

University Students' Beliefs, Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Communicative Language Teaching¹

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Abstract

This study surveys the status of communicative language teaching (CLT) in Japan by examining the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of students from three private universities. A 51-statement questionnaire was utilized to gather the data. Quantitative results show that at the university level, students have become positive towards CLT methodology in general. Focusing on form-based instruction may be true to English language teaching in secondary schools, but is not the case for English teaching at universities where many teachers design tasks that enable students to develop their communicative competence. The findings also reveal that the respondents believe English to be important in general, for employment, or for young learners. This suggests that teachers may want to educate students on some of the uses of English proficiency in the modern economy.

Resumen

Esta investigación analiza el estado actual de la enseñanza comunicativa de la lengua (CLT) en Japón examinando las creencias, percepciones y actitudes de los estudiantes de tres universidades privadas. Un cuestionario de 51 declaraciones fue utilizado para recopilar los datos. Los resultados cuantitativos muestran que a nivel universitario, en general los estudiantes se han inclinado positivamente hacia la metodología de CLT. El enfoque de la instrucción basada en la estructura del idioma puede ser válido en la enseñanza del inglés en las escuelas secundarias, pero no en el caso de las universidades donde muchos profesores diseñan tareas que permiten a los estudiantes desarrollar su competencia comunicativa. Los resultados también revelan que en general, los encuestados creen que el inglés es importante para el empleo o para los jóvenes en su momento de aprendizaje. Esto sugiere que los maestros querrían educar a los alumnos en la necesidad del dominio del idioma inglés en el entorno actual.

Introduction

Initially developed in the late 70s, communicative language teaching (CLT) was designed and applied to ESL contexts, especially in Britain, North America, and Australasia, a region consisting of New Zealand, Australia, New Guinea and other smaller surrounding islands in the South Pacific Ocean where English teachers used a skill-based, discovery-oriented, collaborative approach to education (Holliday, 1994). Where classroom language learning usually takes place in small classes through group and pair work, the central theoretical concept in communicative language teaching is communicative competence. Using second language (L2) in meaningful

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communication, CLT encompasses a range of activities, which are based on *interaction between learners* rather than individualistic approaches to learning (Richards, 2006). Specific methodological proposals such as task-based teaching, task-supported teaching, and content-based instruction have been implemented in classrooms, which provide a more concrete framework for teachers to work with. Although the concept of CLT and its theoretical framework are not new to the ESL community, it has recently made more prominent headway in L2 teaching in present EFL contexts such as Japan.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) introduced communicative language teaching into Japanese junior and senior high schools in 1989 in order to improve the poor listening and speaking ability of Japanese students of English (Tanaka, 2009). MEXT's CLT curriculum underwent a revision in 1999. This update called for the development of *practical communication abilities* as the main goal of foreign language education (MEXT, 1989, 1999). As a result, a 5-year Action Plan was developed and implemented in 2003. Due to this curriculum innovation, less emphasis was placed on grammar and vocabulary, and new oral-aural communication courses were introduced. These new *communication-oriented* classes were mostly task-based and the students were expected to engage primarily in listening and speaking activities.

Following MEXT's CLT curriculum reform and implementation, studies were conducted to determine teacher beliefs and perceptions about the effectiveness of the new CLT oriented curriculum. Gorsuch (2000) explored factors that influenced teachers' approval of CLT. Results showed that teachers were dissatisfied with CLT because it was considered incompatible with the exam-oriented atmosphere of their professional environment. According to the teachers, the exams themselves do not help in this respect, as they are not designed to assess communicative ability. In another study conducted by Taguchi (2005), results revealed that teachers were in an awkward position, caught between the objectives of the national curriculum and the constraints that discourage active practice of the communicative teaching approach. These restrictions were largely external to the classroom, with structures integral to the education system, such as the college entrance exam system, the primary constraint. With the aim to continue the line of research started by Gorsuch, Nishino (2008) surveyed Japanese secondary school teachers to ascertain their beliefs regarding CLT. The results supported Gorsuch's argument that school and classroom conditions have an impact on teachers' perceptions concerning CLT. These conditions included focusing on grammar and vocabulary for passing the entrance examinations. The results of these three studies show dissatisfaction within the ranks of classroom teachers in regards to the CLT based curriculum objectives and the other realities of the Japanese educational system. However, these studies have been based mainly on teachers' beliefs and perceptions of communicative language teaching. There is limited research on learners' views of communicative practices in the classroom.

Cotterall (1995b) stressed that learners' attitudes to learning and the perceptions and beliefs which determine them, may have a profound influence on learning behavior and on learning outcomes (Weinert & Kluwe, 1987, p.), since successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities and the use of effective learning strategies (Anstey, 1988), which have a facilitative effect on learning. These successful learners tend to develop a more active and autonomous attitude that allows them to take charge of their own learning. As Schulz (1996) points out, learner views of learning cannot be ignored, in particular, when there is a mismatch between teacher beliefs and learner beliefs. Savignon (1997) explains further, "if all the variables in L2 acquisition could be identified and the many intricate patterns of interaction between learner and learning context described, ultimate success in learning to use a second language most likely would be seen to depend on the attitude of the learner" (p. 225). This research project investigated university EFL learners' perceptions of the classroom

practices they had experienced in their English classrooms as well as their beliefs about language learning in general. The specific questions addressed in this research project are:

1. What are the learners' beliefs about English language learning generally?
2. What are the learners' perceptions of the classroom practices they have experienced?
3. What are the learners' attitudes toward these classroom practices?

Method

Participants

A total of sixty-seven participants answered a questionnaire (Appendix 1 and see below section on the questionnaire) designed to reflect their attitudes and views of communicative language teaching, particularly, their perspectives on classroom practices. Students with varying majors and varying grade levels from three private universities in the Kansai region in Japan were involved in this study to maximize the range of student perspectives in order to help answer the research questions outlined earlier. In selecting the participants, a convenience sampling was employed as all participants were from universities where the researchers taught.

Questionnaire

A quantitative method, specifically Savignon and Wang's (2003) questionnaire, which was designed to gather data from junior and senior high school students in Taiwan, was adopted and modified for this study. Items were reworded since the focus of the present study was to gather data from university students rather than high school students. For example, "English practice in the classroom in my senior high school" was changed to "English practice in the classroom in my university".

The questionnaire, which has a total of 51 statements, is divided into three parts (Appendix 1). Parts one and two each consist of eleven statements relating to perceptions of classroom learning experiences. Five statements relate to form-focused classroom practices while another five statements relate to meaning-based classroom practices. An eleventh statement in both parts one and two addresses attitudes toward error correction. Part three of the questionnaire consists of 29 statements that concern beliefs about English language learning in general. Items one to 11 are similar in nature to the eleven statements in parts one and two of the questionnaire as described above. In addition, statements 12 to 16 specifically address beliefs about grammar-focused instruction; statements 17 to 19 concern beliefs about meaning-based instruction; statements 20 and 21 are related to beliefs about error correction; statements 22 and 23 are concerned with pronunciation; statements 24, 25 and 28 address the importance of English; and statements 26 and 27 are concerned with learner perceptions of the interrelationship between language learning ability and intelligence. Statement 29 pertains to students' wish to speak English like native speakers. For this statement, students had to choose which dialect of English they would prefer to speak, for example: American English, British English, or Australian English.

Responses were scored on a Likert scale from one to seven, with one coded as strongly disagree and seven as strongly agree. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese and vetted by two Japanese professors of English for clarity and accuracy. To make certain of the comprehensibility of the questionnaire, it was administered to a test group of university students, and then revised and finalized based on their feedback. The data were interpreted as follows: strongly disagree (1.00-2.19), disagree (2.20-3.39) neutral (3.40-4.59), agree (4.60-5.79), and strongly agree (5.80-7.00).

Results

Table 1 shows the college students’ beliefs about the English language learning in general. The data indicate students’ strong beliefs about practices that engaged them through communication (Mean = 5.88^{SA}). Regarding error correction, there is an agreement that teachers should correct errors in class (Mean = 4.89^A). As far as pronunciation is concerned, the data also show an agreement to consider pronunciation as a measure for being a good learner and good English speaker (Mean = 5.30^A). Concerning attitude toward English, the data reveal strong beliefs that learning English is important for the Japanese, that English is useful for getting a job, and that English education should begin in elementary school (Mean = 5.94^{SA}).

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Grammar-based: 1–5 and 12–16	3.62 ^N	0.46
Communication-based: 6–10 and 17–19	5.88 ^{SA}	0.30
Error correction: 11, 20, 21	4.89 ^A	1.42
Pronunciation 22, 23	5.30 ^A	0.62
Attitude toward English: 24, 25, 28	5.94 ^{SA}	0.56

n = 67 ^{SD} = strongly disagree ^N = neutral ^A = agree ^{SA} = strongly agree

Table 1. Beliefs About Learning English

Table 2 shows the college students’ perceptions of the English language classroom instructions they had experienced. The mean (2.69^D) of items one to five indicates that these experiences had not been form-based, with teachers using Japanese most of the time and students rarely speaking English. Communication or Meaning-based practice (mean = 5.28^A) was most commonly reported in the classroom activities. Although students reported that their teachers corrected their errors in class, little such correction took place (mean = 4.70^A).

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
<i>Form-based</i>		
1. Grammar-focused English teaching	3.32 ^D	1.22
2. Sentence drilling and sentence repetition	2.82 ^D	0.88
3. Japanese used most of the time	1.93 ^{SD}	0.53
4. Most time spent on grammar rules explanation	3.03 ^D	0.90
5. Seldom needed to open my mouth	2.33 ^D	1.03
Mean of Items 1 to 5	2.69 ^D	0.91
<i>Communication-based</i>		
6. Communication-based teaching practices	5.02 ^A	1.22
7. Many activities involving communication	5.84 ^{SA}	0.55
8. Communication-focused with grammar explained when necessary	4.49 ^A	0.27
9. Trial-and-error attempts allowed	5.57 ^A	0.39
10. Atmosphere created for the use of English	5.47 ^A	0.76
Mean of Items 6 to 10	5.28 ^A	0.64
<i>Error correction</i>		
11. Teachers corrected my errors in class	4.70 ^A	1.54

n = 67 ^{SD} = strongly Disagree ^N = neutral ^A = agree ^{SA} = strongly agree

Table 2. Perceptions of Classroom Practices

Table 3 shows the college students’ attitudes toward the English language classroom practices they had experienced. The mean (2.40^{SD}) of items one to five shows the students’ dislike for grammar-based instruction, with teachers using Japanese most of the time and students rarely speaking or seldom speaking in class as the most disliked. Conversely, communication-based practices (mean = 6.01^{SA}) were highly regarded as well as teachers correcting their errors in class (mean = 5.84^{SA}).

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
<i>Form-based</i>		
1. Grammar-focused English teaching	2.88 ^D	0.84
2. Sentence drilling and sentence repetition	3.01 ^D	0.17
3. Japanese used most of the time	1.89 ^{SD}	0.26
4. Most time spent on grammar rules explanation	2.51 ^D	0.27
5. Seldom needed to open my mouth	1.73 ^{SD}	0.15
Mean of Items 1 to 5	2.40 ^D	0.34
<i>Communication-based</i>		
6. Communication-based teaching practices	6.02 ^{SA}	0.41
7. Many activities involving communication	6.06 ^{SA}	0.35
8. Communication-focused with grammar explained when necessary	5.94 ^{SA}	0.23
9. Trial-and-error attempts allowed	5.77 ^A	0.40
10. Atmosphere created for the use of English	6.27 ^{SA}	0.30
Mean of Items 6 to 10	6.01 ^{SA}	0.34
<i>Error correction</i>		
11. Teachers corrected my errors in class	5.84 ^{SA}	1.37
n = 67 ^{SD} = strongly disagree ^N = neutral ^A = agree ^{SA} = strongly agree		

Table 3. Attitude towards Perceived Classroom Practices Discussion

In this section we will discuss the three research questions in the following.

1) What are learners' beliefs about English language learning generally?

The findings for the first research question reveal the students' strong belief about practices that engaged them in meaningful language production as opposed to grammar-based instruction. Beliefs about language learning consist of "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, and about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 224). These beliefs are subjective and exist within one's experience (Dewey, 1933). In this study, students' strong beliefs about communication-based practices may have been influenced by their current classroom experiences. A majority of the students sampled were second and third year students, meaning they had had more than a year experiencing the teaching practices in their classroom. Although the participants in one university were all first year students, they had about eleven weeks experiencing the teaching practices of their teachers when the questionnaire was conducted towards the end of the semester. Whether or not these first year students had grammar-focused or teacher-centered instruction when they were in high school was not determined in this study. What is clear in this study is that teachers of the students sampled provided them with a range of communicative tasks, which engaged them in meaningful language production.

Concerning error correction, there was agreement that teachers should not correct errors in class. Specifically, students expressed agreement with such statements as: "It is important for the teacher to correct students' speaking errors in class", "I believe it is important to avoid making errors in the process of learning English", and "Teachers should correct students' pronunciation or grammatical errors in class." Although there was an agreement with these three statements, the mean of 4.89^A, which is just between *neutral* (4) and *agree* (5), tells us that only the majority of students favored making mistakes and error correction. Still many are neutral and did not agree with the three statements. These findings are different from the ones that Riley (2006) found in his study conducted in 2002. Utilizing 744 students enrolled in the English language program of a private university on the outskirts of Tokyo, the results showed that the majority did not want their English teachers to correct all their mistakes while a little over 40% of the students wanted their teachers to do so. It should be noted that the types of

questions in the present study and that of Riley are quite different. In the present study, the questions about error correction are specific as previously mentioned, while Riley's question is general.

Regarding pronunciation, students consider pronunciation as a measure for being a good learner or a good English speaker. Students expressed agreement with such statements as "A good language learner usually pronounces beautifully" and "A person's good pronunciation usually indicates good English". Student belief contradicts the current approaches to pronunciation learning; that is, to be a good English speaker focus should be placed on clear comprehensive pronunciation rather than perfection (Brown, 2001). Finally, the data reveal a strong belief that learning English is important for the Japanese that English is useful for getting a job, and that English education should begin in elementary school. The findings suggest the students' knowledge of the importance of English nowadays. Teachers may want to continue to educate students on some of the uses of English proficiency in the modern economy. The ability to communicate in English is becoming important for them as global contact increases (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). McKay (2002) reports on the dominance of English in various areas, including international organizations, motion pictures, popular culture, publications, electronic communications, and education. To negotiate various academic, political, economic, and cultural issues with people around the world, many of the students will be required to use English in *highly sophisticated communication* both face-to-face and on-line (Warschauer, 2000), although they may not need the whole range of communicative competence. These global interactions will include both those with native speakers and those with other nonnative speakers.

2) What are learners' perceptions of the classroom practices they have experienced?

The data for the second research question clearly show that English language teaching in university was perceived to be communication-based, as opposed to grammar-based. Additionally, all respondents reported having frequently experienced a communicative approach in their classroom. The findings are consistent with the students' strong belief about practices that engaged them in communication-based instruction as opposed to grammar-based instruction. Their strong perceptions might have been influenced by their strong beliefs. These same high perceptions of communication-based instruction may have been influenced, too, by classroom situations they have already experienced. The English courses of the learners sampled covered a wide range of communicative tasks, which enabled them to ask for information, seek clarification, use circumlocution, and interact with each other. Specific activities consisted of games, role-playing exercises, presentations, pair work and group work, which enabled them to negotiate meaning. Although the classroom focused more on communicative activities, attention to form was not neglected. Grammar activities were introduced when the need arose. For instance, during group work where students talked about their weekly reading journal, one common grammar mistake that many students committed is using the conditional 'if' such as "If I win the lottery, I will buy a plane." This common grammar mistake was introduced to the students through a grammar activity later in the class.

Another aspect of CLT that was highly perceived to have happened in the classroom is allowing students to make mistakes while using the language in speaking. This finding, too, is consistent with students' belief that making mistakes is part of the learning process, which might also have influenced their perceptions. As far as classroom environment was concerned, overall, the classroom atmosphere in all three universities was created in such a way that it was conducive for students to use English.

The findings of this study find support in Bandura's (1986) theory that explains how our internal mental process; that is, our beliefs and values, influence the way we interpret and perceive the world around us. As a result of this, individuals can and often do perceive the exact same event

or situation very differently. The same findings corroborate those of O'Reilly (1975) and Kelly (1980) who found that classroom climate influenced the learning of the learners. They further added that the teacher is part of the learning environment as perceived by the learners and as such, his or her teaching behavior affects the learners' perception of the classroom climate. Savignon (2002) stresses that in order to respond to the need for language teaching that is appropriate for the communicative needs of learners, education of classroom teachers about CLT is needed. It is evident that the teachers of the sampled students had a clear understanding of CLT practices and were able to implement CLT related activities, thus positive perceptions of communication-based instruction had been experienced. In short, both beliefs and classroom situations were believed to have influenced perceptions

3) What are learners' attitudes toward these classroom practices?

For the third research question, an analysis of attitudes toward English teaching and learning in general shows student preference for meaning-based approach. In fact, the students' attitudes toward these perceived communication-based practices were highly positive. Students sampled liked it best when teaching practices were communication-based, when many activities involved communication, when grammar was explained when necessary during communication-focused activities, when classroom atmosphere allowed for the use of English, and when their errors were corrected.

Students' attitudes were consistent with their perceptions and beliefs. Specifically, the data reveal that, although there was little error correction in the classroom, students preferred to have their errors in speaking, pronunciation and grammar corrected. This finding, especially error correction in speaking, is consistent with the result from the study of Katayama (2006), which utilized 588 respondents enrolled in 21 EFL classes at six universities located in three different cities in Japan. 77.6% of the respondents liked when their teachers corrected their errors in speaking.

Conclusions

Attitudes towards learning and the perceptions and beliefs, which determine them, may have profound influence on learning behavior (Cotterall, 1995b) and on learning outcomes (Weinert & Kluwe, 1987), since successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities and the use of effective learning strategies (Anstey, 1988), which have a facilitative effect on learning. Like the results of the study on the beliefs of Japanese college students conducted by Riley (2006), the findings of this study reveal that the students hold beliefs consistent with different methodological orientations to learning English, and that students' strong beliefs are congruent with a contemporary, communicative orientation to English learning, which, in turn, were believed to influence their high perceptions of the communication-based practices in their classroom. These strong beliefs and high perceptions seemed to influence students' high positive attitudes towards meaning-based instruction. These findings suggest that teachers should take advantage of these strong realistic beliefs and perceptions as well as high positive attitudes to create learning environments conducive for developing students' communicative competence.

It can be concluded, too, that students may have experienced communication-based instruction in their high school years, especially after the promotion of oral communication as a major goal of English Education in Japan, which took effect in 1993. These past experiences, plus the meaning-based instruction they experienced in their college classrooms could explain the strong beliefs they have about CLT concepts, and their high regard for classroom practices that encouraged them to use the target language communicatively.

Although this study covered only sixty-seven participants from three universities, the findings suggest that for English language teachers both in secondary and tertiary levels to successfully implement communicative language in the classrooms, students' beliefs, perceptions and attitudes should be determined. As Savignon (1997) asserts:

If all the variables in L2 acquisition could be identified and the many intricate patterns of interaction between learner and learning context described, ultimate success in learning to use a second language most likely would be seen to depend on the attitude of the learner. (p.225)

It is hoped other researchers will independently reproduce the questionnaire and study in similar East Asian teaching contexts such as Taiwan and South Korea. Additionally, although this study has produced a good amount of quantitative data, it would benefit greatly with the addition of qualitative data through interviews to more clearly ascertain the students' reasons for their beliefs. Simply, learner views of learning cannot be ignored. Knowing these views will enable teachers to design a curriculum that is tailored to fit the communicative needs of the learners.

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