Shimane Journal of Policy Studies
Vol. 15 (March 2008)

Foreign Language Teaching Reform: "Willingness to Communicate" as Theoretical and Curricular Foundation in Japan and Its Implications

Sean A. WHITE

1. Introduction: Historical Context
2. Willingness to Communicate
3. WTC and Reform Efforts in Recent Years
4. Discussion & Conclusion

1. Introduction: Historical Context

The roughly two hundred year history of English language education in Japan has seen at least three distinct periods of reform of how the language is taught and learned in the country's schools, and although not without some successes, all three of these have been described as failures in achieving significant results (Smith & Imura, 2004, upon which the remainder of this section is largely based). Though beginning at its earliest as a practical object of study in order to provide access to Western science and technology, by the late 1800s English had become heavily associated with entrance to higher levels of the education system through the ubiquitous entrance examination. What is now known as *juken-eigo* ("entrance exam English") was at other times referred to as *hensoku eigo* ("irregular English") and was (and continues to be) distinguished by it's almost total reliance on *yakudoku* ("translation reading") as both instructional technique and classroom learning activity. Like today, *yakudoku*, which has usually been placed in the realm of grammar-translation teaching methodology but, as others have pointed out, really pays little attention to grammar itself but rather translation alone, was at times subject to much criticism and pre-war attempts at reform, beginning with the efforts of Japanese educators Kanda Naibu (1857-1923) and Okakura Yoshisaburo (1868-1936) and later, more prominently through the work of Harold E. Palmer (1877-1949), "linguistic advisor" to the country's Department of Education and director of the semi-official Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET) from 1922 to 1936 (Smith & Imura, 2004).

Structural and sociocultural factors contributed to certain degrees of resistance to reform and persistence of *hensoku* English, while Palmer himself seems to have tried to work within the system, focusing on the use of readers in implementing his oral-focused approach (Imura, 2003). His ideas did also achieve some successes. However, the lead up and actual commencement of the Second World War put an end toward

reforming English education and *yakudoku* methods and nearly—but of course not entirely—English education itself.

It was not until after the war and occupation of Japan that there was another concerted effort to reform language education. This was again begun by educators in Japan, who were influenced by Palmer's ideas and were instrumental in compiling the first post-war courses of study in 1947 and 1951. They were also the Japanese proponents of the methods of University of Michigan professor Charles C. Fries (1898-1967) and his Oral (Michigan) Approach, with the initial impetus and strong backing of the American English Language Education Committee (ELEC, later to become the English Language Education Council), which had as its goal the complete reform of English language education in Japan. While the movement claimed some successes in organizing teacher training at the grass-roots level and influencing materials development between 1956 and 1968, it lacked any official recognition and failed to sufficiently cooperate with potential allies, while Fries and other principal people involved in the effort appear to have lost interest (Smith & Imura, 2004). In terms of influence on Japanese English language education, it had even less than the work of Palmer and the IRET, as it's reliance on drilling failed to catch on in classroom practice and fell from any favor it may have enjoyed around the same time it was losing its influence in the United States.

The 1970s again saw the country's English language education being called into question, which became most evident in the Hiraizumi-Watanabe debates of 1974. "The Great Debate on the Teaching of English in Japan" (*"Eigo kyôiku dai-ronsô"*) between Hiraizumi Wataru (1929-), a member of the House of Councillors, and Watanabe Shoichi (1930-), professor of Sophia (Jôchi) University tended not to focus on actual teaching techniques or methodologies, but it did focus attention on the purpose of English Education in Japan, with Hiraizumi emphasizing utilitarian communication ones and Watanabe cognitive and cultural ones. This undoubtedly influenced the next reform movement beginning in the mid-1980s, officially spearheaded by the Ministry of Education (MOE) with a focus on more practical goals and communicative trends in language teaching in the West.

1987 stands as an important year for two reasons. First, it saw the draft proposal of a new course of study which emphasized the need to learn to communicate in English for the purposes of international understanding (*kokusai rikai*). Second, it was the year in which the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) program began, bringing to the country and its school classrooms hundreds of young, native English speaking Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) each year, building on previous but much more limited programs such as the Fullbright and Monbusho English Fellows, and British English Teaching programs. Assessments as to the effects of the JET program are still few in number, although McConnell's (2000) work is the most often cited. McConnell makes clear that JET was a political rather than educational initiative designed

by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to extend the country's soft power by creating friends among ALT participants who would return to their home countries following their teaching tenures in Japan. It also convinces that from the standpoint of internationalization of Japan it can be judged a relative success in that more Japanese were able to come in contact with these foreign teachers. Results have generally been much less encouraging in terms of greatly influencing actual classroom English teaching, as ALTs and the classes in which they participate have tended to become marginalized in most, particularly academically-oriented, schools (McConnell, 2000; Smith & Imura, 2004).

In reflecting on the history of language teaching reform in Japan, Smith and Imura present several potential reasons for the lack of substantive change (though they do also note that much depends on how we look at things). Perhaps interestingly, they do not include discussion of more recent trends, in particular those related to the inclusion of English in the elementary school curriculum, which had its beginnings around the same time as the start of the JET program and increased focus on communication in official courses of study. Had their article been written more recently, they undoubtedly would have. Before looking at that and more recent reform trends, however, a discussion of the construct of "willingness to communicate" is first necessary in order to best frame and characterize them.

2. Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to communicate (WTC) and its various component constructs were first conceived of in first- or native language communication research and can most generally be understood as "the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so." (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546). The work of McCroskey and his collaborators (e.g., McCroskey & Richmond, 1987) has been oft cited in first language (L1) WTC research which has empirically linked it to such behavioral phenomena as communication apprehension, perceived communication competence, introversion-extroversion, and self-esteem. Although initially conceived of as a trait-like or personality variable, other researchers, especially MacIntyre, have convincingly argued that it is much more of a situational one with "both transient and enduring influences." (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 546).

According to MacIntyre et al. (1998),

> There are many variables that have the potential to change an individual's WTC... [such as the] degree of acquaintance between communicators, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, the degree of evaluation of the speaker, the topic of discussion, and other factors... However, *perhaps the most dramatic variable one can change in the communication setting is the language of*

> *discourse. It is clear that changing the language of communication introduces a major change in the communication setting because it has the potential to affect many of the variables that contribute to WTC* [emphasis added] (p. 546).

It is in light of this that MacIntyre and his associates extended the concept of WTC to second language (L2) use, learning, and teaching. Furthermore, they have argued that WTC should be the primary goal of L2 language instruction, citing general research findings of approximately .60 correlation between intentions or willingness to act and actual behavior found in the psychological research literature.

MacIntyre et al. (1998) lay out a model of WTC that brings together research in both L1 and L2 contexts. They define the L2 construct as the "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p.547). The pyramid model they propose consists of six layers, with Communication Behavior at its apex (Layer I) and Social and Individual Context at its base (Layer VI), with higher layers representing a number of more situationally-based variables and lower ones more persistent or enduring variables. Listed together, the layers are shown in Figure 1.

Layer I: Communication Behavior
Layer II: Behavioral Intentions
Layer III: Situated Antecedents
Layer IV: Motivational Propensities
Layer V: Affective-Cognitive Context
Layer VI: Social and Individual Context

Figure 1 MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) Heuristic WTC Model Variable Layers (p. 547)

Each layer is comprised of one to three variables influencing WTC as listed in Table 1.

Table 1 MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing WTC (p. 547)

1. L2 Use [Layer I: Communication Behavior]

2. Willingness to Communicate [Layer II: Behavioral Intentions]

3. Desire to Communicate with a Specific Person [Layer III: Situated Antecedents]
4. State Communicative Self-Confidence [Layer III: Situated Antecedents]

5. Interpersonal Motivation [Layer IV: Motivational Propensities]
6. Intergroup Motivation [Layer IV: Motivational Propensities]
7. L2 Self-Confidence [Layer IV: Motivational Propensities]

8. Intergroup Attitudes [Layer V: Affective-Cognitive Context]
9. Social Situation [Layer V: Affective-Cognitive Context]
10. Communicative Competence [Layer V: Affective-Cognitive Context]

11. Intergroup Climate [Layer VI: Social and Individual Context]
12. Personality [Layer VI: Social and Individual Context]

Yashima (2002) investigated WTC specifically in a Japanese university EFL context. The results of the path analysis of her data found, in addition to confirming the appropriateness of the model in a Japanese context, that WTC was most directly influenced by students' English "Communication Confidence." In the data, this was influenced by learner motivation, which was itself largely influenced by learner attitude, operationalized and described by Yashima as "International Posture," or an interest or desire to communicate with the world outside Japan. With regard to classroom instruction, Yashima urges that EFL lessons (1) raise students' interest in different cultures and international affairs, and (2) "reduce anxiety and build confidence in communication" (p. 63).

At its most essential, WTC might be characterized as being composed of (1) a desire to communicate, (2) communicative competence, and (3) self confidence. We might also further simplify by subsuming (2) communicative competence under (3) self-confidence, since as MacIntyre et al. point out, rather than an objective evaluation, it is the learners self-perception of his/her communicative competence that underlies self-confidence in communication. It is interesting to note however, that in Yashima's (2002) analysis, L2 proficiency had only a weak influence on L2 communication confidence, which was more greatly influenced by L2 learning motivation.

Back in expanded form, but with a different, more concrete focus, we might ask, what would be the ideal situation or student that we can envision at the end of a second language course of study? From this perspective, MacIntyre et al.'s model might look something like Figure 2.

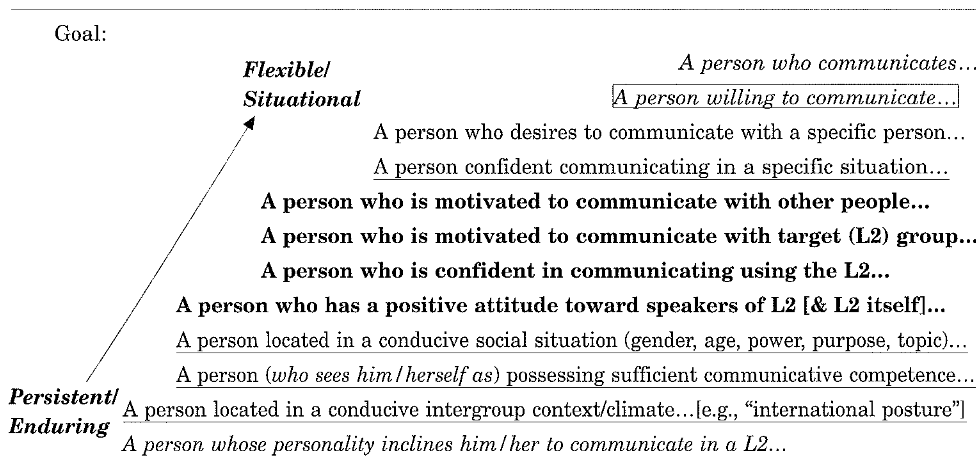

Figure 2 Idealization of MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC Model

With such an ideal or goal in mind, we would of course ask at that point, which of these are most likely to be open to influence or modification, particularly in the L2 classroom, and furthermore, what knowledge and experiences would best help to achieve this? As indicated above, variables that are either underlined or printed in bold may be open to varying degrees of change, and it is particularly the latter (bold) ones that may especially be targeted in formal instruction in classroom settings. As noted, Yashima (2002) proposes that in order to increase Japanese learners' WTC, "EFL lessons should be designed to enhance students' interest in different cultures and international affairs and activities, as well as to reduce anxiety and build confidence in communication" (p. 63). However, the prospect that a more concrete plan of action, including both intensive and more extensive training programs, is a very enticing one and deserves further attention. Although this has yet to happen, the need to in some way address these issues has been at least recognized by researchers, many teachers, and, significantly, official courses of study and other MOE initiatives to which we now turn.

3. WTC and Reform Efforts in Recent Years

Official MOE interest in both communicative competence/language teaching and motivational aspects in foreign language (English) teaching date to the early to mid-1980s and coincide with the introduction of foreign language assistant teachers in the schools and later start of the JET program. The 1989 revised Course of Study for lower secondary/junior high school describes the goals of foreign language teaching as

> 外国語を理解し、外国語で表現する基礎的な能力を養い、外国語で積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度を育てるとともに、言語や文化に対する関心を深め、国際理解の基礎を培う。

To understand a foreign language, to develop basic abilities in expressing oneself in a foreign language, *to instill a positive attitude toward communicating in a foreign language*, in addition to deepening an interest in language and culture and fostering basic international understanding. (MEXT, 1989a; my translation, emphasis added)

Similarly, the 1989 upper secondary/high school revised Course of Study described goals as

外国語を理解し、外国語で表現する能力を養い、外国語で積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度を育てるとともに、言語や文化に対する関心を高め、国際理解を深める。

To understand a foreign language, to develop abilities in expressing oneself in a foreign language, *to instill a positive attitude toward communicating in a foreign language*, in addition to increasing interest in language and culture and deepening international understanding. (MEXT, 1989b; my translation, emphasis added)

Fostering positive attitudes toward communication (a willingness to communicate) remained a goal in the 1998 revised courses of study. The lower secondary/junior high school revision read as

外国語を通じて，言語や文化に対する理解を深め，積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度の育成を図り，聞くことや話すことなどの実践的コミュニケーション能力の基礎を養う。

To develop students' basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and *fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages*. (MEXT, 1998/2003; MEXT 2003a; emphasis added)

The upper secondary/high school revision similarly read as

外国語を通じて，言語や文化に対する理解を深め，積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度の育成を図り，情報や相手の意向などを理解したり自分の考えなどを表現したりする実践的コミュニケーション能力を養う。

To develop students' practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and *fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages*. (MEXT, 1999/2003; MEXT, 2003b; emphasis added)

It was also in 1998 that the teaching of foreign language (English) became possible in the regular elementary school curriculum (previously it had been allowed on a research basis only). It has yet to be established as an official subject of study, but has been an explicit option for inclusion in weekly Integrated Studies (*sôgôtekina gakushû no jikan*) classes, which were first established in the school curriculum with the 1998 Course of Study revision. Regarding the purpose of the new Integrated Studies classes, the Course of Study states

> 総合的な学習の時間においては，次のようなねらいをもって指導を行うものとする。
> (1) 自ら課題を見付け，自ら学び，自ら考え，主体的に判断し，よりよく問題を解決する資質や能力を育てること。
> (2) 学び方やものの考え方を身に付け，問題の解決や探究活動に主体的，創造的に取り組む態度を育て，自己の生き方を考えることができるようにすること。
>
> Integrated Studies classes should be conducted with the following goals in mind:
> 1. To nurture children's critical thinking and problem-solving skills by developing their abilities to identify problems and topics and to learn and think independently.
> 2. To acquire learning and thinking skills, to nurture a positive attitude toward autonomously engaging in problem-solving and inquiry as well as thinking about how one lives his or her own life.
>
> (MEXT, 1998; my translation)

From this, it is clear that autonomous participation, attitude development, and motivation are objects of development in elementary school Integrated Studies classes. Regarding possible areas of study/inquiry in these classes, the Course of Study states

> 各学校においては，[以上に] に示すねらいを踏まえ，例えば国際理解，情報，環境，福祉・健康などの横断的・総合的な課題，児童の興味・関心に基づく課題，地域や学校の特色に応じた課題などについて，学校の実態に応じた学習活動を行うものとする。
>
> Each school shall, in light of the goals mentioned [above], set their own topics and plans of study based upon their own circumstances and may include, but are not limited to, such areas as integrated and cross-sectional study of international understanding, information science, environmental studies, welfare and health studies, in addition to specific areas/topics of children's interest and those related to the local region or specific school, etc. (MEXT, 1998; my translation)

The text goes on to give examples of types of learning activities which share in common a focus on experiential (and sometimes cooperative) learning. Following this it touches specifically on foreign language study/activities in saying

> 国際理解に関する学習の一環としての外国語会話等を行うときは，学校の実態等に応じ，児童が外国語に触れたり，外国の生活や文化などに慣れ親しんだりするなど小学校段階にふさわしい体験的な学習が行われるようにすること。
>
> In the case that foreign language conversation activities are conducted as a part of international understanding studies, schools, based upon their own situations and circumstances, should involve children in experiential learning activities and seek to expose them to foreign language and familiarize them with foreign life and culture, etc., in ways that are appropriate to the elementary school level. (MEXT, 1998; my translation)

During the second-half of 2007, draft outlines of changes to the Course of Study for the expected 2008 revision have emphasized the importance of language, both first and second, in the school curriculum (MEXT, 2007). As a result, it appears likely that a new subject will be created, tentatively titled "Foreign Language Activities," for compulsory once-a-week (35 hours annually) English/foreign language study for fifth and sixth-graders beginning in 2011. The introduction of English as an official area of study in all Japanese elementary schools was included in the MEXT "Japanese with English Abilities" ("*Eigo ga tsukaeru nihonjin*") Action Plan of 2003 (MEXT, 2003b; 2003c).

As was noted above, the formal introduction of English in elementary schools may be viewed as the latest attempt to reform language teaching in the country. After a reading of Smith and Imura (2004), which describes a series of past failures at reform (relative to stated objectives), it is easy to feel less than wholly optimistic regarding the potential for successful reform. Regardless, it is clear that the aims and focus of elementary school English education are developing positive attitudes to influence language learning motivation at later stages of language education, and ultimately, willingness to communicate (viz. Kanamori 2004; 2005; Kumogi Shôgakkô, 2006 as examples). As a result (and not insignificantly, out of necessity, given the lack of proficiency and training among homeroom teachers who are expected to be responsible for instruction), classroom experiences emphasize positive (enjoyable) activities which ideally include the participation of ALT/English-speaking guest visitors. While there is cause for concern that enjoyment be the primary criteria for learning activities, there is some suggestion that short-term enjoyment may lead to more enduring motivation. For example, Hidi and Harackiewics (2000; cited in Nishino, 2007) report a positive influence of situational motivation (related to the pleasure of the immediate learning activity) later influencing longer-term intrinsic motivation among learners engaged in reading activities. Longitudinal studies will be necessary to determine whether such an approach, which attempts to influence learner attitude and motivation, and as a result, willingness to communicate, is effective in the long run in improving the overall quality of language learning over the course of formal education. At the same time,

potential pitfalls and problematic areas (such as the quality of input and actual learning of language/communication itself) must also be acknowledged and dealt with appropriately.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

As should be clear from the preceding, from a curricular perspective, instilling in Japanese learners a willingness to communicate in a foreign language has become a main focus in the country's language education, in fact if not necessarily in name. The introduction of English education activities in the elementary school will continue and strengthen this trend. To what effect, remains to be seen. Research on WTC has come to emphasize the importance of learner attitudes, motivation, and self-confidence. The question remains how might these be operationalized for instruction and effectively nurtured?

In addition, or as a supplement to regular school instruction, both educators and researchers, particularly at higher levels of the educational system, need to be concerned with building upon or enhancing learning and student experiences. For example, as a starting point we may ask how we might diagnose willingness to communicate as well as further investigate it as a construct. A survey of existing instruments (questionnaires, etc.) and the development of supplemental ones would thus be in order. Secondly, should student development of willingness to communicate be only a long-term goal of language education, or, might short-term training also be an option in foreign language instruction? If so, what kind of targeted and intensive training might be developed? At what level might it be appropriate? Specifically, how might the motivations and self-confidence listed in Figure 2 above be targeted for and implemented in instruction/training?

On a final note, it must kept in mind that the development of learner communicative (linguistic, pragmatic, discourse) competence should remain an important goal in language instruction as it clearly can contribute to learner self-confidence and, as a result, WTC. Although much work still needs to be done along the lines mentioned here, the concept of WTC appears to offer a satisfying explanation of current trends in English language education in Japan as well as foundation for further curriculum development and research, so that we may perhaps be guardedly optimistic about current reforms and the future of the country's second language education.

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Key words : willingness to communicate, foreign language teaching reform, elementary English education, Course of Study

(Sean A. WHITE)