

# **How student-oriented is English language education in Japan?**

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## **Introduction**

Japanese students invest a lot of time and money into English study. However, even after six years of learning English as a core subject at school they don't seem to reach a level of communicative ability equivalent to that of other countries that often invest less time and money. "Japanese students study 3-5 hours a week or more, anywhere from 6 to 10 years, yet Japan has one of the lowest levels of English proficiency of any developed country in the world." (Mulligan 2005: 33) Because of this problem the Japanese Ministry of Education officially placed importance on communicative ability in the late 1980s (Taguchi: 3). The course of study set out by the ministry now clearly emphasizes the importance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) activities in the classroom (Samimy & Kobayashi 2004: 246).

As a result of this focus on communication, native English-speaking Assistant English Teachers (AETs) have been employed to work in Japanese junior high schools and high schools. The rationale behind this programme was to bring the language into the schools (Wada 2002: 220). Unfortunately, since the programme started in the late 1980s many problems have been apparent to both insiders and outsiders. Japan is a very populous country with many junior high schools and high schools so almost 10,000 AETs are required. To employ enough native English-speaking teachers to allow every junior high school and high school to have access

to one is a difficult task. Therefore, finding enough people who fit even the absolute minimum requirements for the job is demanding. Generally any native English-speaking university graduate can work as an AET.

The whole idea of this programme is to get the English language into the classroom. Getting people who don't have a language or education background means that the language is likely to be very natural, whereas many trained teachers end up adjusting their language a lot and thus not providing natural input. On the other hand, native-English speakers who may have no real interest in education, language or young people are much less likely to be dedicated to their students' learning process and achievement. Thinking from the Japanese English teachers' point of view, AETs who have no teaching experience are unlikely to be able to control a class of thirty to forty teenage students even if they can carry out successful teaching activities.

From my personal communication with many AETs over the last five years I have found that many of them just sit around in the teachers' room for hours on end waiting for someone to call on them, they often get called upon only about once a day. "Most are basically here for the cultural experience. They have been ineffectually used, often as mere human tape recorders and sometimes not used at all." (Mulligan 2005: 34)

Japanese English teachers have been seen to quickly lose confidence in AETs and therefore control the class themselves, just using the AET as a pronunciation model and planning and instigating the activities themselves. Sometimes the Japanese English teachers also choose not to use the AETs available to them for a variety of reasons. "Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) are treated as short-term guests and

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team-teaching is seen as an exception to the standard curriculum.” (Beale 2002: 27) Beale also states that no clear guidelines have been given as to how to integrate an AET into a Japanese school’s English curriculum so individual teachers are left to negotiate their positions with each other. (2002: 27)

Samimy & Kobayashi state that “being a non-native speaker of English effects a teacher’s level of communicative confidence....discouraging English teachers from using communicative English in their classes....Japanese teachers often teach communicative English by asking AETs to do it or by relying on more traditional ways of teaching.” (2004: 252) That is: they teach communicative English by not teaching communicative English but rather traditional Japanese methods such as ‘yakudoku’ (grammar translation). They go on to say that “While team-teaching with AETs is supposed to encourage more communicative activities in the classroom, their presence can not only be intimidating but also threatening to some Japanese English teachers who lack communicative confidence.” (2004: 252-253)

It seems that there are two problems which, combined together, create a limitation on Japanese students’ ability to reach communicative proficiency. One is the lack of communicative competence of the Japanese English teachers. Obviously a teacher who is not communicatively competent cannot effectively teach communicative English. Because of this lack of competence AETs were brought in to provide the communicative input for the students which leads to the second problem; the lack of adequate qualifications or experience and the consequent misuse of AETs by Japanese English teachers.

Samimy & Kobayashi (2004: 258) state that “CLT....is not adequate nor feasible

for Japanese English education due to socio-cultural and educational factors such as limited access to English, learners' restricted communication needs, non-native teachers, a different culture of learning, and the dominance of university entrance exams." However, in an article in *The Daily Yomiuri* "Entrance Exams – Not what you think" (2005) Guest reports on the contents of the National Japanese University English Entrance Exam. He reports that there is no necessity for the detailed grammatical knowledge, ability to translate or manipulate syntax that is always reported to be necessary in order to succeed in the exam: "such an approach (as *yakudoku*) may actually hinder the students' chances. In fact, more pedagogically sound approaches to comprehension, meaning-based reading, extending to interactive or productive skills, would seem to be the best formula for university entrance exam success." (Guest 2005: 16)

While undertaking this research I was teaching English at British Hills in Japan. Many junior high school and high school students visit British Hills for intensive English programmes. I wanted to find out in the experience of the students who visit British Hills whether the teaching practice in their schools is more like the communicative English teaching espoused by the Ministry of Education or more like the traditional Japanese methods. I also wanted to know what the students themselves feel that their goals are. It's fine for educators to discuss what they think the students goals are or should be but in the end the students are the consumers of the education provided by the educators so at least to some extent the students own goals should be catered for. I wondered whether the students' goals matched the emphasis on communication prescribed by the Ministry. My research questions were: What English language learning goals do Japanese junior high school and high school students have? In the experience of students who go to British Hills, what

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are the current teaching practices in Japanese junior high schools and high schools? I did research to find out to what extent the teaching practice at their schools fulfilled the students' English language goals.

### **Literature review**

Much research has been done in Japan over the past ten years or so into the English education situation. This section reviews two important studies that are relevant to the present research.

Taguchi (2005) did research into the communicative approach as it is applied in a prefecture in Northern Japan. She sent surveys to high school English teachers in that prefecture, asking them to report their typical language activities, assessment methods and equipment. She received ninety-two responses; she noted that as the response rate was only about thirty percent it is quite likely that those who answered the survey were the ones who were keen on the communicative approach. The results of the survey showed that listening exercises were the most frequent activity, followed closely by dialogue practice. The study of grammar/vocabulary was reported to be less frequent and reading aloud, games/role plays and speeches were very infrequent. Only seven percent of the teachers reported using English as an instructional medium meaning that most of these activities were carried out in Japanese.

Taguchi then went on to observe four classes in two high schools in the same prefecture. During the observations it was found that most of the activities were organized in a teacher-fronted way. At one school all time was spent in a teacher-fronted way. At the second school one class was completely teacher-fronted and in

the other class 25% of the time was dedicated to pair and group work and the other 75% was teacher fronted. In terms of the content of the observed classes, 54%-88% of the time was spent focusing on form, no time was spent on function or socio-linguistics in any of the four classes and only in one class procedure was focused on. The control of the content was also documented and in all four classes 100% of the content was controlled by the teacher, meaning that there was no opportunity for students to ask questions or clarify unclear points.

Taguchi concluded that “teacher-related factors such as their lack of expertise and experience in designing communicative activities were....obstacles” and that “Teachers did not seem to understand how to use speaking and listening exercises in a communicative manner and consequently reverted to traditional methods.” (2005: 10)

The additional information from the observations supported the results of the survey. However, the deeper information achieved through the observations showed that although a lot of listening and dialogue practice does take place, it all happens in a teacher-fronted and largely not in a Communicative Language Teaching type way. Getting the teachers to answer questions about their own teaching practices doesn't necessarily yield an accurate representation of what actually happens during their classes. In the present study the students were asked about the teaching practice as they perceive it. Teachers' answers are more likely to be influenced by the fact that they know what the ideal answers are. Students, on the other hand, are likely to give a more accurate representation of what actually takes place in the classroom.

Jacqueline Norris-Holt (2002) did research into students' attitudes towards the study

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of English. She wanted to find out what the students' learning goals were but also how they felt about their English classes at school. She distributed six hundred and six questionnaires to the students in the first year of junior high school (year 7) and the final year of high school (year 12) of one private girls school in central Japan. She received three hundred and seventy nine responses from the year 7 students and one hundred and ninety eight from the year 12 students. In the pilot study she found that the students seemed to select a neutral answer when given that option rather than committing to either a positive or negative answer. Because of this she used a four-point Likert scale which meant that there were only positive and negative options. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese.

The questionnaires were administered by the students' Japanese English teachers. "The teachers were given a one week time period in which to administer the questionnaire. This was done in an attempt to allow teachers to select the most appropriate time to complete the task with the students." (2002) Giving the teachers such a long timeframe to carry out the questionnaire could lead to the answers being influenced by the teachers. Imagine that a teacher is having a bad class, things aren't going too well and the students are not enjoying the activities prepared for them on that day. On that day the teacher is unlikely to conduct the questionnaire, as they wouldn't want the students to have a negative perception of their class at the time of answering the questions. They are much more likely to wait until they have a class that goes really well or even prepare a special fun class on the day of the questionnaire so that the students will have a particularly positive perception of their classes. More generally, the fact that the teachers themselves conducted the questionnaires could influence the students' answers. Although it was anonymous, the fact that the teacher actually walked out of the classroom holding the questionnaires

wouldn't make the students feel very secure in being able to answer in a negative way. The teacher could easily go through and have a look at the answers or even photocopy the papers before passing them on. In a country with such strong hierarchies as Japan this could be very intimidating for the students.

The results of this study showed that the students' English language goals are quite strongly communicative, with more students choosing 'communication with foreigners' than anything else as their main reason for studying English. It was also found that most students felt that they spoke very little English in their English classes, although most students agreed that conversation is an important feature of language study. Norris-Holt concludes that "One need only look at the percentage of students who indicated the frequency with which they verbally contributed in English in English classes to realize that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way in which language is taught." (2002) She also suggests that in future research students should also be asked whether they speak Japanese in their English classes to see whether it's just that the classes are so teacher-fronted that students don't speak at all or whether the speaking that goes on about English occurs in Japanese as is typical of 'yakudoku'.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study ranged from the first year of junior high school (year 7) to the third grade of high school (year 12). This age range was chosen because these are the six years in which English is a core subject at school. A questionnaire was distributed to every third student within this age range who visited British Hills for one month from the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June. In total one hundred and sixty-



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seven questionnaires were distributed and ninety-four completed questionnaires were received back. The response rate was 56.3%.

Completed questionnaires were received from five students in the first grade of junior high school (year 7), eighteen students in the second grade of junior high school (year 8), thirty students in the third grade of junior high school (year 9), thirty students in the first grade of high school (year 10), nine students in the second grade of high school (year 11) and two students in the third grade of high school (year 12). They came from fifteen different schools, seven junior high schools and eight high schools. They included both public and private schools and were located throughout Japan.

### **The Questionnaire**

A questionnaire containing twenty-five questions was used to find out the students' perceptions of their English language instruction at school, opinions about English language study in general, English Language goals and about the current teaching practices in their schools. A four-point Likert scale was used similar to that used by Norris-Holt (2002) in her study in order to encourage students to give either positive or negative perceptions rather than neutral ones. There were two sections in the questionnaire. The first section dealt with the students' perceptions of English and their English language goals. In this section 1 represented "No, not at all", 2 represented "Not really", 3 represented "Somewhat" and 4 represented "Yes, very much". The second section dealt with practices so in that section 1 represented "Never", 2 represented "Seldom", 3 represented "Often" and 4 represented "All the time".

### **The Context**

British Hills is a school but also a hotel. All the students who study at British Hills also stay in the hotel and ‘live’ in an English speaking environment for the duration of their course (up to one week). The questionnaires were left on the writing desk in the rooms of the students before they arrived. Often two to four students share one room so the name of the student/s for whom the questionnaire was intended was attached to the front of the questionnaires with a post-it note. This meant that it was clear who the questionnaire was intended for but the post-it note could easily be removed and disposed of, protecting the students’ anonymity.

### **Piloting**

The questionnaire was trialled twice, each time ten questionnaires were distributed. During the first trial no questionnaires were returned. During the second trial all ten were returned. This huge discrepancy shows that there was some outside influence as to whether or not the students completed the questionnaire. Teachers may have either discouraged or encouraged their students regarding the completion of questionnaires and in some cases may have forbidden it. So, although it was clearly stated that the completion of the questionnaire was voluntary, some students may have completed or not completed theirs based on the recommendation or orders of their teachers rather than purely of their own volition.

In the trials the questionnaire was used in both English and Japanese so that the students could choose the language they were more comfortable with to answer. Some students answered the English version and some answered the Japanese version. However, some students answered both versions and the answers were slightly different. Translation of questions from one language to another can cause

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problems for validity. However, these were fairly straightforward questions, not complex ones that would be difficult to translate clearly. Obviously, the students' English ability was not sufficient to understand the English version. Subsequent to this only the Japanese version of the questionnaire was used for the research. At this stage the number of questions was also decreased from thirty to twenty-five.

McDonough & McDonough (1997) state that there are two main disadvantages of 'opinionaires'. One is that the students have the midpoint as the exemption from having to give their opinion and the other is that different learners have different degrees of caution. However, in this questionnaire there was no midpoint exactly so that students must give their opinion either way. When we ask one question to many people we may find that their level of caution will affect results, however, if we ask many questions to a group of people it is reasonable to assume that one person's level of caution will be consistent over all the questions. Therefore, if we compare the answers of the different questions that have been answered by the same respondents the different levels of caution balance each other out. As long as the respondents are the same for each question, we can validly compare the answers.

## **Results and Discussion**

The possible scores for any question were from 1 to 4. In this questionnaire, the median score for each question was between 2 and 4 out of 4.

### **English Language Goals**

There were four questions relating to the students' English language goals. One question asked to what extent the students wanted to be able to write in English. Another question asked to what extent the students wanted to be able to read in

English. Another question asked to what extent the students wanted to be able to speak confidently in English. The fourth such question was to what extent the students wanted to know English grammar.

*Table R1 – English Language Goals*

<u>Goal</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>JHSm</u>	<u>HSm</u>	<u>Negative responses</u>	<u>Positive responses</u>
To write in English	94	4	4	4	1.1%	98.9%
To read in English	94	4	4	4	2.1%	97.9%
To know English grammar	94	4	4	4	3.2%	96.8%
To speak confidently in English	94	4	4	4	4.3%	95.7%

We can see quite clearly from these results that the students in this research have very strong language goals in general; it doesn't seem to make too much difference to them what aspect of English language we ask about. They really want to know English. They want to be able to read and write slightly more than to speak or have knowledge of grammar.

### **Perceptions of English Study**

There were four questions relating to students' general perceptions of their English study. The first one was to what extent the students enjoy their English classes at school. The second question was whether or not they found English to be a difficult subject. The next question was whether or not they would choose to study English if it were not compulsory. This question relates to students' English language perceptions as it shows to what extent they find English enjoyable and useful based on their experience of learning it as a core subject at school. The final question

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pertaining to English language learning perceptions was whether or not they believed English should be taught using English only.

*Table R2 – Perceptions of English Study*

<u>Question</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>JHSm</u>	<u>HSm</u>	<u>Negative responses</u>	<u>Positive responses</u>
Would you choose to take English	94	3	3	4	18.1%	81.9%
Difficulty of English	94	3	3	3	16%	84%
Enjoyment of school English classes	94	3	3	3	21.3%	78.8%
English classes in English only	92	3	2	3	46.7%	53.3%

It is apparent that students do not enjoy their English classes all that much. Of all the questions “Do you enjoy your English classes at school?” yielded the third lowest scores. Perhaps it is because they don’t enjoy their English classes at school so much that they find English difficult. When we find things boring we tend to do them with less motivation and effort and thus also find those things more difficult. It is interesting to note the huge difference between the answers of the junior high school students and the high school students regarding whether or not they would choose to take English were it not compulsory. Probably, junior high school students have fewer chances to use the English they learn and therefore don’t see it as an important skill. On the other hand, high school students are more focused on entering university or finding a job and are probably finding that a higher level of English does improve their chances in these pursuits. Regarding the question of whether or not English classes should be taught using English only, again there was a huge difference between the answers of the junior high school and high school students. This reflects the much lower level of communicative English ability that the junior high school students obviously have. They appear to be anxious as to

whether their ability is enough to communicate in English only.

### **Teaching Practices**

There were eight questions concerning teaching practices at school, arranged into two subsets of four questions each. One question was whether or not the students considered their English teacher at school to be able to speak English confidently. All ninety-four students answered this question. The median score was 4, and 13.8% of the students gave a negative answer. For the junior high school students the median score was 3, for the high school students it was 4. The other seven questions were in the second section of the questionnaire so the answers were based on frequency rather than positive or negative perceptions.

One was asking how often the students practice listening during their school English classes. As a follow-up to this question I asked the students to choose the method of listening they usually use in class. There were three options; listening to recorded materials such as cassettes and CDs, listening to your teacher, listening to your AET. Forty-eight percent of the students chose 'listening to your teacher' as the most frequent method, 33.5% chose 'listening to recorded materials' as the most frequent listening practice and 18.5% chose 'listening to your AET'.

The third such question was how often they practice speaking in English classes. As a follow-up to this question I asked the students to choose the patterns of interaction that usually take place when they are practicing speaking. There were three options: speaking 'to other students', speaking 'to the teacher' and speaking 'in unison with other students'. The most communicative type of class would involve students speaking 'to other students' for example in pair work and group work activities.

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Speaking mostly ‘to the teacher’ and speaking ‘in unison with other students’ would both represent a teacher-fronted lesson. Seventy-two point nine percent of the students reported that they usually speak ‘to the teacher’, 20% said that they usually spoke ‘in unison with other students’ and just 7.1% reported that speaking ‘to other students’ was the most common form of speaking practice.

*Table R3.1 – Teaching Practices*

<u>Question</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>JHSm</u>	<u>HSm</u>	<u>Never/ Seldom</u>	<u>Often/ All the time</u>
Study grammar	92	4	3	4	4.3%	95.7%
Student speaks Japanese	92	3	3	3	12%	88%
Student speaks English	93	3	3	3	15.1%	84.9%
Practice listening	94	3	3	3	26.6%	73.4%

In the next subset, the first question was how often the Japanese English teacher spoke Japanese during class. After that I asked how often the Japanese English teacher spoke English during class. As was recommended by Norris-Holt (2002), I also asked how much the students themselves spoke Japanese during their English class. The final question on the topic of teaching practices was how often the students were taught by their AET.

*Table R3.2 – Language Input*

<u>Question</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>JHSm</u>	<u>HSm</u>	<u>Never/ Seldom</u>	<u>Often/ All the time</u>
Taught by AET	93	4	4	4	7.5%	92.5%
Teacher speaks English	94	4	4	3	2.1%	97.9%
Teacher speaks Japanese	94	3	3	3	13.8%	86.2%

There were two students who reported never having been taught by an AET. One of them was in the second grade of junior high school and the other was in the third grade of junior high school. That means that although according to Ministry of Education policy every junior high school and high school student should have access to an AET, in at least one and possibly in two out of fifteen schools, this is not happening.

The answers for the different questions regarding teaching practices yielded a wider range of scores showing that teaching practices vary more between different schools than students perceptions do. On average, at most of these schools the AET appears to play an active role in the teaching equation. The Japanese English teachers at junior high schools speak a little more English than Japanese. However, at the high schools, the Japanese English teachers speak English and Japanese in equal proportions. The most common activity at all levels was studying grammar. The next most common was speaking. The junior high school students' responses show that they speak English and Japanese in equal proportions whereas the high school students speak Japanese a little more than English. One student speaking to the teacher was by far the most common pattern of interaction when speaking English, representing a teacher-fronted class situation. Practicing listening was quite a bit less frequent than either studying grammar or speaking and by far the most common method of listening was listening to their English teacher, representing a teacher-fronted class situation.

### **Experiences at British Hills**

Finally, all of the students who took part in the survey have had the experience of being in an English-only environment. There were three questions aimed at



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comparing their English learning experiences at school with their experiences of learning English at British Hills. These questions provide a comparison in terms of teaching practice and help us to see to what extent the students were able to communicate in English.

The first question comparing learning experiences was asking to what extent they enjoyed their classes at British Hills. The first question regarding the students' ability to communicate in English was asking to what extent the students felt they could understand the teachers at British Hills. The second question was asking to what extent the students felt that the teachers at British Hills could understand them.

*Table R4 – Experiences at BH*

<u>Question</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>JHSm</u>	<u>HSm</u>	<u>Negative Responses</u>	<u>Positive Responses</u>
Enjoyment of classes	93	4	4	4	5.4%	94.6%
Teachers could understand students	93	3	3	3	8.6%	91.4%
Student could understand teachers	94	3	3	3	14.9%	85.1%

It is obvious that although the classes at British Hills were taught in English only and students were only allowed to speak to the teacher in English, which would have posed quite a challenge, the students enjoyed their classes at British Hills quite a bit more than they enjoy their classes at school. The classes at British Hills were enjoyed equally by junior high school and high school students. The ability to understand and be understood was not. The high school students could understand and be understood equally, however, the junior high school students found that they were understood much more than they understood what the teacher was saying. This

is probably a reflection of the lower level of confidence of the junior high school students as well as a lower level of vocabulary and grammatical awareness. It is quite likely that the students actually understood what the teachers were saying but were not completely sure and therefore assumed they were wrong. This often happens when students are not used to their teachers speaking a lot of English in the classroom.

One final question was how much English the students spoke during their classes at British Hills. All 94 students answered this question and the median score was 3. The median for junior high school students was 3 and for high school students it was 4. Twelve point eight percent of the students gave responses at the less frequent end of the scale and 87.2% gave more frequent answers. Even given the English-only situation, which would make students feel more anxious about speaking, students spoke slightly more English during their classes at British Hills than they do during their school English classes.

Upon going to British Hills, the students managed to be understood reasonably well but could understand what the teachers were saying to them less. Even so, they enjoyed their classes at British Hills very much. This question yielded the fifth highest scores after the four questions about English language goals.

### **Ranking of questions**

This is a list of the questions, ranked from the highest to the lowest level of agreement.

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Table R5 – Ranking

<u>Question</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>JHSm</u>	<u>HSm</u>	<u>Negative responses</u>	<u>Positive responses</u>
Want to write	94	4	4	4	1.1%	98.9%
Want to read	94	4	4	4	2.1%	97.9%
Want to know grammar	94	4	4	4	3.2%	96.8%
Want to speak confidently	94	4	4	4	4.3%	95.7%
Enjoyment of classes at BH	93	4	4	4	5.4%	94.6%
Taught by AET at school	93	4	4	4	7.5%	92.5%
School teacher speaks English	94	4	4	3	2.1%	97.9%
Study grammar at school	92	4	3	4	4.3%	95.7%
School teacher is confident	94	4	3	4	13.8%	86.2%
Student speaks English at BH	94	3	3	4	12.8%	87.2%
Would choose to study English	94	3	3	4	18.1%	81.9%
Student was understood at BH	93	3	3	3	8.6%	91.4%
Student speaks Japanese at school	93	3	3	3	12.0%	88.0%
Teacher speaks Japanese at school	94	3	3	3	13.8%	86.2%
Student understood by teachers at BH	94	3	3	3	14.9%	85.1%
Student speaks English at school	93	3	3	3	15.1%	84.9%
Difficulty of English	94	3	3	3	16.0%	84.0%
Enjoyment of English classes at school	94	3	3	3	21.3%	78.7%
Practices listening at school	94	3	3	3	26.6%	73.4%
English classes in English only	92	3	2	3	46.7%	53.3%

**Comparison between questions**

The results of questions from different sections of the questionnaire were compared to find out what effects the teaching practices have. In particular, to find out what

effects the teaching practices have on the students' ability to understand what's happening in an English-only environment and be understood in this context.

To see what goes on in the classroom during English classes, we need to look at not only what the students say they actually study in class but also the patterns of interaction. We can see from the results that the English classes in these schools are largely teacher-fronted. Although the teachers do speak more English than Japanese, the students on the other hand speak more Japanese than English.

*Table R6.1 – Patterns of Interaction*

<u>Question</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>JHSm</u>	<u>HSm</u>	<u>Never/ Seldom</u>	<u>Often/ All the time</u>
Teacher speaks English	94	4	4	3	2.1%	97.9%
Student speaks Japanese	93	3	3	3	12.0%	88.0%
Teacher speaks Japanese	94	3	3	3	13.8%	86.2%
Student speaks English	93	3	3	3	15.1%	84.9%

Furthermore, students who spoke more English during their English classes at school were better able to understand and be understood at British Hills. Obviously practicing speaking in the classroom, even in a traditional, teacher-fronted way, helps students not only to communicate more effectively but also improves their comprehension when listening.

*Table R6.2 – Amount of English Output*

Student speaks English at school	Negative response	Positive response
Student understands English at BH	3	4
Student is understood at BH	3	4

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Interestingly, the students who purported that they found English to be a difficult subject were better able to understand what the teachers at British Hills said to them. The ability to make themselves understood was equal for students who found English to be a difficult subject and those who did not. This seems to show that a lot of influence is placed on the students' ability to remember vocabulary and grammar rather than their ability to communicate. This probably reflects a lack of communicative focus not only during English classes but also within assessment practices.

*Table R6.3 – Perception of Difficulty*

Difficulty of English	Negative response	Positive response
Student understands English at BH	3	4
Student is understood at BH	3	3

### **Conclusion**

It is to be assumed that those teachers who have teaching practices which match those set out by the Ministry of Education are more likely to encourage their students to complete such a questionnaire whereas those who teach in a more traditional way are more likely to discourage it. Because of this it is reasonable to assume that the results of this survey represent the more communicative end of the spectrum in terms of teaching practices. Furthermore, all of the students who answered the questionnaire came from schools that see sending their students to British Hills for an English-only experience as beneficial to their English progress. It is probable that such schools also have better teaching practices during their own English lessons in terms of adopting a Communicative Language Teaching approach.

We should remember the sample of students from whom results were collected. They are from schools that chose to send them to British Hills for a chance to communicate in English. Although the intention was to have a random sample of students from these schools, it is apparent that even after coming to British Hills their school teachers had some influence over whether or not students answered the questionnaire. Because of this, the students who took part in this research are quite likely to be from schools with teaching practices that are more similar to what is recommended by the Ministry on Education.

Taguchi (2005) carried out her research in late 2002. Three years later, this research still supports her findings that English lessons are carried out in a teacher-fronted way. It was also found that almost all of the speaking that goes on in the classroom is either between a student and teacher or students (speaking in unison) and the teacher. Considering the students' language learning goals and the content of the national university entrance exam, there is too much focus on form in the classroom. The students in this study spoke more in class than those in Taguchi's, however, it is unclear whether this has changed over the three years between the two research projects. The students in this study are more likely to have more exposure to communicative teaching practices whereas Taguchi used a more random sample of schools.

Compared to the research carried out by Norris-Holt (2002), the students in the present research were much more positive about the study of English. In Norris-Holt's results, 18.7% to 36.1% of the students strongly disagreed regarding whether they would take English if it were not compulsory whereas in this research only 6.4% strongly disagreed and only 18.1% disagreed at all. When asked to indicate

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whether or not they thought English classes should be carried out in English only, only 14.1% to 29.9% of Norris-Holt's respondents agreed whereas 53.3% of the respondents in this study agreed that they should be. Furthermore, only 9.5% to 11.7% of the respondents in her research agreed that they often spoke English during English classes whereas 84.9% of the respondents in the present survey chose "often" or "all the time" when asked how often they speak English in their English classes at school. These positive results appear to show that teaching practices are changing, becoming more communicative, over time.

Regarding the questions as to what the students' English language goals were, it was found that their goals are very strong. Junior high school students' goals are not as strong as high school students'. The high school students would also be much keener than the junior high school students to take English if it were not compulsory. There are several reasons for this. The first one is that the high school students enjoy their English classes more than their junior high school counterparts. Also, high school students are more able to realize that English is necessary in life as they are already looking into tertiary study or work.

In terms of teaching practice it was found that the students study more grammar than anything else. They speak more Japanese than English in the classroom. These characteristics seem to indicate fairly traditional teaching practices such as 'yakudoku'. Practicing listening is done the least often in the classroom. On the other hand, the students do seem to get quite a bit of exposure to their AETs and Japanese English teachers speak more English than Japanese in the classroom at the junior high school level. Overall, teaching practices were found to be better at junior high schools than high schools. This is probably because the teachers are

focusing on the national university entrance exam and believe that the study of grammar is important for success. Actually, the high school students are going to embark on further study or work sooner than the junior high school students for which they will need to use their English skills so their need for communicative competence in English is greater than the junior high school students'. Furthermore, we can see from the article written by Guest (2005) that this kind of teaching doesn't actually help students with the national university entrance exam as much as a more communicative approach would.

The most important aspect that became apparent through this research was the lack of enjoyment of English classes. The teaching style doesn't really fulfill the students' needs as they stated that knowing grammar was the least important to them, whereas they study grammar in the classroom more than anything else. However, the students' English language learning goals are so strong that this in itself doesn't represent a mismatch of goals between students and teachers. What is important though is that students enjoy their English classes. Enjoyment of classes leads to higher motivation, better energy in the classroom and therefore also higher rates of success. The students in this research showed that they don't really enjoy their classes.

One of the aims of this research was to see whether Communicative Language Teaching, which is espoused by the government, is indeed suitable for Japanese students. CLT certainly is suitable for Japanese junior high school and high school students. While studying at British Hills the teachers only spoke English, all instructions were given in English, yet the students still spoke slightly more English in the classroom than they usually do in their English classes at school. Most



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importantly, the fact that the classes were carried out in English only did not promote undue levels of stress but rather the students enjoyed their classes very much. These students only studied for 2 to 5 days at British Hills but having English only in their school classrooms would also provide a level of English input sufficient to increase their communicative ability. They spoke more English in the classroom at British Hills, which leads directly to communicative competence, and they enjoyed their classes. If these classes had been for a longer period of time this increased enjoyment would potentially lead to increased motivation, increased effort in the classroom and therefore increased proficiency as well.

The reasons given for stating that the communicative approach doesn't work in Japan are usually that the teachers themselves are not confident enough to teach in a communicative way, that the students are not capable of learning in a communicative way because they are shy or nervous and used to very traditional teacher-fronted approaches to teaching and that the students need the in-depth grammar knowledge rather than communicative ability in order to pass the national university entrance exam. Japanese students are, it appears, quite open-minded when it comes to studying English, especially with students in this age group; if they try something and find it to be fun they will keep doing it in spite of their shyness. From the article written by Guest, we can see that the national university entrance exam in fact does not require such in-depth grammar knowledge but rather knowledge of functional English and the ability to use English in a natural way would stand them in good stead.

The only problem that remains is the teachers' lack of communicative ability. Based on literature it is unclear whether the problem is purely one of ability or whether

the teachers simply don't feel it's appropriate to speak primarily in English in the English language classroom. Mulligan (2005) pinpoints one aspect of this problem "(a) major barrier is the entrenched culture that stigmatizes as uppity those teachers who dare to use English in the classroom. Oftentimes, a new teacher, full of hope and enthusiasm, attempts to use English in the classroom and is castigated by his or her colleagues (and students as well) until coerced into conforming to the status quo." One solution would be to increase the requirements for employment of AETs and use them as full-time teachers in their own right alongside Japanese teachers. This way the students could have exposure to the in-depth grammatical knowledge as well as to more appropriate quantities of English input. Another is to change the selection process for Japanese English teachers, focusing more on communicative competence rather than more academic aspects.

The main limitation of this study was that there was no opportunity to observe teaching practice in practice. This would have required substantial connections with people in the education system as well as substantial financial input, which weren't available. Although it seems that the teaching practices are improving over time, they are improving in the rest of the world too and more needs to be done if the communicative competence of Japanese people is to reach levels equivalent to other developed countries. In the future more research needs to be done to find out what can be done about the lack of communicative ability of English teachers in Japan. For example; research into the deeper ideology behind the AET programme, enquiry into the AET selection process, into the selection process for Japanese English teachers and the continued training that they are offered during their employment.

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