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3 Challenging government policy on English language teaching in Japan through collaborative action research: theory and method

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Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (known as MEXT) has repeated its announcement of plans to reform English language education in recent years. These movements show the government's desire for an urgent improvement of Japanese students' English ability which puts considerable pressure on many Japanese English teachers. In preparation for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, in 2013, MEXT announced the latest plan (2013), identifying specific levels or scores in external English proficiency tests both as the goal of Japanese secondary level students and as the minimum requirement of English proficiency for Japanese English teachers. MEXT is also considering the idea of introducing the TOEFL test into university entrance examination.

Amongst Japanese English teachers themselves, there has been some debate about the credibility of this decision. Some of them have questioned whether scores in standardised tests can assess communicative competence. Moreover, in 2014, MEXT convened a number of Leaders of English Education Projects (known as LEEPs), one from each of the Japanese municipalities, and began a series of training courses for the LEEPs with the support of the British Council. Japanese English teachers are watching anxiously how MEXT and the British Council may require them to change their practice, and some tension has arisen as the result.

From the perspective of critical applied linguistics, MEXT's policy apparently supports 'native-speakerism' (Holliday, 2005, p.6) and assumptions about 'dominant varieties' (British/American)' of English (Canagarajah, 2006, p.229). This instrumental approach to education, its

focus on outcomes and its 'monolithic' conceptualization of English goes against my own values. These include a commitment towards authentic communication through the development of communicative competence and a 'plurilithic' approach to the conceptualisation of English (Hall, 2013, p.211). In order to challenge the national notion of native-speakerism, I have convened an action research group of Japanese Junior High School English language teachers, who are the research participants for this study. We have tried to find ways of facilitating our students' communicative competence, and developing ourselves and our practice. Ultimately, we aim to make a positive contribution to the development of English language education and English teacher education in Japan. Using a workshop for Japanese English teachers (Wicaksono and Kondo, 2014), I have also tried to raise consciousness of, and develop sensitivity to, changing Englishes and their professional development according to their local needs and contexts.

In the spirit of 'bottom-up applied linguistics' which challenges the existing 'top-down transmission model' of teaching and learning in applied linguistic studies (Hall et al., 2011, pp. 19-20), this project takes a collaborative action research approach to generating new knowledge. Action research is described by McNiff and Whitehead (2011, pp.7-10) as a cyclical process of learning that includes: 'observe - reflect - act - evaluate - modify - and move in new directions'. The purpose of action research is not only to 'improve our practice' but also to 'generate new knowledge' which 'feeds into new theory' (ibid., p.14). Importantly, action researchers are 'insider researchers' who 'see themselves as part of the context they are investigating' (ibid., p.8). This inevitably requires them to work with others throughout the research process, leading the process of 'knowledge creation' to 'a collaborative process' (ibid., p.32). On the basis of this approach to practice-based action research, I have worked with the research participants through facilitating their action-reflection cycles, in order to influence the political context which condones native-speakerism, by putting new knowledge about English language education and English teacher education into the public domain.

In this context, this paper aims to answer these questions: What is the impact/ are the gaps in English teacher education programs conducted by an 'external professional expert'? What does communicative competence mean? How could a plurilithic understanding of English have impact on the English language education context of Japan? The findings from the following qualitative data analysed by means of content analysis are provided and discussed: the questionnaire responses from: 10 LEEPs who participated in the second British Council-led teacher education program in October 2014;

15 teachers who participated in a LEEP-led teacher education program in August 2015 and the feedback from 15 workshop (Wicaksono and Kondo, 2014) participants.

What is the impact/ are the gaps in English teacher education programs conducted by an 'external professional expert'?

In 2014, MEXT commenced a new 'cascade' design project for English teachers' professional development 'in cooperation with the external professional expert', the British Council (MEXT, 2014a). The aim of this new project is 'promoting the training of English teachers with communicative competence in English appropriate to globalization' (2014a). Actually, this project started in response to MEXT (2013) which states that English should be taught 'basically in English' at junior high school level. It is MEXT's view that monolingual instructional strategy would 'increase students' English experience', leading to the development of their communicative competence (2014b). Under this project, LEEPs have attended two kinds of education programs conducted by the British Council, the first one focusing on their learning of practical teaching strategies, the second one focusing on how to instruct other teachers (2014a). Having been educated there, LEEPs are required to educate other English teachers in each municipality. The LEEP-led teacher education programs are mandatory programs which all English teachers have to attend 'within around the next five years' (2014a). In order to attain this, in 2015, new LEEPs were selected in each municipality to be sent to the governmental (the British Council-led) education programs which are going to conduct the LEEP-led teacher education programs, in the same way as the first LEEPs.

The LEEPs who participated in the British Council-led second education program in October 2014, and the teachers who participated in a LEEP-led education program in August 2015, share discourse in their description of the impact and the gaps in those programs as part of the MEXT's cascade project. While most of them are positive about the content of the program, they identify the gaps between the content of the program and their expectations/needs in their real-life teaching context. The analyses of the LEEPs' and the teachers' written reflections are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Analyses (Frequency)	The LEEPs' written responses
<u>Positive impact of the program</u> / All are very positive about the program	"It was a very good stimulus to learn the totally different way of teaching from mine." "If I had only to attend the program, that was great, helpful to my future practice"
<u>Benefit of the program</u> / Networking and interacting with other LEEPs which took place 'outside the program', was mentioned most (5)	"Meeting with the highly respectable LEEPs as individuals and professionals was the greatest benefit from the program." "Interacting with the LEEPs from other municipalities was specifically new, sharing the same experience and discussing with them was invaluable."
<u>Gaps identified 1</u> / Relevance between the program and their future practice (2)	"Why do we attend these education programs? How will these lead to the future English language education? The programs would have become more effective if we had made them clear before the start of this project."
<u>Gaps identified 2</u> / Relevance between teaching strategies they learnt at the program and their real-life teaching context (3), [a]in terms of students' level, [b]in terms of the idea of following the same way with the British Council, [c]in terms of LEEPs' time commitment to get ready as a teacher educator	[a]"The content should be more conscious of how we can apply it to the first year students in junior high school. Both the content and the materials should be more conscious of students in the real-life situations." [b]"Realistically, it is doubtful whether I will be able to practice a hundred percent what I learnt at the program at school." [c] "Considering what I am required to do as a teacher educator, I need much more time."

Table 1: Observations on the questionnaire responses from 10 LEEPs who participated in the British Council-led second education program in October 2014

Analyses (Frequency)	The teachers' written responses
<u>Positive impact of the program</u> / Their general opinion about the program is mostly positive: [a]good (11), [b]maybe good (2), [c]needs reconsideration (1), no answer (1)	[a]"This training course is really good for me to improve my teaching skills." [b]"It is good, if we do not have to think about English for entrance exams." [b]"It is good to develop students' practical English skills, but we should be trained more if we use the method." [c]"We should discuss monolingual instructional strategy."
<u>Benefit of the program</u> / [a]Certain sessions or features of the program were mentioned most (8), [b]got new ideas (4), discussion with other participants (1), knowledge update (1), no answer (1)	[a]"It was beneficial that we learnt how to increase authentic English use in class." [a]"Writing session and vocabulary session were so useful." [b]"I could get many activities that I can use in lessons!"

Analyses (Frequency)	The teachers' written responses
<u>Gaps identified 1</u> / Relevance between teaching strategies they learnt at the program and their real-life teaching context (10), in terms of [a]level,[b] time, [c]relevance with the Course of Study, [d]language use	[a]"It is hard for me to adopt the method we learnt with my students." [b]"It takes us more time to teach with the method. Progress with classes would be behind." [c]"The idea of the program isn't relevant to the Course of Study or the MEXT-authorized textbook. [d]"Japanese explanation should be necessary depending on the content."
<u>Gaps identified 2</u> / Gaps between the program and their expectation/needs (2)	"We should have discussed how we can give MEXT-authorized textbook-based lessons only in English." "I wanted to learn theory of second language acquisition."

Table 2. Observations on the questionnaire responses from 15 teachers who participated in a LEEP-led education program in August 2015

The following points should be noted:
1. None of the LEEPs and the teachers mentioned learning and improving monolingual instructional strategy, which is the focus of MEXT (2013), as the benefit of the program. This shows another gap between MEXT and the participants. This also implies that it is not realistic for the participants to consider the development of students' communicative competence in connection with monolingual instructional strategy. Actually, monolingual instructional strategy is questioned by eight LEEPs in the same questionnaire.
2. The gaps between the content of the programs and the participants' real-life teaching context imply the challenge of teacher education programs conducted by an 'external professional expert'. Specifically, the relevance between the program and their future practice, which was identified by two LEEPs, suggests the significance of the cycles of (re)evaluation of teacher education programs in relation to the changes in the real-life teaching context.

What has given rise to the current situation described above are as follows: the gap between MEXT's and teachers' thinking on communicative competence, and the lack of the consistency of MEXT's viewpoint for English teachers' professional development. In other words, discussing what communicative competence means has been left out, as was discussing what the requirements for Japanese English teachers should be, in this postmodern, globalised era in which a variety of 'Englishes' are spoken all

over the world. It is the primary purpose of this study to spotlight these issues and stir up discussions among those involved.

What does communicative competence mean?

The nature of communicative competence and its implications for language teaching has been much debated, over several decades, for example by Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983) and Savignon (1976, 1997 and 2002). On theorising my theoretical framework of communicative competence, I mainly look at Savignon's (2002) approach to communicative competence, in that Savignon's theory suits the present-day context where communication in English occurs a lot in 'nonnative-nonnative interactions' (Canagarajah, 2006, p.233). Savignon's (2002) theoretical framework includes four domains of communicative competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and sociocultural competence. Savignon (2002, p.9) broadens the perspective of sociolinguistic competence of Canale and Swain (1980), and presents instead a new concept of sociocultural competence, emphasising 'an understanding of the social context in which language is used'. My preliminary research, in collaboration with the research participants, has suggested that teachers conceptualise communicative competence as 'a positive attitude towards communication', consisting of the following six factors: willingness, empathy, openness, creativity, originality and confidence. Having got this initial conceptual framework, I then looked at the relevant literature in an attempt to link the framework with various theories of communication, and finally produced the model of my conceptual framework of communicative competence (Figure 1). From our perspective, these six factors should be emphasised in English language education context in order to help students become communicatively competent in real-life social-discursive context.

In the responses to the above-mentioned questionnaire for LEEPs, eight out of ten LEEPs hold similar views to us, mainly emphasising the following two points: a positive attitude towards communication (including oneself, the other, the relationship with the other), and a capacity to have, give and share our own opinions. These factors seem likely to be relevant to the notion of 'dispositions that favor translingual communication and literacy' (Canagarajah, 2013, p.5). Canagarajah (2014, p.91) also explains that those dispositions are 'developed in social contexts through everyday experience, as in habitus'. In his study on 'skilled migrants in English-dominant countries', Canagarajah highlights one migrant's disposition of being 'comfortable with using English in combination with local languages and even having influences of one's own values and identities' (ibid., p.95).
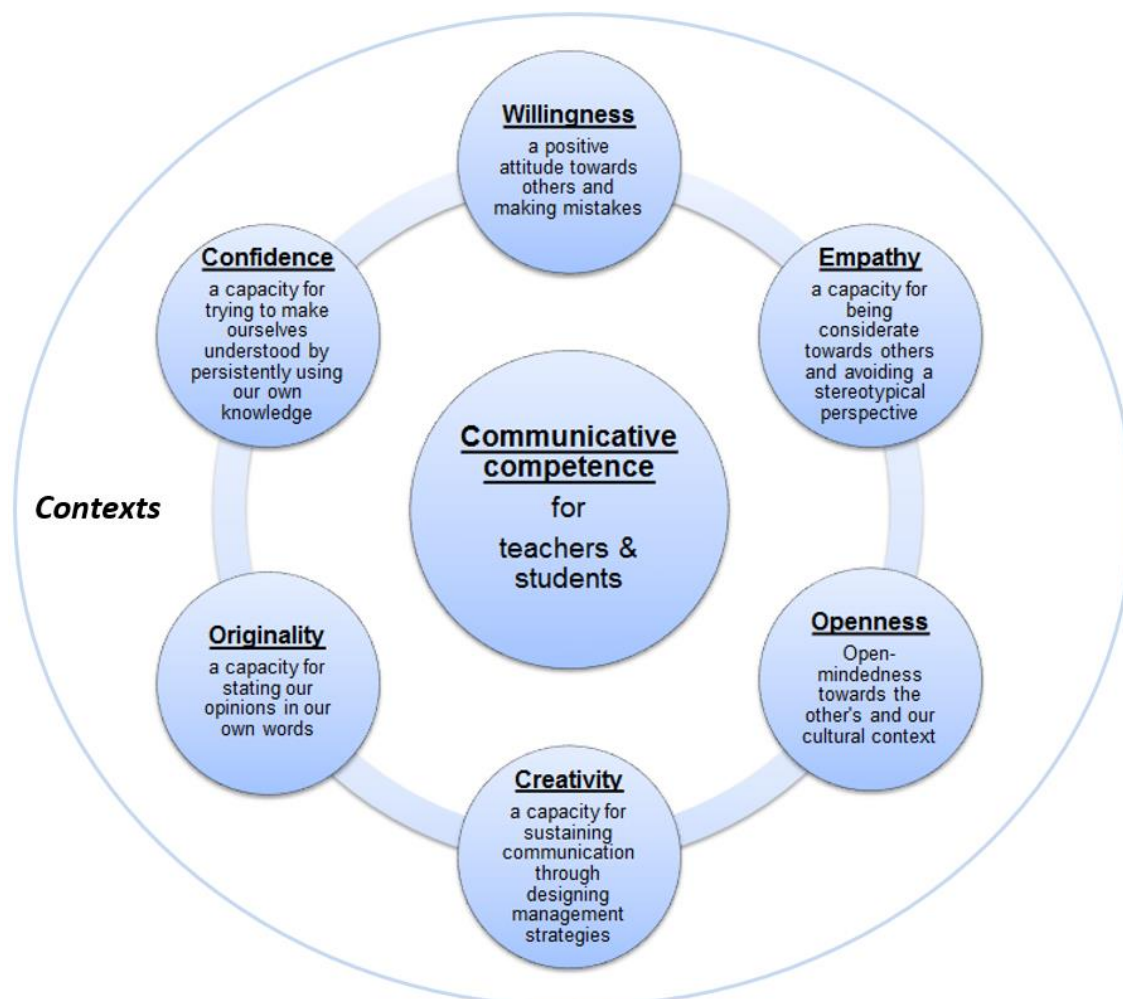
Figure 1: What helps us become communicatively competent? (Kondo, 2015)

Although this statement assumes a multilingual communication setting, I think that this idea can be emphasised in the same manner in the additional language education context in a monolingual society such as Japan. That is because this open-mindedness towards speaking English even with influences of our own language would help our students feel comfortable and become confident with their English. With this hope, our interpretations of willingness (a positive attitude towards others and <u>making mistakes</u>) and openness (open-mindedness towards the other's and <u>our cultural context</u>) include a positive attitude towards 'ourselves' and 'our culture'. This model also reveals a significant gap in the interpretations of communicative competence of teachers and MEXT, who have simply tried to equate communicative competence with scores in external English proficiency tests. By presenting this, I hope that this conceptual model will be of some help for other language teachers to theorise their own perspective towards communicative competence.

How could a plurilithic understanding of English have impact on the English language education context of Japan?

Monolithic conceptualization of English is consistent with a belief in dominant varieties of English (British/American English), tending to rely on well-known 'standardised' English tests (Canagarajah, 2006, pp.229-230). This monolithic conceptualisation of English has greatly influenced the discourse in English language education policy in Japan, showing apparent contradiction between its discourse and the principle of the Course of Study, where authentic communicative language skill is valued. A plurilithic conceptualisation of English, influenced by the thinking of critical applied linguists on World Englishes and English as a lingua franca, has challenged traditional monolithic ideas about language learning and teaching. In a plurilithic concept of English, the language consists of 'multiple, coalescing objects', has 'fuzzy boundaries' and 'an ambiguous shape and form', and is 'variable, hybrid, and dynamic' (Hall and Wicaksono, 2015). From this perspective, the adoption of 'standardised' English tests targeting English used in specific areas of the world (such as the UK/the USA) would narrow English diversity in the educational context, and does not necessarily help students communicate effectively and satisfactorily in a range of different contexts. On the basis of this plurilithic approach to English, we need to help both Japanese English teachers and students to identify themselves as 'a speaker of their own English', not 'a non-native speaker'. What should be highlighted is Japanese English teachers' 'expertise', not their non-nativeness (Rampton, 1990). Accordingly, we need to stop being misled by traditional notions and re-evaluate the goal of English language learning, by emphasising that we do not have to be 'trying to become exactly like the other person' ('a native speaker') (Gumperz, 1979, p.273).

On the other hand, it is a challenge to spotlight plurilithic conceptualisation of English in a monolingual context such as Japan, where people have very little opportunity to interact with people from other countries in English. As a first step, a workshop (Wicaksono and Kondo, 2014) was held with the aim of raising Japanese English teachers' 'awareness of the variable and dynamic nature of global English' and reflecting on 'implications for *their* professional practice, according to *their* local needs and contexts'. Part of the workshop was focused on the ontologies of English, comparing monolithic and plurilithic conceptualizations of English. The feedback from 15 participants show five kinds of impact which the workshop had on them, as shown in Table 3.

Impacts	The participants' written reflections
[1]Raised awareness of varieties of English and the contradiction in MEXT's policy	"I am getting to have a big question to the Japanese Government ideas for English language education they are planning now. Because its goal is depending on "Standard English" being tested by TOEFL."
[2]Identified what is really the issue and spotlighted dilemma	"I agree that the concept of "Standard English" is useless because actually nobody can define what "Standard English" is. However, when teachers teach English to students, particularly beginners or low-level learners, we need to teach them what is correct so that they won't get confused."
[3]Encouraged them to challenge the existing reality positively	"But we teachers are required to open mind toward the world and keep studying what English is." "We can be flexible with our ideas and teaching methods, and for this we need to have many workshops."
[4]Encouraged them to think how they can make a difference in their context	"The people outside the English education context strongly believe there is one "Standard English". How we can change their belief is one of the big challenges."
[5]Possibly laid the foundation of teacher community culture	"To make today's session more useful experience, we will reunite again in the near future and share our experience."

Table 3: Observations on the feedback from 15 participants in the workshop (Wicaksono and Kondo, 2014)

These reflections communicate that the workshop gave them the opportunity to think for themselves how 'they themselves are influenced by' the context, beyond thinking about the ontologies of English (Sheppard 1998, cited in Edy 2000, p.57). At the same time, it is implied that there should be more opportunities for Japanese English teachers to think about how English language should be understood in this postmodern, globalised era. Those opportunities could help teachers become aware of the equality of all varieties of English, which would be communicated to their students. With this hope, plurilithic conceptualisation of English should be focused and discussed in the English teacher education context. At the outset, we should shift our perspective on Japanese English teachers, from 'teachers of English as a foreign language' to 'teachers of English as a lingua franca', because 'the idea of English as a *foreign* language' belongs to 'native speakers only' (Hall and Wicaksono, 2015).

Implications

This account of my action research could suggest the way of incorporating a critical applied linguistic approach into action research, and possible classroom-based responses to 'plurilithic conceptualisation of English' in the monolingual context. While MEXT have repeatedly referred to 'globalization' ('gurōbaruka' in Japanese) in policy (MEXT 2003, 2011 and 2013), they still value the dominant varieties of Englishes, as I discussed above. Nowadays, 'much of the communication in English happens among multilingual speakers in nonnative-nonnative interactions' (Canagarajah, 2006, p.233). My point is that true globalisation means being able to value all languages and speakers (all Englishes and English speakers) in this globalised era, not being able to speak the English used in the UK or the USA. It is this ability that gives Japanese students 'global citizenship' which MEXT desires them to have. The present situation shows the limitations of MEXT's (2013) rushed decision to push forward a monolingual instructional strategy in junior high schools for the development of students' communicative competence. A monolingual instructional strategy could be a means for developing students' communicative competence, however, it should not be the goal of English language education or teacher education programs. Likewise, 'standardised' English tests should not be the goal of our students or the requirement for English teachers. What could be emphasised is to help Japanese English teachers and Japanese students recognize and appreciate the many varieties of Englishes, and 'the ability to shuttle between different varieties of English and different speech communities' (p.233). This would contribute to Japanese English teachers' professional development and Japanese students' life-long English language learning. I hope that this paper could trigger discussions among those concerned.

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