

Examining the Difficulties of English Language Teaching in Japan: Implications for Future Assistant Language Teachers

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ABSTRACT

English language education has been a central focus of educational reform in Japan as the country seeks to strengthen students' communicative competence in a globalized world. Despite these reforms, many Japanese learners continue to face challenges in developing effective English communication skills. This qualitative study examines the difficulties encountered in English language teaching (ELT) in secondary schools in Kobe, Japan, and explores the implications of these challenges for future Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). The study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with twenty English teachers from three public secondary schools in Kobe. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key instructional challenges. To strengthen the analysis, frequency counts and participant quotations were incorporated. The findings reveal that examination-oriented teaching practices continue to shape classroom instruction, with teachers prioritizing grammar and reading skills. Other challenges include limited class time, large class sizes, and varying levels of teacher confidence in conducting communicative lessons. Despite these constraints, collaboration with Assistant Language Teachers and the use of interactive strategies were identified as potential solutions. The study concludes that strengthening teacher training, integrating communicative approaches, and providing institutional support are essential to improving English language learning outcomes.

Keywords: English language teaching, Assistant Language Teachers, communicative language teaching, Japan education system, language learning challenges, secondary education

INTRODUCTION

English has become an important global language used in international communication, higher education, and professional environments. As globalization continues to expand, many countries have strengthened their English language education systems in order to prepare students for participation in the international community. Japan is one such country that has implemented numerous educational reforms aimed at improving English proficiency among students.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has introduced various initiatives to enhance English instruction, including earlier exposure to English learning and the promotion of communicative language teaching approaches. Communicative language teaching emphasizes the development of practical communication skills such as speaking and listening.

Despite these reforms, many studies have reported that Japanese students continue to struggle with spoken English communication. Learners often demonstrate strong performance in grammar and reading tasks but experience difficulty in authentic communication settings. One explanation is the continued influence of traditional teaching methods such as the grammar-translation approach.

Recent studies further suggest that although communicative teaching is widely promoted, systemic constraints such as examination pressure, limited instructional time, and teacher preparedness continue to hinder its implementation. These findings highlight the need for more contextualized and practical approaches to English language teaching.

This study therefore aims to examine the difficulties encountered in English language teaching in secondary schools in Kobe, Japan and to explore how these challenges influence the role and preparation of future Assistant Language Teachers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes the development of communicative competence rather than the mastery of grammatical structures alone. CLT highlights meaningful interaction, authentic language use, and learner-centered instruction.

In the context of English language teaching in Japan, CLT aligns with MEXT reforms promoting communicative competence. However, its implementation is often constrained by institutional factors such as examination-oriented systems, limited classroom time, and teacher preparedness.

This framework guides the analysis by examining how classroom practices support or hinder communicative competence and by evaluating the role of Assistant Language Teachers in facilitating interactive learning environments.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design. This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and perspectives of English teachers regarding challenges in English language teaching.

Participants. The participants consisted of twenty English teachers from three public secondary schools in Kobe, Japan, with teaching experience ranging from three to twenty years.

Data Collection Instruments. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on:

- Teaching challenges
- Classroom practices
- Communicative activities
- ALT collaboration
- Student engagement strategies

Data Analysis: The Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns. To strengthen validity, frequency counts and representative participant quotations were included.

RESULTS

This qualitative analysis of teacher interviews revealed several recurring themes related to challenges in English language teaching.

Examination-Oriented Instruction (15/20 participants). Most participants emphasized that exams strongly shape teaching practices.

“We need to prepare students for exams, so most lessons focus on grammar and reading rather than speaking.”

This shows that assessment systems influence instructional priorities.

Limited Communicative Activities (12/20 participants). Teachers reported limited time for speaking and interaction.

“There is not enough time to include speaking activities regularly.”

This indicates curriculum pressure reduces communicative teaching.

Classroom Size Constraints (10/20 participants). Large classes hinder interaction.
"It is difficult to manage speaking activities when there are too many students."

This limits student participation.

Teacher Confidence (8/20 participants). Some teachers feel uncertain using English fully.
"Sometimes I feel unsure using only English because students may not understand."

This affects instructional delivery.

Role of Assistant Language Teachers (14/20 participants). ALTs support communicative learning.
"Working with ALTs helps students feel more comfortable speaking English."

This highlights collaborative teaching benefits.

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Major Challenges in English Language Teaching Identified by Teachers

Identified Challenge	Description	Frequency
Examination-Oriented Teaching	Focus on grammar and reading due to university entrance examinations	15
Limited Communicative Activities	Insufficient time for speaking and discussion tasks	12
Large Class Sizes	Difficulty managing interactive activities	10
Teacher Confidence	Hesitation in using English as the primary language of instruction	8
Classroom Time Constraints	Limited time available for communicative teaching methods	12

Table 1 presents the major challenges identified by the participants along with their frequency of occurrence. Examination-oriented instruction emerged as the most dominant factor, reported by 15 out of 20 teachers. Limited opportunities for communicative activities and time constraints were also frequently mentioned, indicating structural limitations within the curriculum. These findings reinforce the need for instructional and institutional reforms to support communicative language teaching.

This shows the interaction between examination-oriented instruction, classroom constraints, teacher-related factors, and the role of Assistant Language Teachers. The model shows that examination pressure and structural limitations directly reduce opportunities for communicative language use, while teacher confidence and ALT collaboration act as moderating factors that can either hinder or enhance communicative teaching practices.

The frequency distribution presented in Table 1 further confirms that examination-oriented instruction remains the most dominant constraint affecting communicative teaching practices

DISCUSSION

The findings reinforce that examination-oriented systems continue to dominate classroom practices, limiting communicative teaching. This aligns with previous studies and recent research indicating persistent systemic barriers.

Structural constraints such as limited time and large class sizes further restrict opportunities for meaningful interaction, a core component of communicative competence under CLT.

Teacher confidence also plays a crucial role. Without adequate training and support, teachers may rely on traditional methods rather than communicative approaches.

The study also highlights the value of Assistant Language Teachers in promoting interaction and authentic communication. Strengthening collaboration between teachers and ALTs may serve as an effective strategy to improve outcomes.

Overall, the findings suggest that policy reforms alone are insufficient without addressing structural and instructional challenges.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its small sample size (three schools in one city), which may affect generalizability.

The study relies mainly on qualitative data; the inclusion of quantitative measures could strengthen validity.

Future research may incorporate larger samples and mixed methods to enhance reliability.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the challenges in English language teaching in Kobe, Japan and their implications for Assistant Language Teachers.

Findings show that examination-oriented instruction, limited time, large class sizes, and teacher confidence issues affect communicative teaching.

Strengthening teacher training, improving institutional support, and enhancing ALT collaboration are essential for improving English learning outcomes.

Future studies may further explore policy and training interventions to support communicative teaching practices.

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