimulus-response chains are central to the practice. As for the Substitution a), students are asked to change the subjects and objects following the teacher's instructions. Students also make questions and answers in Conversion b) to make basic conversations, and in Expansion c), they are asked to add modifiers to the basic pattern.

The main strength of this theory was that it emphasized accurate pronunciation and enhanced auditory memory and listening comprehension at native speed. In addition, since

the sentences in the textbooks were adopted from native speakers' speech, educators considered that students could learn natural conversations.

c) The Communicative Approach

The communicative approach is today's major teaching method in Japan. After the decline of the oral approach, educators in Japan considered the functional and communicative potential of language to be an important aspect of English education. They found that communicative proficiency in language was more important than the mastery of structures. Collins (1999) explains the communicative approach focuses on a view of language as descriptive rather than prescriptive. In other words, it sees language as continuously changing and avoids judgmental views such as what is "wrong" and "right." The work of linguists such as Hymes has been influential in changing ideas about the significance of attending to functional meaning and socio-cultural settings in the study of language acquisition. This change has also raised a question of what it means to have "communicative competence" in a language. In this view, communicative competence involves not just having knowledge of the grammar, but being able to carry on appropriate conversation, and understand it in a wide range of social contexts.

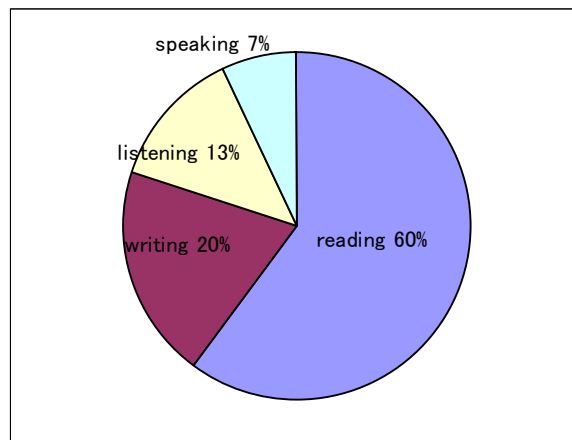
Unlike the oral method, which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can leave students in suspense as to the outcome of a class exercise, as the outcome will vary according to their reactions and responses. For example, while one student may be enthusiastic about talking about hobbies, the other student may want to enjoy small talk. Since students' personalities vary, their preferences for a topic can also vary. Students' motivation for learning comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. Therefore, classroom activities can be full of variety.

In accordance with these changes, the Ministry of Education revised textbooks in 1994. An increasing number of American and other native English speaking teachers in the JET

Program have joined Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) in teaching communicative English. However, despite these changes, the training of JTEs has changed little, and the ability of JTEs to help junior and high school students develop communicative proficiency in spoken English remains minimal. Teachers “follow traditional grammar translation methods or at best tend to emphasize rapid reading, finding main ideas in reading, and asking/answering questions in Japanese about the contents of textbooks” (Umeda p.1). The possible reasons for the traditional style seem to be that teachers have not been trained well in the new teaching method and have a tendency to follow the methods they observed in their own school days. In order to solve this problem, the Ministry of Education has begun to make plans such as determining English teachers’ language proficiency requirements, creating concrete teaching plans for English teachers, and designing teacher training programs. Upgrading the teaching system using such solutions seems vital to implement the communicative approach.

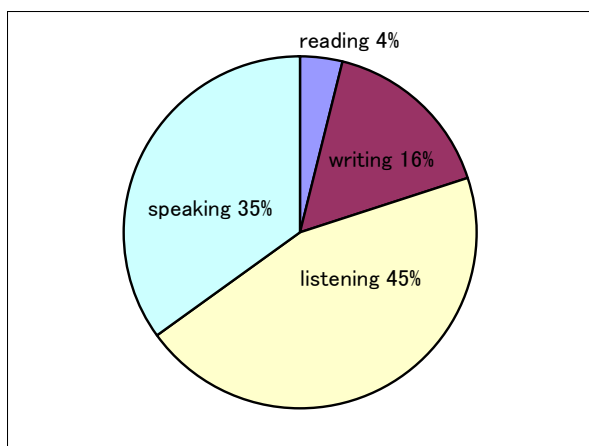
IV. Students’ Reactions to English Education

In order to investigate the gap between current English education and students’ preferences about such education, a survey was conducted. A questionnaire was given to 194 students at Hamamatsu Medical University, and they answered about their feelings on junior high and high school’s English education. They were allowed to choose more than 2 answers for Question 4, 5, and 6.



Q1. What is your strongest skill?

Q2. What is your weakest skill?

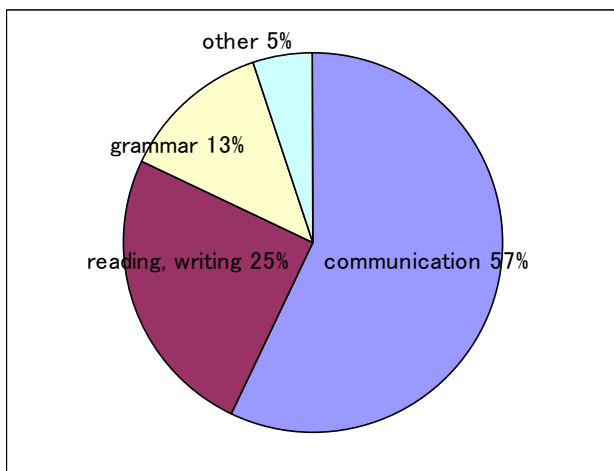


The answers showed that more than half of the students felt confident in reading, and writing was the second strongest skill. Eighty percent of the students answered they preferred reading and writing to speaking and listening. The answers demonstrate that classroom activities and homework relied on textbooks or compositions. In other words, English education in school still focuses on reading and writing skills.

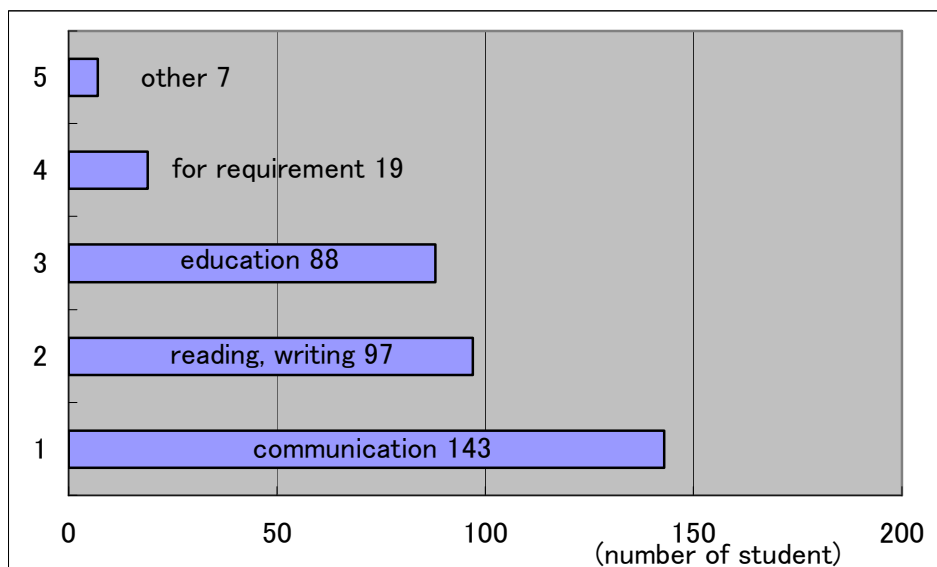
In addition, the answers show that Japanese students did not have many chances to expose themselves to English conversations. Between listening and speaking, students feel a little more confident in listening than in speaking. The reason for this result may be that students could enhance their listening comprehension on their own by using materials such as English movies and educational TV programs. Since Japan is an island country with a monolingual environment, students do not have many chances to talk to native speakers of English, and this situation seems to be the most compelling reason for their weakness of listening and speaking skills.

The next questions concern their preferred learning style and their purpose of English learning.

Q3. What type of classroom activity did you prefer?



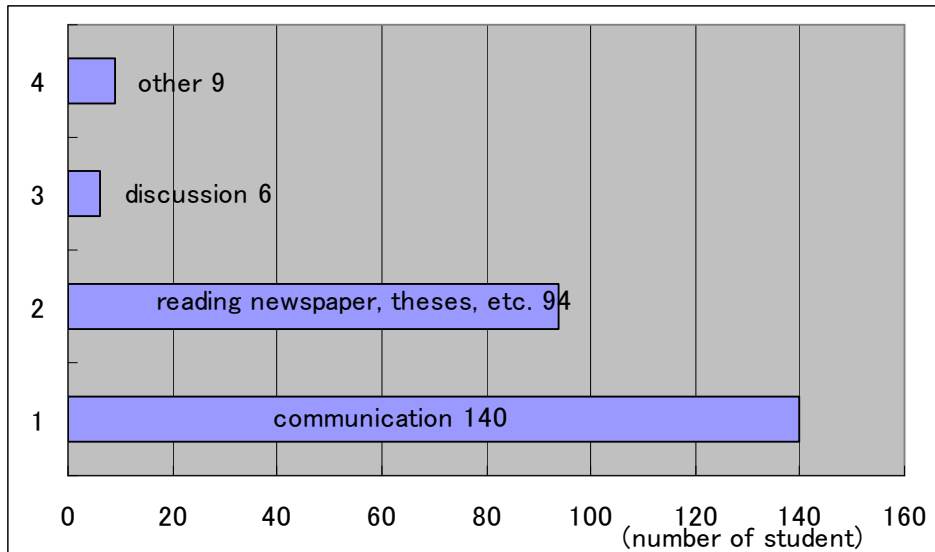
Q4. What is your purpose in studying English?



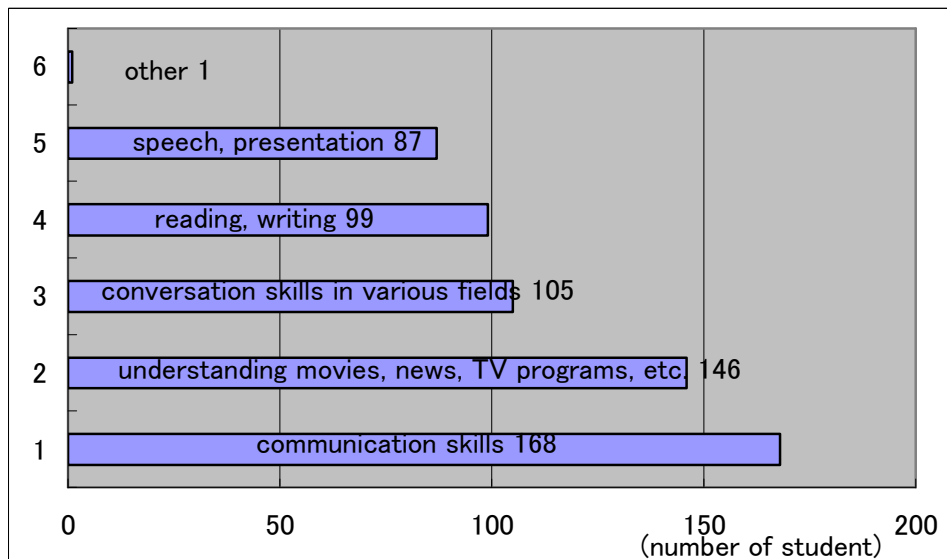
The results show that preferred activities and purpose of study are compatible. Since the chances for international business, travel, and study abroad have increased, it seems students feel a strong need for communication skills. However, despite the large proportion of students who prefer communication skills, more than half of the students still think reading and writing are necessary. It indicates students feel that those skills are also important for their future study and jobs in today's rapid internationalization.

The next questions regard their motivation and goal.

Q5. What kind of activity stimulated your motivation?



Q6. What kind of skill did you want to acquire?



In Question 5, more than 70% of the subjects indicated that they were motivated by activities that focus on communication, despite their weakness in communication skills. Their desire to improve their weaknesses should not be ignored. The English education system in Japan should respond to the students' will, and students' suggestion should be considered in making curricula to obtain an optimal learning environment.

As for the Question 6, more than 80% of the students answered that they wanted to

acquire communication skills. Following communication skills, understanding English movies, news, and TV programs was their major interest. These answers show that students would like to use not only academic materials, such as textbooks and drills, but English movies and TV programs, which also include slang and natural conversations. Therefore, these results indicate that teachers should include new materials such as English films, TV programs, and interviews in the teaching process.

The responses from the survey consistently indicate that students were enthusiastic about acquiring communication skills, and feel that classroom activities should be designed to enhance their communicative competence. In this regard, today's changes in English education toward the communicative approach are in accord with the students' will. However, in order to establish successful curricula, some possible drawbacks in the communicative approach should be considered.

V. Possible Drawbacks in the Communicative Approach

English education in Japan reached the communicative approach 50 years after research in the field started. Although a number of linguists and researchers have proposed possible methods, classroom activities may differ according to the teacher's approach. Teachers should be aware of newer methods which are proposed by researchers and the Ministry of Education.

Although there are many definitions for language knowledge, Jim Cummins (1984) believes that linguistic knowledge can be divided into two areas: BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills), and CALP (Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency). BICS are "language skills needed in social situations. It is the day-to-day language needed to interact socially with other people" (Haynes p.1). On the other hand, "CALP refers to the form academic learning. This includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content material" (Haynes p.1). This stage of language learning is necessary for students to

achieve goals of school education.

Between these two, BICS seems to be more emphasized than CALP in Japan, in which conversational skills are emphasized. However, it seems the meaning of “communication” is often misunderstood. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines communication as “the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information.” Although communication can be associated with conversations, written language can also be a means of communication as many people use email today as a major communication tool. In addition, the Internet became an important means of collecting information in various fields. In order to deal with these tools, students need accurate skills for reading and writing in addition to conversational skills. Furthermore, accurate skills will eventually help students in communication. Therefore, practice for reading and writing should not be ignored in the learning process while classroom instruction emphasizes communicative skills.

VI. Conclusion

Linguists, educators, and the Ministry of Education in Japan finally realized that the reason for the poor communicative skills of Japanese students was their traditional focus on grammatical skills. People involved in English education adopted a number of methods to find the best way to enhance Japanese students’ English skills. After several decades, English education in Japan has finally begun to change from a structural approach to a communicative one. From the survey of English education, the use of the communicative approach can be considered appropriate, and people involved in English education can be optimistic about students’ enthusiasm for communication skills. Such enthusiasm should be encouraged by responding to students’ preference in the selection of materials. However, teachers also have to improve their teaching skills. Since English teachers’ approach to newer methods varies according to their own experiences, trainings for English teachers are necessary. The Ministry of Education should focus not only on the guidelines, but on

education for English teachers as well, because an optimal environment cannot be achieved by educators alone. Various trials with objective evaluation will ensure that the English education in Japan continue to improve.

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