

# ‘In reality it’s almost impossible’: CLT-oriented curriculum change

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*Curriculum innovation is challenging and, as several commentators have reported, moves to introduce communicative language teaching in many contexts internationally have resulted in mixed outcomes, or even failure. In an effort to shed some light on this complex problem, this article focuses on curriculum change through the introduction of new communicative textbooks in an engineering college (kosen) in Japan. First, three key factors that inhibit change are considered and then other factors that specifically hindered change in the kosen environment are identified. A study investigating the attitudes and classroom practices of four Japanese teachers of English highlighted a culture of pedagogical uncertainty and lack of professional support. Suggestions for supporting teachers to implement curriculum change more effectively, both in Japan and elsewhere, are drawn out.*

## Introduction

Much ELT curriculum innovation worldwide over the last three decades has focused on the introduction of communicative approaches to language teaching, one common vehicle for which may be the adoption of new textbooks, as in this article. However, as [Waters and Vilches \(2008\)](#) contend, curriculum innovation often ends in failure due to educational policies that are incompatible with the realities of the teaching context, insufficient levels of professional support, and inadequate teaching materials. With particular reference to the study on which we report later, we select three factors that can inhibit curriculum change: teachers’ expectations, external constraints, and internal constraints.

## Teachers’ expectations

Teachers’ expectations about the feasibility of introducing innovations in their classrooms are often based on beliefs, which come from their many experiences as learners and teachers, and the training and preparation they receive. Moreover, unlike other professions, teaching is particularly susceptible to the ‘apprenticeship of observation’ ([Lortie 1975](#); [Borg 2009](#))—methodological preconceptions based on teachers’ own schooldays—which may colour their understanding of the language classroom. Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), the focus of this research, have generally succeeded in passing university entrance tests by following *yakudoku*, a form of teacher-led grammar translation. It is natural, therefore, that they may believe this approach will help

their students succeed, and their preparatory teacher training may not undo these beliefs.

When there is a strong clash between teachers' own beliefs and those underlying a curriculum innovation, teachers are likely to reject change. In contrast to *yakudoku*, communicative language teaching (CLT) is learner-centred and meaning-oriented rather than form-focused, where 'learners are expected to negotiate meaning without the direct control or intervention of the teacher' (Littlewood 2007: 244). In contrast, argues Littlewood (ibid.), the long-standing traditional approach in many classrooms worldwide has been teacher-centred and transmission-oriented, with the assumption that students receive knowledge from the teacher. The *yakudoku* approach is embedded in this latter paradigm.

Misconceptions about the principles underlying educational innovation also hinder its implementation. In the case of CLT, teachers may believe that they must focus entirely on speaking rather than other skills, and never focus on language forms, which is unsettling for many teachers (Littlewood ibid.). Non-native speaker teachers might assume they must transmit oral information to their students only in English and may well fear making linguistic and sociocultural errors. Moreover, in relation to external constraints, discussed below, many teachers and students believe that CLT is an ineffective way to prepare for traditional assessments (Butler 2011).

Teachers' beliefs are one source for evaluating new approaches and determining to what extent innovation is adopted. Two further factors are the external and internal sociocultural settings where they work which 'often constrain what they can do' (Borg op.cit.: 166).

## External constraints

Constraints that are external to classrooms and the schools in which teachers operate include government policies, mandated materials, teacher performance evaluations, local stakeholders such as parents and education authorities, and perhaps most significantly, external examinations. In the Asia-Pacific region, the examination culture is a deeply rooted force that substantially influences teaching practice (Butler ibid.). In Japan, entrance examinations for prestigious universities continue to use traditional forms of assessment based on challenging reading passages, the testing of receptive skills through multiple choice items, and translation focusing on vocabulary and grammar (Kikuchi and Browne 2009). Moreover, government-mandated textbooks contain exercises requiring highly structured and low output English production, with the emphasis on reading comprehension and practising target structures (Humphries 2013). Teachers lack the time to supplement these textbooks; therefore, they commonly fall back on using *yakudoku*.

## Internal constraints

Constraints within a teacher's workplace include working conditions and the institutional culture. Working conditions can be influenced by class sizes, number of contact hours, administrative and extracurricular duties, numbers of staff employed, and internal assessment of teachers and students. In relation to CLT adoption

in Japan, a study by Nishino (2008) indicated that, although JTEs expressed a desire to teach communicatively, they felt class sizes were too large (30–40 students), and they lacked contact hours to teach beyond test preparation. Moreover, teachers have many additional duties, which reduce time for lesson preparation and professional development. Institutional culture incorporates unwritten cultural norms, developed and reinforced by managers, teachers, and students, which impact on teaching practice. Japanese junior teachers follow norms set by older colleagues, leading to the perpetuation and consolidation of an existing school culture (Sato and Kleinsasser 2004). Such norms also extend to Japanese students who may be discomforted by demands for class interaction, and will, therefore, as King (2013) suggests, resist attempts to speak.

## The study

The study<sup>1</sup> took place in a *kosen*, part of a system of specialist colleges within Japan that focuses on engineering education. Most students in *kosen* colleges study for five years, comprising three years at secondary level (15–18 years old) plus two tertiary-level years. Upon graduation, students have three options: find employment, continue for an in-house bachelor's degree, or transfer into a third-year university course. Students taking the third option can enter universities across Japan based on a recommendation from their *kosen* and an interview in Japanese. Although English is taught, the number of hours is low. At the secondary level, students have only six periods of 45 minutes per week in the first year, which reduces to five periods in the second and third years. This particular *kosen* had been struggling to recruit students and attempted to attract enrolments through increasing the number of sports scholarships; thus, some students had additional priorities to academic study and to learning English.

## Context for the innovation

At the *kosen*, many changes took place from 2007, when it joined the Japan Accreditation Board for Engineering Education (JABEE), which sets accreditation criteria for bachelor's degrees in engineering. In order to streamline teaching approaches throughout all five grades, the *kosen* adopted and modified JABEE's tertiary-level goals to reflect them in the secondary-level syllabi. The JABEE criteria required the development of communicative competence for 'international communication', and therefore the English curriculum needed to shift towards a more CLT approach. The Dean of the Liberal Arts Faculty authorized the introduction of the TOEIC Bridge as a compulsory test for grading second-, third-, and fourth-year students. In liaison with the Dean, the English Department decided to introduce new textbooks intended to prepare students for the TOEIC assessment. They selected the textbooks to meet three criteria: (1) communicative functions and situations; (2) interactive listening practice; and (3) reading development, with the expectation that they would lead to changes in teaching and enhancement of students' communicative skills. The new textbooks emphasized activities focusing on meaning rather than grammar, prioritized listening and speaking, and assumed substantial interaction and language output by students.

**Research question** The research took place in the second year of using the new textbooks, which replaced previous textbooks aligned with traditional *yakudoku* methods. The major aim was to respond to the questions:

- 1 What were the teachers' views of the new textbooks?
- 2 How did the teachers' use of the new textbooks change their practices?

**Participants** Four male JTEs, who used the new textbooks, volunteered to participate in the study (Table 1). Chikara and Bonda both worked full time and taught the highest and lowest proficiency students, respectively. Akira and Daiki worked part time, teaching lower-intermediate classes. (All names are pseudonyms.)

**Data collection and analysis** Classroom observations and teacher interviews took place over a six-week period. For each teacher, eight 45-minute class periods were observed using a research diary and video recording, and post-observation interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The frequency and duration of interviews varied depending upon various factors, such as the interviewee's daily workloads, the number of classroom observations, and the clarity and flow of responses (Table 2).

Constant comparison guided the collection and analysis of data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Memos taken during observations guided the interviews that followed and further memos were then prepared. This continual writing process uncovered instruction patterns among the teachers and revealed areas that needed further enquiry.

**Findings** The classroom observations showed that participants continued to follow the *yakudoku* tradition (Humphries 2012). Classes were primarily teacher led, highly structured, conducted in Japanese, and focused on recurring language structures. English language production was limited to repetition and written gap-filling exercises. However, unlike the *yakudoku* used for university entrance examination preparation in regular Japanese high schools, where teachers may devote time to complex grammatical explanations, the *kosen* teachers made considerable efforts to minimize the complexity of the instruction. For

	<b>Akira</b>	<b>Bonda</b>	<b>Chikara</b>	<b>Daiki</b>
Age	55	43	55	41
Full-time/ part-time (rank)	Part-time (lecturer)	Full-time (associate professor)	Full-time (professor)	Part-time (lecturer)
Years taught at <i>kosen</i>	1	16	6	5
Class (proficiency)	A (lower-intermediate)	B (lowest)	C (highest)	D (lower-intermediate)
Education	MA theology	MA English literature	MA education	BA English literature

TABLE 1  
Participants' background information

TABLE 2  
Frequency and duration  
of interviews

	Akira	Bonda	Chikara	Daiki
Number of interviews	3	7	7	8
Total duration (minutes)	100	100	171	154

example they focused on simple grammatical patterns and word-level translations. Akira, Bonda, and Daiki avoided communicative activities, especially those challenging students to use problem-solving skills, and they fed answers orally to students who had not completed exercises. In addition, rather than asking students to listen for comprehension, they used the transcripts and translated the content for them. Chikara was the only teacher who attempted listening and pair work, but he also avoided embarking on less structured, more creative activities. Various factors that impacted on the teachers' practices are discussed in the following sections.

Teacher understanding  
and implementation  
of the textbook  
methodology

The textbooks included activities designed to encourage exploration and discussion of various cultural contexts where English might be used. However, this aspect posed a challenge. The teachers often explained these topics at length in Japanese, because 'it's quite difficult for them to understand' (Chikara). Moreover, they stated that they often struggled to translate unfamiliar concepts and offer information about overseas locations and international travel. Akira asserted that the contexts were irrelevant to the students' everyday lives. He was at a loss to explain this cultural content and omitted many activities.

The teachers also seemed to misunderstand the approach adopted through the activities in the textbook. Students were expected to interact with the text and each other to find answers during listening comprehension and pair-work activities. Students therefore needed to draw on their own efforts to understand the text. However, the teachers were either unaware of this need or felt reluctant to burden their students. They preferred to supply the answers in order to progress through the textbook efficiently. As a result, they criticized the lack of explicit content and guidance for the students to complete the activities, and the need for time-consuming explanations. Bonda created his own worksheets. He valued the concrete nature of gap-filling activities and Japanese translations, and stated, 'I myself decide the main point of the class so [it is] easy to explain and I save the time itself'. Even Chikara, who was the only teacher to engage students in pair work, avoided open-ended communicative activities because: 'I must explain it more in detail and it takes time and even in that case I wonder how they understand it'.

Training and experience

As for Japanese high school teaching in general, teacher training was seen as less significant than teaching experience. The participants' lack of pedagogical training meant that they reverted to the status quo of past learning and work experiences. Bonda stated, 'I liked learning English but in my junior high and high school I can't remember the class itself'. In contrast, Chikara and Bonda recalled their individual *yakudoku* learning strategies from *mondaishu* (books containing university entrance examination questions). Akira had originally

trained in a different discipline. He felt confident about conveying his ideas in a classroom based on his experience preaching as a pastor, and he had a strong English foundation from living in Scotland. Like many JTEs, Bonda and Daiki both earned their teaching licences by taking extra credits while they studied for their undergraduate degrees in English Literature. However, Bonda could not remember any teaching-focused courses: 'the only thing I can remember is always translation'. Daiki remembered advice about teaching from his undergraduate professor, but as he could not apply the theories, he followed 'my own way [pause] no theory'. Only Chikara seemed to feel that his university study, especially his MA in education, had helped to prepare him for teaching.

At the *kosen*, no internal training took place to support the change in textbooks and in the teaching practices required. Departmental meetings were administrative and did not include discussion of teaching methodology or classroom issues related to the change. Externally, Bonda had attended compulsory high school teacher seminars, but explained that, unlike at the *kosen*, other attendees were concerned about preparing students for university entrance examinations. Bonda's response to the value of such events was that they were 'no use'. Daiki believed that teachers needed to reach a high level of English proficiency for CLT, but he conceded 'even if I have tried [to improve my English level], nothing has changed'. Only Chikara seemed enthusiastic and took an active approach to his professional development: 'I go to conferences ... and reading books suggest me new methods'. He made continuing efforts to improve, even though he sometimes had to reject ideas that did not work, such as an extensive reading class, where some students 'always fell asleep' in the perceived 'free time'.

Lack of training for teaching, combined with lack of support departmentally seemed to cause the teachers continual pedagogical uncertainty about implementing change. Akira could not influence his students' poor behaviour and lack of motivation. Daiki lamented that he lacked confidence in English proficiency and knowledge about methodology: 'please teach me how to teach English'. Bonda could not think of alternatives to his current traditional approaches: 'I don't know if it [is] effective to their skilling up or not but I think I can only do this way'. Of the four teachers, Chikara was most able to articulate his teaching approach and to reflect some understanding of the textbook, but he struggled to find a solution to non-responsive students.

## External factors

Given the lack of pressure for university entrance examination preparation, none of the *kosen* teachers could identify external factors impacting on their teaching practices. As Akira emphasized: 'I never felt *any* pressure from *anywhere* as to how to teach'. Awareness of national policymaking goals for English language teaching could have explained the adoption of the CLT textbooks; however, the participants regarded the education ministry (MEXT), and JABEE with scorn. They asserted that MEXT policies had no relevance to their context. Akira said (laughing) 'I tend to ignore' and Bonda agreed: 'I don't care I think

it's [i.e. CLT] an ideal thing of teaching English but in reality it's almost impossible'. Despite the *kosen's* recent membership of JABEE, the teachers were unsure of its goals and how they related to their teaching; instead, Akira noted the paperwork it created.

Although the lack of need to prepare for entrance examinations offered a fruitful context for introducing teaching innovation, the teachers felt that they had lost a means to increase students' extrinsic motivation. Akira asserted that it 'decreases interest', while Chikara and Bonda noted lower achievement levels in comparison with regular high school students. Moreover, Daiki graphically illustrated the inertia: 'because the students don't study [for entrance examinations], they fall asleep zzzzz'. The teachers' challenge was how to address internal teaching and learning factors.

## Internal factors

Apart from lack of time to complete the textbooks, noted by Akira and Chikara, none of the teachers complained about classroom or work conditions, suggesting that these were not salient factors in influencing their practices. Moreover, in comparison to regular high schools, the *kosen* had smaller classes of less than 30 students. In regular Japanese high schools, teaching tends to be influenced by senior teachers, leading typically to the perpetuation of existing norms such as *yakudoku*. The *kosen* teachers indicated no such constraints: they had complete freedom to choose their teaching approaches. Moreover, they were able to design 70 per cent of their own assessments as the TOEIC Bridge only accounted for 30 per cent of overall grades. Akira explained that this meant the teachers could make it easy for students to pass. However, this freedom caused a lack of common direction and a cyclical fall in standards. The part-time teachers, Akira and Daiki, felt frustrated at the lack of guidance about how to teach and what targets to set for students. 'You are thrown into the deep end you know ... you struggle to find out what to do in the course of the classes' (Akira). Chikara, the Department Head, noted that while he concurred with the change towards more communicative approaches, 'some kind of [assessment] standard may be necessary'.

Student factors also had a strong internal impact on lack of change in teaching approaches. The teachers claimed that students lacked confidence in their English proficiency; this, combined with the lack of assessment standards, led to low motivation. Akira and Bonda asserted that students operated at a minimum level necessary to pass the courses. 'They felt poor at English so not so eagerly to learn English just take the credit hours of English [pause] just pass, the main thing for them' (Bonda). The effects of low motivation were observable in class, where students often failed to participate and sometimes challenged the teacher's authority. Daiki took the students' rebelliousness in good humour: '[they are] good person[s], but not good students', but Akira compared it to a battle:

It's really bad. So before you start teaching there's a battle going on, you know, how mentally making them turn around to listen to you to the class, but er you know some kids are not interested in listening at all.



In addition, the *kosen* contained students on sports scholarships, and Akira and Daiki asserted that extensive hours dedicated to sports club training had a detrimental effect on students' energy levels and time devoted to learning: 'school is their sleeping place' (Daiki). The training regimes, lasting until late evening, caused Daiki to 'pity' the students, so he avoided giving additional work. His colleagues followed this trend. Apart from short vocabulary lists to memorize for translation and spelling quizzes, no homework was set.

## Discussion

Within the context of the *kosen*, there existed weak internal and external constraints to change. The teachers had the freedom to introduce new teaching approaches and assessment. Nevertheless, they circumvented the CLT-oriented approaches of the new textbooks and expressed considerable uncertainty about how to implement them. In the face of such uncertainty, the teachers' experiences of their own apprenticeship of observation (Lortie op.cit.; Borg op.cit.) led them to resort to routine teacher-centred approaches where they maintained practices that were familiar and comfortable. In other words, they continued to use *yakudoku*. Thus, there were no opportunities for students to interact with the materials or their peers to investigate new cultures, solve problems, and/or express their interests and opinions. The teachers guided the students through the content, supplying answers orally, and providing Japanese translations and explanations. As a result, class time was mostly devoted to teacher-talk. Apart from in Chikara's classes, students experienced no listening comprehension and no pair work. In class, student output was limited to gap filling, copying from the blackboard, and repeating after the teacher and there was little or no homework apart from vocabulary memorization.

It appears that the main barriers to change related to:

- 1 teachers' beliefs
- 2 understanding the new approach
- 3 lack of ongoing support.

Beliefs are critical in mediating the implementation of new approaches. The teachers at the *kosen* believed that they did not have enough time to guide the students through the communicative activities or explain unfamiliar cultural issues. Consequently, providing time for teachers to understand the new approach being introduced and offering ongoing support become critical.

Relevant training could focus on helping teachers engage with the principles that underlie student-centred, exploratory learning. If teachers can see the reasons to loosen their control and allow students time to find answers for themselves, it follows that pressure to expend class time guiding and explaining becomes less relevant. More responsibility could lead to students using their time sensibly in class and at home. The *kosen* teachers had no opportunity to examine and discuss the CLT principles underlying the textbooks which, combined with their experiences of student discipline problems, fed into their uncertainty. If teachers gain understanding of an innovation, they can adapt it to their context in a principled manner. However, lack of



understanding may lead to rejection (Littlewood op.cit.). Littlewood suggests that, with understanding, teachers can extend their repertoires to include a mix of traditional and new approaches. For example the *kosen* teachers could use communicative activities when students need to express opinions and choices in English, but save time and avoid confusion by introducing, explaining, and discussing such activities with their students in Japanese. In this respect, teachers need not feel guilty about principled use of the mother tongue (Macaro 2013).

Mediating teachers' beliefs also requires continuing support. It requires time and teachers need to be persuaded that the change can be successful. The pervading culture of professional uncertainty at the *kosen* could be addressed through developing opportunities for collaborative problem-solving meetings between the *kosen* teachers and the management, based on Fullan's (2011: 52) concept of 'collective capacity building'. Fullan (ibid.) argues that research over 30 years consistently shows that collaborative work within schools is the key to effective change. It consists of instructional practice closely linked to student achievement, purposeful exchanges between teachers who work together, supportive school leaders working in collaboration with teachers, and openness to external stakeholders such as facilitators, similar schools, and other community members invested in the change.

Collaborative work of this kind in the Japanese context proved to be beneficial in the case reported by Sato and Takahashi (2008), where a university professor (Sato) helped a high school teacher (Takahashi) to guide her colleagues through changes to a more communicative curriculum. Professional development took the form of meetings that explored problems and measured student progress. Substantial changes were eventually made to the departmental culture and to learning outcomes, despite initial resistance from the teachers.

In the *kosen*, teacher meetings should reduce the focus on administrative matters and increase time for discussion of professional challenges associated with the change to communicative textbooks. Examining how assessment could be more closely linked to learning content and teaching practice could provide teachers with a sense of involvement and responsibility in identifying appropriate achievement standards. More rigorous criterion-based assessment standards clearly linked to their learning could motivate the students to aim for higher results and would provide clearer instructional directions for the teachers.

## Conclusion

This research focused on just one case study of an unsuccessful attempt to introduce curriculum innovation into a school context. While the findings are not generalizable, they provide insights into some of the perennial barriers to curriculum reform that may equally apply in other situations. In particular, those leading change should not minimize the importance of the expectations and beliefs of the teachers who must implement the change and should consider carefully what training and ongoing support must accompany the gradual transition to new practices.

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