

# Suggestions: Treatment of the New Course of Study for Foreign Language Education in Japan

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## Abstract

This paper aims at helping teachers understand issues relevant to the new Course of Study for Foreign Language Education at the secondary and elementary school levels in Japan. As the new Course of Study encourages instructors to teach in English and to expand the breadth of the content, teachers, non-Japanese in particular, may experience difficulties in implementing these reforms and changes. This paper aims at explaining the changes, and offering several practical approaches that illustrate ways of putting the new course into effect. Finally, the paper encourages teachers to examine this important document carefully so that language education in Japan can develop to the fullest extent possible under this new Course of Study.

**Keywords:** Course of Study for Foreign Languages, secondary school language reform, teacher training, English Expression, Communication English, communicative language teaching in Japan

## OVERVIEW

The new Course of Study for Foreign Languages, unveiled in 2009, represents a significantly more progressive step forward compared with like-oriented courses of study of the past decade. Like its predecessor of six years earlier, which strongly recommended teachers to focus on the development of practical communicative competence, this course of study reaches yet further, aiming to encourage teachers to focus on the development of language as communication. Changes in language education for the upcoming block of courses of study are both sweeping in scope and numerous.

Paramount among the changes at the secondary level is the Ministry of Education's plan to introduce two new courses, Communication English I and II, and English Expression I and II. In reviewing the objectives for these two courses, it becomes evident that there is far less emphasis on the teaching of grammar, and powerful encouragement to concentrate instead on objectives built upon the acquisition or learning of productive skills, particularly regarding the course called English Expression. Furthermore, English has, for the first time, been introduced as a mandatory course at the primary school level. While this may appear to be a mere rubber-stamping of a development that was already

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more or less undertaken in the previous course of study (i.e., upwards of 90% of all elementary schools offered English during the past several years), it represents an official sanctioning of an earlier step, one that should have a significant effect on teachers at the junior high school level. The learning of a foreign language will take place at an earlier age for children throughout Japan.

There are, of course, reasons to be skeptical that the Course of Study for 2009 will succeed. In the early 1950s, a progressive course of study was introduced, but went largely unheeded by administrators and teachers. Does a course of study represent a binding document for teachers of foreign language? The answer would be clearly no; at the past six speaking engagements in which this writer has presented, fewer than 1% of all participants had actually read the document. As for a partial reading, the number was easily under 1% as well. (It should be noted that at one presentation, roughly 5% claimed to have read the Course of Study partially, but it should be emphasized that they had all received it a day earlier, at the beginning of the conference.)

Yet while teachers may not read the document itself, it appears that they are familiar with the goals of English education as they are transferred from ideal to reality. Ostensibly, this process manifests itself through the textbooks, which embody the goals and objectives of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages, since it is expressed on the homepage for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that, "... MEXT sets Courses of Study (sic) as standards for curriculums designed for use at elementary, junior high and senior high schools, and examines textbooks in consideration of their important role as the primary teaching materials." (MOFA, p. 1, 2009). The explanation goes on to point out that MEXT screens textbooks that have been compiled by private-sector companies to determine their suitability for inclusion in school curriculums.

Based on this explanation, it would appear that since MEXT has created the guidelines for the courses of study for various subjects, it would be able to strictly regulate the teaching materials through this process as well. However, while the process may extend as far as the compilation and distribution of materials, it is not always carried through in an optimal way so as to ensure the achievement of the objectives outlined in a particular course of study.

In addition to the content in the Course of Study for Foreign Languages, numerous teachers have expressed much concern and anxiety over suggestions that course material be taught entirely in English. As we will see, however, this directive has been exaggerated as absolute. This misunderstanding likely stems from miscommunication by the mass media, or the failure of teachers to actually read this important document.

It cannot be stated with objective conviction that the new Course of Study for Foreign Languages represents the correct path in helping to render the next generation functional in English. There are some elements of classroom management that could be overseen nationally to aid in the improvement or spread of language proficiency on a national scale, however, the current document provides ample freedom and leeway for working toward this goal through the adoption of its objectives and the pursuit thereof.

Before examining changes in the Course of Study at the senior high school level, it is important to consider another sweeping policy development that will affect language education at every level: the sanctioning of instruction at the elementary school level.

## A HEAD START OR A STEP BACKWARD?

Prior to the introduction of this new Course of Study, schools were free to use what was called, “a period for integrated study to provide interdisciplinary and integrated learning according to students’ situations, and in consideration with local and school circumstances.” (MEXT, p. 121). This wording is not only reminiscent of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages from 1953, but extremely liberal in terms of providing schools with the freedom to use the time as deemed most suitable for its charges.

Not surprisingly, English classes were called “foreign language conversation”, or an introduction (or orientation, sampling) to foreign language prior to the implementation of this new Course of Study. This undertaking seemed to embody a three-pronged goal: the development of self-expression, international understanding, and a heightened sense of self-identity. It is highly reminiscent of classic principles of education such as those outlined by scholars like John Dewey: “Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes may be more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history, for these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future. The most important attitude that can be formed is that of the desire to go on learning.” (Dewey, p. 44).

Dewey went on to express another valuable aim of education: “What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his soul? Loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses the desire to apply what he has learned and above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?” Dewey could be speaking about rote learning, the memorization of material in order to pass a critical examination, rather than prepare children as good citizens with the ability to think *critically*. As we shall see further on in this analysis, that ability (to think critically) is hinted at in the objectives for senior high school students.

What was most important about the previous Course of Study for Foreign Languages was its very nature: that education be construed not as a commodity or the acquisition of skills for the marketplace, but as an arena for developing free minds. That children could “try” English was progressive; that elementary schools could introduce it to them as an undertaking or subject was admirable. It would appear that problem lay not in sanctioning this course for the purpose of furthering it at the junior high school level; rather, it would seem that English be shifted to an elective subject from junior high school if a “sampling” was to serve as an objective.

Under the Course of Study that will go into effect from 2011, students (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders) are required to learn English. As an introduction or orientation, however, this could prove useful. If it serves to raise the affective filter of a young person, on the other hand, then the outcome might be a student who is vehemently against learning a foreign language.

## AS A FLEX COURSE

The previous course of study provided for such FLEX course construction, one that would appear to prepare students well for the formal study of English at a later stage while providing input in the form of casual instruction and participation. The goals of Foreign Language Exploratory/Experience (FLEX) programs are usually limited to introducing students to a foreign language and culture, with the aim of arousing interest in further language study. (Curtain & Pesola, p. 29). As of the last course

of study, it appeared that the Ministry was emulating the so-called Croatia experiment (Brewster & Ellis, p. 17), a much heralded project of the early 1990s. Under this curriculum, students were to start English “casually”, through play, at an early stage. Toward the middle of primary school, “serious study” was to be introduced *gradually*. By the end of elementary school, students found that they enjoyed learning English through a more serious approach after the basics had been mastered.

One aspect of the program that could have been adopted was the concept of streaming. From junior high, students had clearly mastered English to differing degrees. Students in a school were thereafter sorted by perceived proficiency level, as determined through placement tests. This reform could have been extremely useful in Japan; since private companies have already designed tests that serve such a purpose, these exams could have been administered widely and teachers could have taught students who were at least grouped by skill level.

Additionally, the Ministry had published a handbook that proved extremely useful as a resource text for teachers working in this FLEX course (i.e., the period for interdisciplinary and integrated study). Called the *Practical Handbook for Elementary School English Activities*, the bilingual sourcebook could be used by either Japanese instructors on their own or by native speakers with just a rudimentary understanding of teaching methodology. In addition to numerous practical activities that were explained in great detail for the lay teacher, the book provided helpful theoretical underpinning for such courses: “When conducting foreign language conversation activities within the study of international understanding, the activities should incorporate experiential learning appropriate for elementary age students in which children are exposed to foreign language and familiarity with the culture and daily life of foreign countries.” Again, the book harkens back to an extremely progressive period in education. It suggests that teachers create syllabuses tailored to the needs of their students, and not merely aim for success on an examination of mind-boggling complexity.

## PROCESS-ORIENTED SYLLABUS

Given the nature of language teaching at the elementary school level, it is not necessary, as is done at the secondary level, to follow a grammatical syllabus (in other words, a text that is prepared with the mastery of grammatical structures as its main aim). Rather, it is possible, using text material such as the handbook from the ministry, to *integrate* language into lessons. Such an approach would most likely reduce emphasis on language, thus making a reduction in the affective filter a possible or even likely outcome. As Curtain postulates, this affective filter, if raised, could impede, block, or destroy a student’s enthusiasm for learning language at an early stage. (Curtain & Pesola, p. 54).

This progressive approach, as outlined in the previous Course of Study from 2004, naturally leads to a heightened interdisciplinary focus, skill integration, and other objectives being inserted into the period for integrated study. The following might serve as a lesson plan in such a course for integrated study. Special attention should be given to the multitude of objectives set for such a simple lesson:

Theme: Holidays (Fathers’ Day)

Language focus (notional): Colors

Language items for practice: “What is it?”, Numbers (1–12), Colors, Family members (pronouns “he”

and “she” for the father and mother)

Macro skills: Listening, speaking

Micro skills: Presentation skills

Interdisciplinary topics: Culture (holidays), art (designing a necktie)

ACTIVITY	TIME	SKILL FOCUS	PROCEDURE
Greeting	1 m	S, L	Greet the students as a group and some individually, employing routine patterns.
Game	8 m	S, L	Two teams, using large dice to practice numbers from 1–12. Students repeat the chant, “1–2–3, THROW!” each time a student “plays”, and respond to the teacher’s question, “What is it?” by saying the number appearing on the dice.
Story	10 m	L	The teacher tells a story about a father who is getting a present on Fathers’ Day. The present turns out to be a necktie; the teacher then shows the necktie choices, introducing each color in the process.
Necktie	20 m	L	Following instructions and a demonstration, the students make paper neckties for their fathers.
Presentation	6 m	S, L	Each student shows his/her necktie. Speaking in English, they talk about the colors they used.

NOTE: S = speaking; L = listening

At the conclusion of the presentations, the students vote for their favorite neckties and the teacher presents those students with awards. Again, because this is elementary school, this is an exercise in democratic choice. This is an undertaking that aims indirectly at instilling responsible habits of democracy in good citizens, rather than aim at creating academic juggernauts.

In the next lesson, the teacher can use popular animation figures and link them to country of origin, thus drawing from the students’ world and at the same time, focusing on world history/geography while again working on colors, an important notion in the world of the elementary school student.

### THE NEW COURSE OF STUDY FOR 2009

As texts are fixed for the English courses, it may be that teachers are unable to prepare lessons in a way that is consistent with or similar to the lesson plan outlined in the previous section. The focus would more likely shift to the patterns or material outlined in the text; rather than follow a process-oriented approach, the teachers would feel the need to follow a pre-set syllabus in the form of a text. As often happens, teachers may follow a “synthetic syllabus” and pay less attention to student motivation

and interest in learning a foreign language. In other words, the elementary school teachers may experience “backwash.” They may teach strictly to the approved text for fear of leading students astray.

Upon closer analysis, it would appear that the new Course of Study at the elementary school level aims not to provide guidelines for FLEX courses, but rather, for FLES (Foreign Language at Elementary School), an upgraded form of the former FLEX programs. Such programs will focus on the learning of another language and its culture.

Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent junior high teachers will interact with their counterparts at the elementary school in coordinating the two programs. In this sense, “standardizing” education at the elementary level makes sense, as the teachers at the junior high school level will know approximately what students have learned at the elementary school level. On the other hand, texts may not reflect this development just yet, and teachers may simply re-teach that which students have already learned. This, too, may lead to problems with motivation and affective filter.

Within a few years of trial and error, however, teachers may successfully adjust and alter the new course to link with junior high school. Under such a scenario, teachers could build upon that which students have already learned, raising the level of proficiency at which teachers may aim.

As the Course of Study for Foreign Language at the Senior High School Level reflects raised levels of proficiency, it is possible that this will be achieved. The overall level of foreign language proficiency in Japan could, as a result, increase.

## TWO NEW COURSES

Under the new Course of Study for senior high school students, two new courses (or “classes”) have been created: Communication English and English Expression. From these two new courses, it appears evident that English is to be taught in integrated fashion. The four major skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) have been given equal importance while in English Expression, heavy emphasis is placed on the productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing). A balance of skill development, of input/output, is paramount at all levels.

Such a development could be viewed as revolutionary, as the Ministry seems to be aiming to create a system for language learning that is based on objectives similar structurally to those systems outlined in the Common European Framework of References on Language. There appears to be a greater effort to incorporate communicative approaches to teaching, such as those developed by linguists Henry Widdowson and J.P.B. Allen. The models drafted by these two linguists to guide teachers are invaluable in forging a synthesis between communicative and grammatical ends.

Since the late 1970s, Widdowson’s model has served in presenting a fundamental balance concerning language teaching. A sociolinguistic, or communicative, component complements and modifies a “structured” or “grammatical” approach to teaching language. It does not supercede it. (Stern, p. 261). The new Course of Study is therefore progressive (albeit late) in that it appears that language acquisition is to take place with formal grammatical knowledge being taught to systematize or supplement it, as expressed in III 3 (B) of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages.

The following chart showing levels of communicative competence serves to expose some problems with the current situation.

<p><b>LEVEL ONE</b> (Structural Competence)</p> <p>a. Structural control b. Simplified material c. Mainly structural practice</p>	<p><b>LEVEL TWO</b> (Functional Competence)</p> <p>a. Discourse control b. Simplified discourse c. Mainly discourse practice</p>	<p><b>LEVEL THREE</b> (Experiential Competence)</p> <p>a. Situational or topical control b. Authentic language c. Free practice</p>
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At present, it would appear that levels one and two have been reversed for some time. It would also explain a second phenomenon or development, “the habitually lost student.”

### THE HABITUALLY LOST STUDENT

Given failure to stream or to radically alter the structure of language instruction, motivation and content suitability for lower level students would seem problematic. There are two facets to the case of this so-called habitually lost student:

1. The student came into junior high school with no prior English instruction. From the first day, the teacher’s instruction was geared toward comprehension and progression. Those with prior instruction naturally come to treat first year English as remedial, or review-oriented, in nature. For these students, who most likely represented a sizeable portion of a given class, the pace of instruction was increased so that an element of challenge would exist. Explanations on certain points were ignored or skipped, as the instructor seemed to feel that the students had understood. Given the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the student, such students—who had fallen behind from the first day— would be likely to fail to make their state of confusion known, leading them to spend the first year, and each year thereafter, lost. Due to various pressures, however, the “lost” student is passed on to the next level, as material is either skipped or “dumbed down.” The more advanced learners may therefore be held back from more challenging material, though ironically, they may cover it in juku.
2. Many students recall having followed the second stage more frequently at junior high school than high school. They recall practicing conversations and exercising patterns more frequently at the junior high level than at high school, when their knowledge of English would have been considerably higher. At the senior high school level, however, little attention was given to functional competence, meaning that students were focusing on structural competence for some extrinsic goal: success on examinations. Again, the “lost” students would find the structures and input beyond their abilities in many cases at the high school level. This often leads to three more years during which little to no practical or functional English is likely learned.

This would explain a trend common when Aural Oral Communication was taught back in the early 1990s. Actually, there were just three courses offered, Aural Oral Communication A, B, and C. (C was rarely chosen, as it focused on debate and discussion.) However, many teachers at seminars confessed to teaching *Aural Oral Communication D*, which meant that they were using the AOC time slot to teach an increased amount of grammar-oriented English. This made it rather evident that some, perhaps many, teachers found AOC to be a waste of time; communication was not important, succeeding on examinations was. Many ask how it was possible to teach such a class; the explanation is quite

simple: a book was bought and distributed for, say, AOC B, with a listening focus, and then the book was ignored, or students were told to use it for “self study.” In this way, teachers could focus on 英語 (*eigo*, or English as a subject) while avoiding 英会話 (*eikaiwa*, or English conversation). Developing solid transcription skills in the form of reading seems to be a habit that teachers have had difficulty breaking since the Meiji Period.

A more likely, re-worked model for how English should be taught under the new Course of Study would look something like this:

STRUCTURAL ASPECT	FUNCTIONAL ASPECT	SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECT	EXPERIENTIAL ASPECT
Mainly analytical (involving structure and practice)			Involving language use (non-analytical)

In this simple model, the two approaches to instruction are weighted so that either communication or grammar-oriented instruction can take precedence. It is important to note that both are critical components in the successful teaching of a language. The two analytic components, in any case, complement one another. Neither should dominate the process.

## ENGLISH EXPRESSION

English Expression, as a course, would appear to encourage students to seek out and broaden their interests in life, while analyzing and giving strong consideration to facts and examinations.

Essentially, the course requires that students be able to decode information of a fairly complex and voluminous nature, and thereafter, be able to respond to such information critically and logically, posing questions that further investigation while offering substantiated opinions. Moreover, it encourages impromptu speaking, an undertaking seldom adopted in foreign language education simply because it proves daunting even for many highly proficient or native speakers. For example, at the Zen Eiren National Speech Contest in 2007 in Tokyo, it is the opinion of this writer (who also served as a judge at that event) that the worst speech of the day was made by a native speaker, who was speaking impromptu at the time.

Let's examine one example of a language situation that might be covered early on in the course, introductions. A conventionally progressive approach might work as follows: Two students form a pair, student “A” and student “B”. “A” then uses a sheet of paper, with questions, to ask “B”. During the interview, the student takes notes, most likely in Japanese. At the end of the interview, “B” and “A” switch roles. Now “B” will follow exactly the same procedure to interview “A”. Upon completing these interviews, the students then write summaries about each other. Most likely, a model summary has been given to the students so that they can use or imitate the structure, substituting their information in the shell, or outline. Such an approach could be simplified yet further. The questions could be given in Japanese, with just the data gathered given in summary form at the end of the exchange. This would constitute the output, and be perhaps the only part of the process where English is truly used.



Students may actually ask the questions or answer them in Japanese.

Such an approach requires that a student function in English to a very limited degree. Correctness, cohesion, accuracy are given precedence over communicative elements. However, putting Professor Widdowson's ideas into practice, a different procedure could be crafted:

1. Students form pairs. Four pairs then form a group.
2. For two minutes, "A" asks questions to "B"; "B" then asks "A" questions during a two-minute period.
3. Student "A1" in each group then stands up. Using only his or her notes, student "B1" is introduced. In this way, there are five introductions taking place at one time. Each introduction is limited to two minutes.
4. At the end of the eight introductions, each group selects a "best" introduction that will then be demonstrated to the class.

In this way, students need to think critically by coming up with questions rather than simply reading them off of a paper. It is hoped that students frequently exercise WH and HOW questions so as to master the interrogative forms necessary in instigating and sustaining conversation or discussion. Thus, their introductions are not just interviews, but sustained conversations and ultimately, impromptu speeches. Since they take place simultaneously, there is less likely to be extensive concern about accuracy; fluency and the opportunity to practice should prevail as student concerns.

All four language skills are used in this activity; writing could be used to a greater extent if the teacher has students write summaries after all of the aural/oral work is completed. Thus the instructor has managed the activity well, exercising both functional competence through discourse, as well as addressing structural competence through the use of questions used in introducing someone. There is mastery of patterns. It therefore becomes an ideal activity for "English Expression."

By giving students questions to study the evening before for homework, the student has done much of the structural preparation already. If the students are all of like ability levels (in other words, if they have been streamed), this would be optimal. Otherwise, the teacher should think about organizing the students in complementary pairs in some way.

This reflects Widdowson's contrasting concepts, in which he suggests that language be taught both as a formal system and as a communication event. This represents a shift toward teaching English as communication rather than a grammatical system; after all, the teaching of usage does not appear to guarantee a knowledge of use. A knowledge of use, however, does seem to guarantee the learning of usage, since the latter is represented as a necessary part of the former. (Widdowson, p. 19). The acquisition of linguistic skills does not seem to guarantee the consequent acquisition of communicative abilities. (Widdowson, p. 67). It is important to note that grammatical concerns do not go ignored in this process. They are instead complemented and reinforced by the communicative emphasis.

Above all, this activity develops critical thinking. In order to obtain information, students need to instigate a conversation and then pose interrogative statements to gather data. Though logic is more embedded in the process, culminating with presentations and writing coherent, concise summaries, such activities help students to exercise their productive skills, which is again an aim stated in the

guidelines for English Expression.

### **A TEXTBOOK BASED APPROACH**

For teachers to fulfill the objectives set forth in the Course of Study for 2009, they could easily follow the text (using this as the fundamental syllabus) while supplementing it with units/activities of their own so as to meet those objectives and goals unattainable by relying on the text alone. For example, let's assume that the students in a particular class are working on the past perfect. This pattern may appear in the textbook passages in several places; also, the book, as well as the complementary workbook for the text, will offer sufficient drilling material through exercises. This should result in structural reinforcement of the pattern.

In pursuing functional competence, the instructor will want to think of situations in which this grammar pattern can be used in a fairly natural way. Also, the teacher needs to think of activities that will help students focus on the development of their productive skills. Finally, the teacher should try to exercise functions that help improve students' communication skills. Because the past perfect could work well in a cause/effect situation, giving reasons might work as a practical function to pursue in this case.

The following activities are suggested for supplementing this chapter that highlights the past perfect:

1. **CARD MATCH GAME.** In this activity, students match sentences using the grammar pattern and logic, trying to reason their answers.
2. **MISSING FRAME COMIC STRIPS.** In this activity, students need to write sentences to replace a missing frame, using the past perfect. In doing so, they engage in storytelling, again trying to provide an answer that logically links the other frames.

The activities will now be examined in detail.

#### **CARD MATCH GAME**

This activity is fun for students and easy to explain, as they should all be familiar with the procedure. Therefore, the procedure for managing this activity will be outlined.

STEP 1. Form 10 groups of four students. The students should put their desks together.

STEP 2. Each group receives two sets of cards: one is green, the other is pink. There should be nine cards in each set.

STEP 3. A student turns over a green card and reads it. He or she then turns over a pink card and reads that. If the cards match, the student keeps the cards, and tries again to match two cards.

The student may not show the cards to the other members. Together, they have to figure out the meaning if one of the students cannot understand. (The activity is obviously student-centered; the teacher serves as the facilitator in this activity, facilitating the learning process that is carried out largely by the students on their own.)

STEP 4. After finding eight logical matches, the students will have two remaining cards. These non-matching cards are the final "match." This should be shown to the teacher. If it is deemed correct, that group "wins" the game.

EX.

*Bob had drunk all of the coffee...* (green card)

*...because he had spilled coffee on it.* (pink card)

Students often select this as a match. (It is not.) The teacher, as facilitator, would have to circulate and undo any illogical matches. Otherwise, the students would be unable to complete the game successfully.

Two of the actual matches, by the way, are as follows:

*Bob had drunk all of the coffee....before he realized it was Mr. Toyoda's.*

*John cleaned his desk well....because he had spilled coffee on it.*

These two now form logical pairs.

The game is an ideal communication activity for many reasons. First, the students speak and listen. Second, they try to understand the sentences so that they can decide whether or not they form logical matches. Third, because they often pick up the wrong card, they read the cards repeatedly in many cases. This repetition is good for structural competence (as it is essentially a form of pattern practice). Fourth, though the communication is not “real” in a sense, it creates a good situation whereby cause and effect are needed to use the grammar point.

This activity should be concluded with an extension activity. Because the activity involves no writing, this could be focused upon in the extension activity. For example, the students receive a worksheet with eight sentences like these:

1. John cleaned his desk well because (                      ).
2. Bob (                      ) before he realized it was Mr. Toyoda's.

The students who write the most accurate sentences in a quick manner then “win.” (Note that this activity requires speed and accuracy, which are good skills in pursuing fluency.) Also, it ensures that students will pay attention during the game, and not merely engage in the game just for fun.

Above all, however, the activity should help students to memorize sentences using the past perfect.

### MISSING FRAME COMIC STRIPS

In this activity, two students are given a print with four three-frame comic strips. Each frame is labeled A, B, and C. However, in each strip, the middle frame, B, is missing. Only A and C can be seen.

The following procedure is used in conducting this activity.

STEP 1. The students break into pairs and begin working on their stories.

STEP 2. For frames A and C, the students are to use the past tense. For Frame B, the students begin with, “Probably...” and are instructed to use the past perfect tense.

STEP 3. Students break into groups of four pairs. They then read all of the stories and decide which is the most interesting (this story will be shared orally with the class eventually).

**EXAMPLE:**

FRAME A: (ILLUSTRATION: *It is a drawing of a young man in a suit, holding a bouquet of flowers, leaving his home. His mother is waving good-bye to him and smiling.*) John was very happy. He had a date with Mary. He was leaving to meet her. He was carrying flowers as a present, and wearing his best suit. His mother looked very happy and proud of her son. He told her not to wait up for him.

FRAME C: (ILLUSTRATION: *The young man is sitting on a park bench. Stars and the moon are out; an owl perched in a tree hoots. The man looks distraught. He is still holding the bouquet of flowers, which are now wilted.*) John sat on a bench in the park. He was alone. He still held the flowers that he had wanted to give to Mary. An owl looked down from a tree and hooted. John was too embarrassed to go home. Also, he thought that Mary might still come. He waited and waited.

FRAME B: (NOTE: *There is no illustration in this frame. It is up to the students to imagine it.*) Probably Mary had forgotten about their date. She had gone to see a movie with Bill, John's best friend. She had fallen in love with him, but John will not know this until tomorrow. He had stayed in the park all day, waiting for Mary to come.

In this way, students create stories and use the target sentence. They use the four skills (listening and speaking are used during the reporting phase). It is a multi-dimensional activity.

**ACHIEVING ALL GOALS**

In working this way, teachers will then be able to incorporate the directives outlined in Section III of the Course of Study for 2009. For example, by creating their own activities that connect to the texts they use, the teachers can introduce idiomatic expressions and collocations that are well-suited to their students' situations and needs. The same goes for vocabulary. Furthermore, the document suggests that teachers use sentence structures with a high degree of utility. This directive can certainly be adapted with the students' needs in mind. Combining these objectives with the functions and situations presented in Sub-section 1 of Section III should enable teachers to cover many areas, linguistic and communicative, simultaneously, as was demonstrated through treatment of the past perfect, trying to link linguistic elements with their communicative counterparts, thus creating material that covers a grammatical syllabus upon which critical examinations are based, objectives outlined in the Course of Study, and key language functions and situations. Moreover, it represents a practical application of the models and hypotheses postulated by Dr. Widdowson and Dr. Allen. In other words, structural competence is developed through focus on the grammatical material outlined in the text. At the same time, functional competence is developed through exercises and activities that are based on the text. Finally, because the activities are communicative in structure and nature, the third element—sociolinguistic—is developed. Though it is hoped that students could interact and practice with native speakers, this pseudo communicative setting will help ready students for experiencing real communication later in their lives. If managed properly by the instructor, this phase may even serve to bolster confidence, a key factor in lowering affective filter.

## MOTIVATION

The motivational effect of such an approach should be obvious. Activities naturally reinforce material that is presented in the text, which is aimed at examinations for which students prepare. Thus, they are pursuing a practical goal, motivation that derives from the influence of some kind of external incentive (Ur, p. 277). This form of motivation is called *extrinsic*. Achieving satisfactory results on examinations is one *example*. If diligent and attentive, the students will also receive satisfactory marks on their school reports, which could serve as a second example of extrinsic motivation.

More important than both of these, perhaps, is the intrinsic motivation inherent in such an approach. It is hoped that students will find the communicative/sociolinguistic approach stimulating and challenging. In this so-called Information Age, where knowledge is downplayed and information retrieval processes dominate, students should find the English lessons refreshingly different: varied, challenging, practical, intellectual, and above all, enjoyable.

Motivation extends to instructors as well. Ostensibly, teachers entered the field of teaching because they considered it a creative undertaking whereby they could apply their talents and skills in imparting a critical subject to young people. Surely, the banality and monotony of *yakudoku* (grammar translation) cannot prove satisfying to a motivated instructor; eclecticism, both from the students' and the teachers' point of view, is an important component of diverse syllabus design.

## ECLECTICISM

As Communication English and English Expression both require a plethora of materials to be used in fulfilling the wide array of course objectives, an eclectic approach to structuring a syllabus will be helpful. Rather than simply relying on a text and its supplementary exercises, as is often done, teachers will need to complement their syllabuses, as stated earlier, with additional activities and materials well suited to their students' needs, many of which should be self-created for the purposes of motivation.

When creating activities, one of the most important considerations is to vary the topics and tasks. Other considerations include adding tension and challenge; establishing clear goals for the activity; making activities enjoyable; from time to time, personalizing is important, particularly as it connects with the directives stated in the previous Course of Study for Foreign Languages (that activities and tasks connect with an important language situation, daily life). These considerations should help a teacher to build a successful and eclectic syllabus, one with which students will not feel the burden of ennui or excessive routine.

As an example, let's take presentations. In addition to standard informative, persuasive, and impromptu speeches, students can also engage in activities that have more succinct objectives: Describing a photograph, explaining a favorite article ("Show and Tell", for example), explaining a course of action or plan, etc.

In furthering presentation skills, it is important to be eclectic and expand the range of content, material, and approach so as to fulfill objectives for these activities while extending them. In the following activity, current events are focused upon. At the same time, students express opinions and support them, a key skill in debating. Since news is often difficult to read in English, this activity focuses on a

visual approach (which could be another consideration in creating activities that appeal to students). Single-frame cartoons from newspapers and magazines are used to bring a variety of news issues and topics to the students' attention. Examine the three cartoons below, which serve as examples of material to be used in this activity.

(CARTOONS: *Note that they were not included due to concerns over copyright violation. Therefore, they will be explained in detail below.*)

**Cartoon A:** This shows a man speaking on a cell phone. His car has just crashed through the guard barrier of a mountain road and his car is airborne. He has not, however, noticed what has happened. He is saying into the phone, "It's OK, I can drive while I'm talking!"

**Cartoon B:** Three men are standing outside the two-storey home of an average man, who is staying inside, but looking out a first-floor side window, wearing a baseball cap. Near the top of the front of his house is an American flag, hanging properly. A lawnmower stands idle in his backyard. There is a sign on his door that reads KEEP OUT. To the far left is a desperate looking businessman, holding up signs that say SAVE and GOOD DEALS. Next to him is a figure that looks very similar to ex-President of the U.S., George W. Bush. He has his hands clenched together, as if he is praying. To his right is the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke. He has a bag beside him that reads FED. He has a bullhorn, and he is on his knees in the street. He is shouting to the average American holed up in his house, "Come out and spend! Please!"

**Cartoon C:** Current President of the U.S., Barack Obama, is on a stage dressed as a magician (he is wearing a black tuxedo and a black bow tie). The audience is applauding, especially an enthusiastic Uncle Sam, who is in the front row. As Obama gets ready to pull a rabbit out of a hat, only the ears can be seen. "Recovery" is written on one of them. Covering the table, and the rabbit, which is under the table, is a cloth curtain that reads, "The Great OBAMA". Because we, the reader, can see the table from the side, we see that the rabbit, beneath the table, is huge, tired, and fat, far too large to pass through the table or the hat. In fact, the rabbit is larger than Obama himself.

Mr. Obama, however, is holding the ears and gesturing toward the table. There is a huge grin on his face.

#### **PROCEDURE:**

STEP 1. Students form groups of three.

STEP 2. Each group chooses a cartoon from a selection of perhaps 25–30. The cartoons should focus on a wide variety of issues and problems in terms of content. For example, some of the cartoons can focus on political problems. Some can focus on social problems or societal concerns, such as using cellular phones in public places, as in Cartoon A. However, those chosen should have "potential substance" in terms of content, just as a resolution in debate must have substance. (Fryer et al., p. 30). As with debate, controversy would be helpful as well.

STEP 3. The students divide their roles for presenting. Student A will explain the cartoon and de-

scribe it. Student B will then explain what the cartoonist or author wanted to say or express. In other words, he or she explains what the cartoon means. Student C will then give the group's impressions and opinions on the cartoon and issues or issues raised.

It should be apparent what grammatical patterns will be employed in presenting: present and present progressive tenses to describe, giving advice and using modal auxiliary verbs (as well as the subjunctive) for explaining meaning, and finally, expressing opinions and using the subjunctive in the final student's part.

In looking at Cartoon B, we see that this is a difficult example, though it highlights the motivational value of this activity. While students may be familiar with some of the characters in the cartoon, the situation is easy to understand, though they may not understand the applications to real problems. Thus the cartoon, and the accompanying presentation, may serve to encourage them to learn more about the situation. It is provocative and motivational; in fact, it should be motivational for the teachers as well.

Contrast this with the Cartoon A. The content of this cartoon involves cellular phones; it is an old cartoon, yet it is still salient in our lives. It provides a good source of controversy from which students can easily discern meaning and form opinions.

Cartoon C, upon first glance, is easy to understand. However, for the students to give an accurate analysis of the cartoon, they will need to analyze it correctly and prepare special vocabulary for doing so. Again, this is not an easy selection for secondary students.

STEP 4. Depending upon the number of students and the amount of time the instructor has to spend on this activity, the groups can then form sub-groups (four sets of groups in one set, for example) or the students can all present to the class, which is optimal, if time permits.

STEP 5. After listening to each group, the other students should give feedback in the form of impressions and opinions, either to the presentation, the group's stance or opinion on the problem, or the issue raised by the cartoon. The main aim of this segment of the activity is to have students express their thoughts and opinions in written form.

There are some considerations for the instructor when undertaking this activity. First, the instructor may want to discuss each cartoon with the groups to make sure that the students are on the right track. The instructor could also give guiding hints at the outset so that students do not misunderstand the content of the cartoon.

Also, the groups should all choose different cartoons. If multiple groups focus on a single cartoon source, it may lead to boredom on the part of the students, as they will have to listen to variations of the same presentation over and over again. Variety is critical to the success of this activity; even students with no interest in current affairs or issues can become familiar with contemporary news after engaging in this activity.

The activity is beneficial in many respects. Presentation skills, for one, are exercised. Second, certain grammatical structures are used repeatedly in addressing certain parts of the cartoon. Third, many language skills are touched upon in this activity. As the presentations are oral, speaking and listening are naturally focused upon. However, writing is prerequisite to speaking. Also, during the ex-

tension activity, a considerable amount of writing needs to be used in expressing opinions and stances on issues/problems. Finally, the functions used in this activity are numerous: expressing opinions, agreeing/disagreeing, explaining, giving reasons, etc. The situation is naturally ideal if one considers an aim of education to be building responsible citizens.

Such activities will not only complement the text well in many places, but serve to carry out the guidelines set forth in the new Course of Study for Foreign Languages. In examining the following section from English Expression II, in which suggested language activities and considerations for instruction are explained, it is clear that the activity outlined above can be useful to teachers.

(Section 2, English Expression II).

## 2 CONTENTS

(1) The following language activities should be conducted in English within the framework of realistic usage situations in order to give students a chance to experience for themselves understanding and communicating information, ideas, and more.

A. Speaking impromptu under terms specified, and organizing one's ideas and presenting them logically.

(Skip to sub-section C.)

C. Organizing and presenting information and ideas from what one has heard or read, or learned or experienced. Also, asking questions and offering opinions about others' presentations.

D. Concerning controversial issues, organizing one's ideas and choosing a position, then exchanging views in a persuasive manner.

(2) In order for the language activities in (1) to be effective, the following should be considered for instruction.

C. Learning methods of presentation and formal discussion, and expressions used for such. Then, using these in actual presentations and discussion.

(Tokyo Shoseki, p. 12, 2009).

The activity involving single-frame cartoons fits well into this explanation of contents. It would be a worthwhile activity for students, as well as constructive treatment of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages.

## PERSUASIVE PRESENTATIONS

As persuading or convincing is also an important skill in debating, presentations of this orientation should be exercised from time to time. In the following example, students nearing the end of a term (just prior to vacation) work on a timely topic: how to spend one's holiday, but in a theoretical sense, much as debate requires defending a position with which one may not agree personally.

This task aims at treatment of the objectives, suggested language activities, and considerations for instruction outlined in English Expression. It represents a practical application of presentation skills; students try to formulate a plan of action, then present it to the class, aiming to support their plans with sound reasoning so as to render their plan attractive. It is indirectly a form of persuasive presentation.



The procedure for this activity is as follows:

STEP 1. Students form pairs. These pairs are then part of a larger group. This is done so that teachers can manage the activity effectively and efficiently.

STEP 2. Each group, consisting of four pairs, is given a set of circumstances such as follows:

TIME: 5 days                      BUDGET: ¥85,000

Students are then expected to work out a plan for a holiday using this information. Quite naturally, their discussion may take place in Japanese, though the final aim is to create a written copy of their plan in English.

STEP 3. The four pairs come together and present their plans. After all members listen to the presentations, they decide upon the optimal plan, quite often based on interest rather than logic.

STEP 4. The pair with the best plan in each of the groups then presents its ideas to the class. The teacher selects the best *supported* plan among the five, giving the students guidance in logical thinking and the need to support assertions/claims.

This activity, though simple, deals with a practical language situation: planning an activity. It could make use of the subjunctive, or modal auxiliary verbs as grammatical items to apply. It clearly touches on all of the main language skills, though reading is not done to as great extent (unless the instructor wants to copy plans that he or she found to be good so that students later read others' work).

As for relevance to the Course of Study, students need to reason and persuade, exchange opinions, and then draw conclusions. This activity draws on the following from the course outline for Communication English:

(Section 2, Communication English)

## 2 CONTENTS

(1) The following language activities should be conducted in English within the framework of realistic usage situations in order to give students a chance to experience for themselves understanding and communicating information, ideas, and more.

A. As well as understanding information and ideas, picking out the main outline or gist of aural explanations, reports, dialogues, and discussions on specific subjects.

(Skip to sub-section C.)

C. Discussing and exchanging opinions about information and ideas from what one has heard or read...and ending by drawing conclusions.

Clearly, the section of Communication English presented above, as well as sections from English Expression, apply to this activity. In other words, it fulfills the suggestions outlined in both courses, English Expression and Communication English.

Above all, this activity helps to foster critical thinking. Students think of a rational plan, then try to support it with logical reasons. This is a life skill that holds benefits for students beyond foreign language. Furthermore, it focuses powerfully on numerous functions: agreeing/disagreeing, giving rea-

sons, supporting an opinion, describing and explaining, persuading, all of which are critical in engaging in both discussion and debate.

## INDIRECT SKILLS

Since Communication English also calls for reading a variety of written material quickly and critically, it is important that activities go beyond traditional grammar translation. The following activity, called “Timeline”, focuses on an important language situation: introducing oneself, yet it is done through the form of a chronological timeline. Here is the procedure that accompanies this activity:

STEP 1. Students form pairs. They are given a copy of the teacher’s timeline, and a set of questions that they will attempt to answer.

STEP 2. The teacher will tell them not to read the outline word for word, but rather, skim and scan the material, looking at the visual decorative elements as well for hints.

STEP 3. At the end of a certain period of time, those students who find the most answers to the questions are the winners of this “race” (note that the activity has been given challenge, or tension, to enhance its appeal.)

Here is a sample section of a timeline would look like or contain:

1960	1961	1964	1965
<i>February 29</i>	<i>January</i>	<i>October</i>	<i>August</i>
Mr. Juppe was born in San Mateo, California.	Mr. Juppe moved for the first time, to New Jersey.	Mr. Juppe went to the World’s Fair in New York City with his father. His father let him taste his beer there. Since then, he has loved it.	Mr. Juppe rode in a plane for the first time in his life. He was not scared at all. He flew from New York to San Francisco.

The timeline would be decorated with photographs, drawings, and realia.

As can be seen, certain questions can be answered by thinking logically. For example, the questions about injuries or accidents would logically be located near the Red Cross symbol that appears on the bottom part of the first page. Since pictures of three pets appear on the outline (page 2), this is also a question that students can answer by scanning the outline for information about these animals.

A question about receiving an award in high school would most likely be found by extrapolating age. Since the instructor was born in 1960, it would be logical that he would have attended high school from the ages of 16-18, or 1976-1978, which could be found by quickly skimming the passages located in these sections. This develops both attention and the ability to predict, two skills often used in reading. The latter connects to examination-oriented reading. As the instructor can explain, it behooves the students to read questions before reading the text, a skill which will certainly help students on

standardized tests and examinations.

The task is useful because it provides reading for the students that is both entertaining and enriching. It provides the instructor with a chance to see how well students comprehend. As the course outline for Communication English recommends reading graphs, diagrams, etc., this timeline serves as a form of visual guidance students can use in locating critical information to answer questions.

The extension activity used after this is both creative and progressive, as it moves to productive skill development following reading. The students prepare their own timelines, using the instructor's as a model. Needless to say, with or without the extension activity, this undertaking is sufficiently personalized, which should pique student interest.

## CONCLUSION

The Course of Study for Foreign Languages for 2009, at the secondary level, is a positive, progressive document that improves upon its predecessor. It aims at moving language instruction toward a synthesis of a formal system, or grammar, which is a critical component of language learning in Japan, with communication, the practical application of language learning so that the next generation of students is functional in a sociolinguistic sense. It upholds important theoretical underpinning done decades earlier by both Widdowson and Allen, which was expounded upon earlier in this paper.

As for the Course of Study at the elementary school level, it is still uncertain whether making language instruction mandatory will result in heightened motivation, or potentially raise the affective filter of many young people, thus making language learning potentially unappealing at later stages such as secondary school. It would appear that active coordination between instructors at the elementary school level and junior high would be important in ensuring a smoother transition between the two stages.

Whether this will occur, or whether teachers will actually read and create syllabuses that take into consideration the suggestions and outlines provided in the Course of Study is also uncertain. There is a very good chance that teachers will treat Communication English as 英語I (English I) and English Expression as 英語II (English II). However, it is likely that progressive teachers will incorporate many of the ideas from the new Course of Study into their syllabuses; as their successes spread throughout language education in Japan, it is likely that the next generation of learners will be more proficient in a sociolinguistic sense; they will be more communicative.

Finally, it is unlikely that a quick shift to teaching English in English will occur. This consideration is explained as follows in the Course of Study: "Within each of the English courses, as experience using English is the aim, the classroom should be seen as a place where actual communication takes place. For this reason, classes should in principle be conducted in English. In so doing, special care should be taken to use English comprehensible to the students." (Tokyo Shoseki, p. 20). Teachers have been doing this in the AOC courses for years; as for doing this in the conventional English classes, it may be looked upon as potentially jeopardizing both student comprehension of grammatical points and student success on examinations, a consideration powerful enough to dissuade teachers from adopting it.

Yet upon reflecting on the previous paragraph, an analytic theorist would likely find problems with

the author's use of a translation of the Course of Study, which was published by a private company, Tokyo Shoseki. In fact, if the Ministry of Education had been adamant about having teachers instruct only in English, the Course of Study itself would have been published in English. Whether the ministry would have included a Japanese translation as a transition tool would have been another issue. However, by printing the Course of Study solely in English, the Ministry would have sent an important message to the language teaching community: English is not merely a subject, not merely recommended to teachers for instruction, but required of them. Publishing a bilingual Course of Study could serve to both lead and guide teachers who doubt that English is really necessary to teach English as a language, for practical communication. It may serve as a sign that being able to use English is a critical component of secondary school language education in Japan.

"Rome was not built in a day", goes the old proverb. In the same vein, adopting the very positive and progressive measures laid out in the new Course of Study for Foreign Languages for 2009 will take time and tinkering, but ultimately, it should prove extremely practical and helpful in pointing teachers in the right direction: toward a synthesis of teaching language as both a formal system and a sociolinguistic system.

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