

# Challenging government policy on English language teaching in Japan from the bottom-up through collaborative action research

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## Background

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (known as MEXT) has repeated announcement of plans to reform English language education in recent years. However, those plans seem likely to be influenced by 'monolithic' understanding of English language (Hall and Wicaksono, 2016), where English is seen as 'a single object', and assumptions about 'dominant varieties' (US/UK) of English (Canagarajah, 2006, p.229). For example, the latest policy (MEXT, 2013) identifies the goal of Japanese secondary level students' English ability and the minimum level required for English teachers with scores in the TOEFL test. Moreover, in 2014, MEXT have started a new English teacher education project (what is called 'the cascade project') and convened Leaders of English Education Project (known as LEEPs) from each municipality. Under this project, the British Council train LEEPs, afterwards those LEEPs deliver training to other teachers in their municipality. The LEEP-led teacher education programs are mandatory programs which all English teachers have to attend 'within around the next five years' (MEXT, 2014). However, my questionnaire-based studies on LEEPs and teachers show their concerns for the gaps between the British Council method and their real-life teaching context. They call in question monolingual instructional strategy which seems likely to be the focus of the whole project. The training methodology in which LEEPs are required to follow the exact British Council method is also questioned by LEEPs. This instrumental approach to education, its monolithic understanding of English language and 'native-speakerism' (Holliday, 2005, p.6), the belief that native-speaker trainers are ideal, denies my values. These values include teachers' professional development according to their local needs and context, and a 'plurilithic' approach to the conceptualization of English where English is referred to as Englishes (Hall, 2013, p.211). In this challenging context, I have convened an action research group of Japanese Junior High School English language teachers, who are the research participants for this study. While working with them, I have been trying to develop a person-centred teacher education methodology from the bottom-up. I have also aimed to contribute to a new knowledge base of English teachers' professional development not judged by native-speaker competence.

## Methodology

Starting our project by theorising how we understand communicative competence (see Figure 1), the research participants and I have worked collaboratively to find ways of improving our practice to develop our students' communicative competence. While helping them reflect on their practice through regular one-to-one interviews, I have documented how their thinking developed. In this process of my systematic inquiry-based practice, I have attended to the dialogic context of our collaboration, looking at how communication helps us make meanings. This enabled me to develop a dialogic form of theorising methodology. In other words, theorizing methodology has been interrelated with our collaborative project itself, which led me to focusing on communication with consistency during the whole research process. Here I identify the three main principles for the action research methodology for this study: collaboration, reflective practice and a values-oriented perspective, and explain how they are relevant to this study.

### Principle 1 Collaboration

First, collaboration have improved our ability to reflect critically on our practice through 'synchronous and asynchronous' reflections (Ioannidou-Koutselini and Patsalidou, 2015, p.128): synchronous reflections mean collective reflections such as meetings, interviews, and asynchronous reflections mean individual reflections we do separately. After each interview, I have documented the summary of the research participants' narratives to be shared with them, which enhanced their individual reflections, as shown below:

I have had another look at the interview summary you sent me like this, which led to my thoughtful reflection (Teacher A, 2015a).

Second, collaboration also improves our ability to bridge the gap between the collective theory of the group and each member's practice. By the collective theory of our group, I mean our perspective on communicative competence seen in Figure 1. Teacher B's primary focus in communicative competence was empathy, but through collaboration, he has come to attend to other factors, as shown below:

Through sharing [ideas] with other teachers, I could come across new ways of thinking, which shifted my focus to creativity (Teacher B, 2015a).

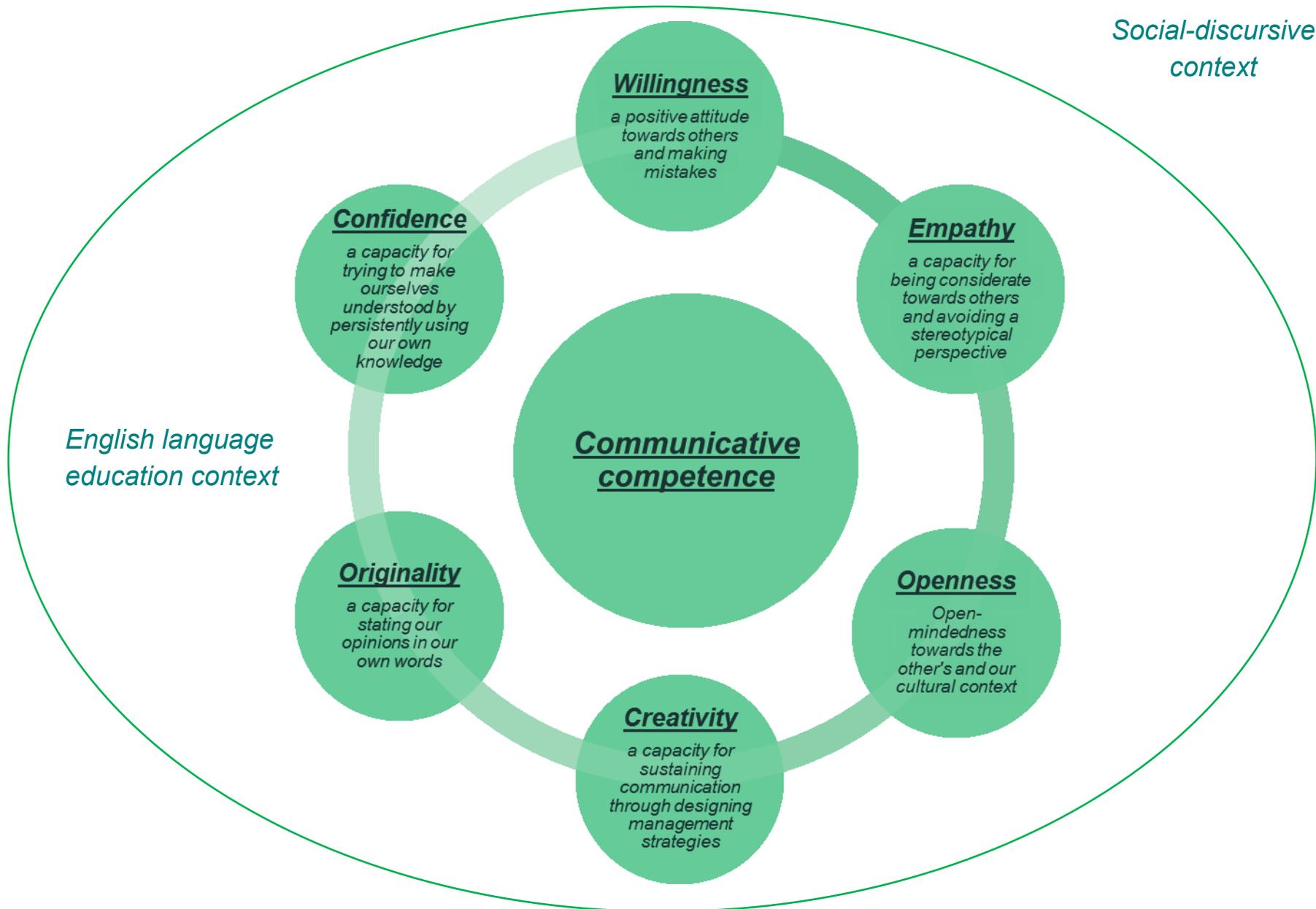


Figure 1 (Kondo, 2015a)

## Principle 2: Reflective practice

First, reflective practice has improved our flexibility to reshape our thinking and practice to make sense of it. Teacher A reflected his multiple reflective practice with me, a colleague new teacher, an assistant language teacher (ALT) and by himself, saying that 'each reflective practice stimulated [him] in different ways' (Teacher A, 2015a). It can be considered that those 'multi-faceted reflections' provided him the 'opportunities for new ways of seeing, thinking and theorizing' (Cook, 2009, p.280). The next quotation shows the mechanism of reflective practice as 'critical dialogue with others' (Finlay, 2008, p.2):

Through looking at the ALT from an objective point of view and reflecting myself in him, [I have noticed] how I can improve my practice (Teacher A, 2015b).

This indicates that reflecting on ourselves through positioning ourselves in relation with others enables us to reshape our thinking and practice.

Second, reflective practice enables us to interpret the 'situated meanings' of our practices and experiences which are based in the 'actual contexts of use' (Gee, 2015, p.53). It is significant because meanings of our practices and experiences are always context-bound. Teacher C noticed the situated meaning of her students' changes, which were actually brought by her own change, as shown below:

Well, uh I think my students changed because I myself changed after all, in my opinion it is not that easy to change other people basically (Teacher C, 2014b).

Third, reflective practice enables us to reflect reflexively on our practice. It develops both our 'self-critique and institutional critique' (Elliott, 1991, p.38), enables us to understand that we 'not only influence the world and equally [we ourselves] are influenced by that world' (Sheppard 1998, cited in Edy 2000 p.57, Researcher's emphasis). Teacher A viewed the issue of one student from the wider political context, as shown below:

We cannot measure [the students'] willingness, if I mark wrong, he might be losing his willingness. That is what the government is trying to do now, right? (Teacher A, 2014b)

### **Principle 3: A values-oriented perspective**

A values-oriented perspective for this study communicates the following two ways of thinking: the equality in all involved in this research, and the equality in all Englishes and English speakers. First, during the whole research process, the research participants and I have valued our differences, learning from the differences through democratic discussions, even if we have different opinions. Teacher A started to talk as shown below, before giving me some critical feedback:

I do not mean I did research [on this]. I don't think I understand the process by which you did this (Teacher A, 2015a).

This kind of respectful relationship made it possible to make sense of our practice. The second perspective is inspired by a critical applied linguistic approach which includes the pluririthic understanding of English. During the whole research process, I have been trying to find ways of contributing to Japanese English teachers' professional development, by valuing Japanese English teachers' real-life practices, experiences and expertise rather than attending to their non-nativeness. Holding a workshop on World Englishes and teachers' collaborative action research in Japan (Wicaksono and Kondo, 2014) was one of the attempts.

These three principles are closely related to each other, having been influenced, shaped and developed by each other during the whole research process.

### **Findings**

Our collaborative action research has led me to finding the effectiveness of a person-centred dialogic form of teacher education, as seen in the following quotation where Teacher A explained the value of my documenting his development in thinking:

Because there is the evidence of my changes here, that makes me happy (Teacher A, 2015a).

Our collaborative action research has also led me to finding the effectiveness of collaborative learning in a teacher community, as shown below:

Well, we cannot change ourselves without a chance of collaboration (Teacher B, 2015b).

Based on these findings, this is my understanding for teachers' professional development, inspired by Krainer (1998, cited in Llinares and Krainer, 2006, pp.446-447) and Zehetmeier et al. (2015, pp.166-167). Each of the pairs ('action and reflection' and

'autonomy and collaboration') is complementary to the other dimension, at the same time, the two pairs are complementary to the other pair. Each of these four dimensions is indispensable for teachers' professional development.

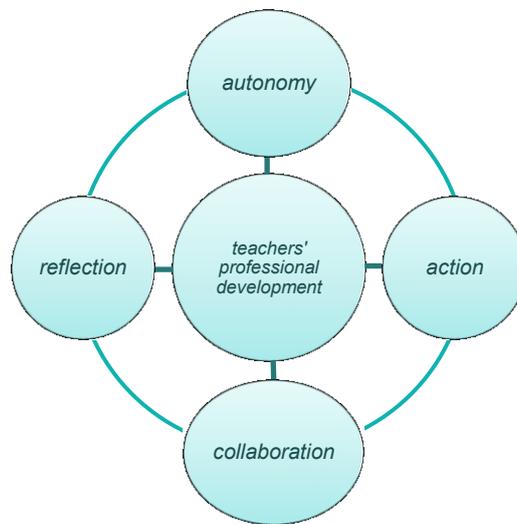


Figure 2 (Kondo, 2015b)

This account of my action research could possibly suggest the way of incorporating a critical applied linguistic approach into educational action research, and classroom-based responses to plurilithic conceptualization of English in the monolingual context.

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