

Developing Communicative Materials for Junior High Schools

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Introduction

Native-English Teachers (NET), in Japanese public junior high schools (JHS), are usually designated to the role of “Assistant Language Teacher” (ALT), and are often required to author (or co-author) team-teaching and learning materials (Sakui, 2004, p.160). They try to create fun, meaningful materials, but as “assistants” they can rarely choose what is studied, or how it is to be taught. Even though ALTs may teach entire lessons by themselves, they are guests in the classroom, and therefore need to create materials and use methods that are approved by regular Japanese English teachers (JET). Mostly, this means creating or adapting materials that review grammatical structures or vocabulary recently taught by the JET.

Most Japanese JHS pupils will have had little formal English education, so are true beginners. Their immediate need for English is to pass tests. Accordingly, this paper illustrates how to produce appropriate, meaningful, and communicative materials with activities and tasks, which promote the accuracy required for tests. This is done by creating a series of tasks requiring students to interact with spoken and written texts.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section examines the learning environment and why ALTs and JETs create materials. Next, it examines whether communicative language teaching methodology (CLTM), task based teaching methodology (TBTM), or the audio-lingual variant referred to in Harmer (2001) as “present, practice and perform” (PPP), are suitable team-teaching supplements to the regular grammar translation method JETs typically teach.

The second section presents the learning and teaching materials, “Christmas in The U.K.”. These materials show how a strongly communicative series of tasks

can be applied in Japanese junior high schools. The materials have been designed to review multiple forms the students have studied, while encouraging the accuracy needed for tests.

The Learning Environment

A typical lesson is 50 minutes long and taught to up to 40 true beginners. Many JETs are progressive, but as materials developers ALTs should not only consider the JETs they will team-teach with but also the learning community's traditions. The syllabus is generally taught through grammar-translation ("yakudoku") (Gorsuch, 1998; Rapley, 2010). Students are assessed twice a term using grammar, reading, and listening tests. This is part of a cycle of negative washback where reading is the most practiced skill and grammar knowledge, as opposed to functional use, is the key to high school and university entrance examination success (Butler & Iino, 2005, p.28; Gorsuch, 2000, p.682). There is little time for long-term reviews covering multiple forms. Instead, team-teaching materials are typically developed to focus on a single target form. The priority is to help students pass tests, rather than communicate (Sano, Takahashi, & Yoneyama, 1984). ALT-fronted lessons often follow the audio-lingual method (Sakui, 2004, p.158).

There are few pre-existing materials for NETs at JHS level. This seems to be the reason for the tradition of NETs and JETs producing materials by themselves. Smiley and Masui (2008) found that Japanese tertiary level materials have few activities and offer little opportunity for spoken practice and the same is true at the secondary level. Each chapter of the government authorised textbooks presents new structures imbedded in a story. Activities are usually restricted to reading comprehension, with occasional substitution or listening comprehension activities. Unlike team-taught lessons this material is usually presented in the traditional yakudoku method. ALTs remit is to provide speaking and listening opportunities. Due to the lack of commercially available materials it is often necessary to create their own.

Tomlinson (2012) observes that many materials writers are moving away from PPP to approaches which emphasise "the importance of experiencing language in use" (p.160). Since most first year Japanese JHS students have very little experience

with English, materials should present language being used in meaningful and engaging contexts. To make the language more memorable they should also be simple and easy to understand, and should maximise understandable input. Materials can also provide test revision material. As teachers, we have a responsibility to meet the students' needs and the community's expectations (Lochland, 2013).

Because PPP is not as radical a shift from teacher-centred grammar-translation as CLTM or TBTM many teachers choose it for team-teaching. Despite, many seeing PPP's overt focus on discrete forms as undesirable, Harmer (2001 p.82) and Spada & Lightbown (2008, p.197-8) mention that "non-integrated" grammar presentation may aid classes of low proficiency or young beginners. Semi-controlled practice in large classes of mixed ability provides scaffolding to support students with little intake to draw upon, enabling progression towards more meaningful use.

In many classrooms around the world, PPP has gone out of favour because of its unnatural focus on discrete forms and because tasks (communicative activities) provide more realistic "language in use". However, given the constraints of the Japanese curriculum, the limitations of the students' own English knowledge and community expectations there is often little choice but to focus on individual forms. The tasks below encourage accuracy, but review multiple forms. Writers have debated whether direct form instruction (presentation) is required for acquisition. In fact, there is no conclusive proof on either side as due to cost and countless variables, long-term studies on the impact of grammar instruction are rare (Ellis 1999 p.171). However, concerns have been raised about the accuracy of learners' language when they perform tasks with no prior form presentation or practice (Foster, 1998; Holliday, 1994; Littlewood, 2007; Richards, 2002). Given the focus on accuracy in secondary level testing, it is important that while we focus on meaning and usage we must also be careful not to encourage errors in written English. Therefore, these materials have been designed to be taught using the TBTM approach with feedback and instruction being provided as needed before or during the tasks (Richards 2002; Spada & Lightbown 2008). There is also an explicit focus on common errors towards the end of the lesson.

Communicative Materials

The JHS lesson materials examined below consist of written text, but it is a group task designed so all learners should have something to do. All the members read, listen to, and speak English. These materials demonstrate that it is possible to provide a strongly communicative task within the Japanese educational system. All the materials have been designed to be appropriate for the learning environment, and to maximise impact and relevance through design, and content choice (Tomlinson, 2011, p.8-9).

“Christmas in the U.K.” (Second grade, 13-14 year-olds). This lesson material contains multiple forms the learners have already studied with no overt teaching of the grammar until the final feedback. This task is designed for groups of six or seven, as the task is not designed to produce original language but to encourage interaction with text (Holliday, 1994) and is designed to allow the students to “notice” recently studied forms.

One group member is the “writer”; the others are the “messengers”. The writer should be reasonably good at English. The messengers go to short texts, stuck up around the class, containing information about Christmas in Britain. Students memorise phrases or sentences and then return to tell the writers what they have read, who transcribe what they hear. All the learners are encouraged to proofread and check the text by discussing meaning, checking spelling and so on. Illustrations of new vocabulary are presented briefly before the students start the task and are shown on the class TV via PowerPoint to aid understanding of the texts. Finally, once a group has finished reviewing the text, they must match pictures to the texts, thereby checking their comprehension of the task (Appendix shows the completed handout). The two groups with the most accurately completed texts receive small prizes. Accuracy is entirely appropriate in the written form and tasks should reflect this (Willis & Willis, 2001). As learners’ L2 develops, teachers’ instructional language provides more opportunity to notice form. The rules of this task are understandable to students when the teachers explain them using recently taught forms (e.g. “writers must not”; “the messengers have to”) and then give them time to discuss (in Japanese) the instructions. Successful interaction with the spoken instructional

text increases learner confidence. Learners' use of Japanese is actively encouraged in this lesson. Without an extensive knowledge of English to draw upon they could not complete the tasks without using both languages. Students' use of Japanese does not make the lesson less communicative, instead students are working together to communicate with written and spoken text (Holliday, 1994 p.172).

After all the learners complete the tasks, the teachers can provide feedback on errors. This can be used to highlight common errors taking overt emphasise of grammar and punctuation out of the task while still encouraging accuracy (Richards, 2002; Willis & Willis, 2001). It is important to point out to the learners that the student groups who got the highest scores did so because they proofread and checked grammar, spelling and punctuation. Finally, although this lesson is about "target-culture" traditions, teacher-led feedback after the tasks encourages discussion of cultural difference and similarity. This discussion, therefore, makes the lesson's focus relevant because learners reflect on how their version of Christmas differs from the British version.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teachers in Japanese JHSs can provide flexible communicative materials that promote accuracy needed for testing. These can increase students' opportunities to interact with L2 text and notice how forms are used. Thus, the materials presented combined with effective instructional language maximise communication opportunities for learners in engaging and relevant lesson.

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Appendix: Completed Christmas in the U.K. Handout.

	<p>1. Holly is a small tree. It is green in winter. The berries are red. Green and red are the colors of Christmas.</p>
	<p>2. A turkey is a big bird. We eat it on Christmas Day. It is big. We have to eat it for two days.</p>
	<p>3. Mother and father, get presents on Christmas Day from their children. We open presents on Christmas Day.</p>
	<p>4. Many people have Christmas trees in their living room. On Christmas Eve presents are put under the tree.</p>
	<p>5. Santa is an old man. He gives children presents.</p>
	<p>6. A stocking is a big sock. Santa puts children's small presents in them.</p>
	<p>7. Young people kiss under mistletoe. You can kiss anyone under it.</p>