

# Language education pressures in Japanese high schools

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## Abstract

The Japanese education system has been in a constant state of reform, with pressure towards CLT (communicative language teaching) in language education being made as far back as the 1980s. Fast forward to 2017 and there appears to have been little change in language teaching approaches, with the traditional grammar translation remaining dominant. One reason put forward for this stifling development of the reforms is the rigid testing system, which pressures teachers to favor more traditional methods of teaching. Perhaps the most severe test is the National University Center Entrance Exam (Center Test), which is essential for many students who want to enter university. Although this Center Test has an English language section, it is not a language proficiency test. This leads to a language learning environment with a plethora of pressures from reforms, the Center Test and more traditional methods of teaching. This study used a mixed method research approach to explore the pressures of language education in Japanese high schools.

Keywords: Center Test, education pressures, MEXT reforms

As Japan increases its presence in an ever-expanding globalized environment, we must question whether the language education pressure in Japanese high schools is there to equip the students with the English skills needed to communicate internationally or rather it is simply to pass a test. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan (MEXT) certainly wishes to focus public language education on communication rather than grammar translation through its current reform plan. However, as far back as Hino (1988), the move away from grammar translation faced many challenges. Heavy criticism was given to the National University Center Entrance Exam (Center Test) which still exists in 2017 as a written multiple-choice test (Asquith, 2014; Browne & Wada, 1998; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). This test, although given as an excuse for grammar translation, could benefit from the MEXT communication focus reforms (Guest, 2008; Mulvey, 1999). MEXT also aims to inject culture into its communicative teaching, which grammar translation lacks. Liddicoat (2008) pointed out that this learning through culture has the potential to broaden students' cultural awareness, better preparing them for the globalized society envisioned by MEXT.

With pressure on the advancing and impending education reforms for English education in Japanese high schools, which aimed to move from a grammar and translation pedagogy “to one with a stronger emphasis on communication” (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001, p. 70), this study focused on the language education pressures in Japanese high schools, including pressures on ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers), JTs (Japanese Teachers) and high school students. These include the MEXT pressures to move away from grammar and focus on teaching culture and communication, as well as pressures around preparing for the Center Test.

The pressure to perform better internationally is reported by MEXT (2013) in the *Current Status and Issues of Education in Japan*, as well as the “rapidly declining birth-rate, aging population”, called for Japan’s education to pay “attention to international as well as domestic trends”. These pressures resulted in MEXT drawing up the *English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization* (MEXT, 2014a) and moving away from more traditional grammar translation methods. This reform plan will start at the elementary level and continue up towards high schools, with the year 2020 set as the target for completion. In their reform plan, MEXT (2014a) revealed that “English education” in high school “should focus on the development of communication skills to convey ideas and feelings in English, rather than

grammar and translation”. Here we are seeing a shift from the traditional grammar translation method to a more Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) focused teaching approach.

The rejection of grammar translation in favor of CLT is one that has been embraced globally. Although it has been argued that teaching grammar translation is less demanding for the teacher, it can be tedious for students. CLT may be more demanding on teachers, particularly non-native speaking teachers, but it provides students with opportunities to communicate in English (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The MEXT reforms focused on three principles in education: “‘Independence’, ‘Collaboration’, and ‘Creativity’” (MEXT, 2015, p. 6). According to the reform plan, the goals for these students was to have the “ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons” (MEXT, 2014a, p.1). This goal was to be achieved by having “classes conducted in English with high-level linguistic activities”, through “presentations, debates and negotiations” (MEXT, 2014a, p.1). With the student goal being to “fluently communicate with English speaking persons” (MEXT, 2014a, p.1) this could be described as weak CLT (Howatt, 1984). This was reflected in the Course of Study (CoS), the teaching guidelines set up by MEXT, which was revised in 2009 to be more in line with the MEXT reforms.

Introducing CLT in Japan has not been an easy task, Sakui (2004) suggested it is “a complicated issue, involving various factors such as teacher beliefs and contextual restraints” (p. 156), this was due to grammar translation being a teaching method which was regarded as being embedded into Japanese culture. Since grammar translation has not been supported by the government since the mid-1980s, Hino (1988) concluded that it is “not something that is politically imposed ... but is a long established tradition which exists at a deeper level of the sociolinguist structure of Japan” (p. 45). With this in mind, the reforms by MEXT to introduce more CLT in the classroom have been described as a “re-culturing of schools, teachers and teaching conditions” (Mondejar, Valdivia, Laurier, & Mboutsiadis, 2011, p. 180).

MEXT responded to this by establishing the JET Programme which brought more foreign ALTs to Japanese public schools, sharing “their own culture to a local community in Japan, helping the country to gain personal contact with peoples of other countries” (JET, 2016). There are now more foreign ALTs than ever before, with a reported 62,000 ALTs from 65 different countries (JET, 2016). Following the research on teacher’s pressures analyzed by of Browne and Wada (1998), it was found that teaching the contents of the textbook to be greatest pressure in high school. Furthermore, in Schneer’s (2007) study of five of the most popular high school textbooks it was found that all of these books presented “Japanese and Western cultures as facts” which often “reinforced stereotypes and an us-and-them mentality” (p. 605). This was unfortunate since Kazufumi & Befu’s (1993) empirical research showed that, “belief in *Nihonjinron* is negatively correlated with education, travel abroad and having foreign friends” (p. 100). *Nihonjinron* can be translated as “the question of the Japanese people” and is part of Japanese ideology and identity, includes elements of belief that Japan is “linguistically and culturally homogenous” (Liddicoat, 2008, p. 34). This contradicts the idea of a globalized Japan envisioned by MEXT. Therefore, the globalized reforms to expose students to more foreign people, such as foreign ALTs, and offer more cultural education, will have a negative effect on both teachers’, and students’ belief in *Nihonjinron*.

However, McConnell (2000) talked about Japanese students using topics of “age and marital status of one’s conversational partner” being “crucial determinants of language and demeanor used during face-to-face interaction” (p. 86). These topics may not always be appropriate when communicating with non-Japanese people and therefore increase the need for cultural education. Many ALTs felt underutilized as educators and rather than reducing *Nihonjinron* through cultural education, it was reported by McConnell (2000) that ALTs sometimes felt they were in Japan “for a *gaijin* [foreigner] show – not for teaching” (p. 126).

McConnell (2000) also observed that some JTs believed that the “presence of an ALT would take away valuable time from entrance exam study as well as constantly threaten to embarrass the majority of the

Japanese teachers of language, whose spoken English skills were limited” (p. 168) The Association for Japanese Exchange & Teaching (AJET) in a survey of 936 ALT respondents in 2014 revealed that the “apparent goal of English education in Japanese schools at present is not to learn communicative English” as suggested by MEXT, “but rather to memorize textbook materials and pass exams” (AJET National Council, 2014, p. 12).

Browne & Wada (1998) believed that “the predominance of translation and teacher-fronted (i.e. non-communicative) teaching methodologies in public schools may be due to the overwhelmingly discrete point, receptive nature of the entrance exams” (p. 108). Underwood (2010) criticized language teachers in Japan regarding “their overemphasis on grammar-translation methodology and the discrete-point view of language” with a reported pressure from “the entrance examinations as highly influential on their practices” (p. 166). Asquith (2014) suggested high school English language testing still had a strong focus on “grammar and reading comprehension, with only a small section allocated to listening” (p. 49). With CLT, the teacher is teaching communicative language skills, however, the students need “to score highly on these tests” (p. 49). This can cause complications when teachers are following the MEXT reforms, but find it difficult adapt their CLT style to the learning outcome or goal. Grammar translation was still believed to be the easiest method for “preparation for tests and perceived as the method for success on exams” (Mondejar, et al., 2011, p. 181). One such exam is the Center Test which forms the first major test often used by high school students to enter university. This Center Test was deemed by Sakui (2004) as being “heavily grammar-orientated”, yet acting as a “critical gatekeeping practice” to enter Japanese universities (p. 156). This resulted in Asquith (2014) commenting that English teaching in high schools was “outdated”, with a “lack of variety and creativity in lessons” being a result of the Center Test (p. 49). However, competition for entering universities in Japan was fierce “and based solely on entrance examination scores” (Browne & Wada, 1998). The National Institute of Japanese Language and Linguistics lists 109 compounds regarding *taking an examination* or *juken* (Backhaus, 2014). Three such interesting terms are *juken kyoso* (*exam competition*), *juken senso* (*exam war*) and *juken jigoku* (*exam hell*) (Backhaus, 2014), which highlight the pressure students faced when taking the Center Test. This pressure came from parents who started to prepare their children for these exams at pre-school age. The Japan Times newspaper reported that “8 percent of 5-year-old kids in Tokyo take part in the process” (Clavel, 2014). Doing this could be a taboo topic since there was a great shame for parents whose child failed their entrance exam after taking part in this process, this was known as *zenmetsu* (crushing defeat) (Backhaus, 2014). Each year more than 500,000 candidates nationwide take the Center Test, “which will have a great impact on determining which university exams” (Guest, 2008, p. 86) they will take some two weeks later.

Samimy & Koybayashi (2004) showed justification for the high pressure of grammar teaching, as it was seen to be beneficial towards the Center Test. These results suggested there was a washback effect from the Center Test, where “CLT contradicts existing methods” (p. 204). However, Guest (2008) observed that when taking the Center Test, “the skill required to complete the task correctly might well demand an integrative approach” (p. 90). It should be noted that far more weight was placed upon the “more extended, comprehensive, integrated texts and tasks than upon discrete items” (p. 96). These extended reading passages were regarded by Mulvey (1999) as being “adult level, well-written” and “grammatically and stylistically correct” (p. 129). Guest (2008) drew the conclusion that this made the Center Test “not a grammar test” (p. 96), which was reinforced with Mulvey’s (1999) analysis concluding that the Center Test offered “contextualized, task based questions” (p. 129).

The pressure from MEXT and the CoS was clearly toward the goal of communicating proficiently, and exposing students to culture, yet there was substantial pressure to teach grammar for the Center Test. Since the Center Test was so critical for students, with 82% of all Japanese high school students taking the test in 2016 (Kyodo, 2016) and a seeming mismatch of goals, this study attempts to understand the

teaching pressures of high school English teachers in Japan and how the Center Test and these CLT reforms effect such pressures on teachers in Japanese high schools.

## Method

This research consisted of two types of data collection methods, quantitative and qualitative data collection. It focused on the pressures of English education in Japanese high schools, therefore it analyzed the data from English language high school teachers and students. For the quantitative data collection, two questionnaires were developed. One was designed for the students, and the other for the teachers. These can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively. The questions focused on pressures of teaching in Japanese high school, therefore variables in the participants were set. There were two main groups of participants: high school teachers in Japan; and Japanese first year university students who have passed the university entrance exam. The questions analyzed pressures on high school teachers' similar to the research by Browne and Wada (1998), using pressures suggested by MEXT (2014b) and Gorsuch (2001). This study aimed to concentrate on the reforms set by MEXT and the constitution of the Center Test. Knowing the pressures helps understand how these reforms are effecting the English language teaching in Japanese high schools.

## Participants

In the teachers group, there were three types: Japanese teacher (JT), Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) and Other. Since team teaching is part of the MEXT guidelines, both JTs and ALTs were asked to participate. The participants chose whether they were a JT, ALT, or *Other*. If the participant chose *Other* they stated their teaching position. 100 teachers participated in the research, and they were all given the online teacher questionnaire. Out of the 100 teachers who took part in the questionnaire, 67 were ALTs or Other, and 33 were JTs. We can see from Table 1 that 5 of the teachers were ALTs and 33 were JTs. The 12 who selected *Other* were asked to specify their teaching position. Out of the 12 teachers who selected *Other*, eight were non-Japanese solo teachers (not ALTs). These solo teachers would still be teaching high school students for the entrance exams. However, the remaining four who selected *Other*, believed that many of their students would not be taking the entrance exams. We can assume that this reduces the amount of Centre Test teaching pressure these teachers face.

Table 1

### *Language Teachers Who Teach High School Students Aiming to Enter University in Japan*

Answer Options	Response Count
ALT	55
JT	33
Other	12

All the participating students were Japanese first year university students studying at a national university in northern Japan. One hundred and fourteen students participated in the quantitative research, and were all given a paper based student questionnaire. They were all studying my language learning course, which was an optional course and focused on CLT. They were first year university students and had passed the Center Test. The students' responses were compared to the answers of the teachers. Therefore, the questions for the students and the teachers were largely the same in the quantitative research, the wording was changed as appropriate.

A qualitative data collection method was used with this research to analyze the responses from the quantitative questionnaire data. A small sample of teachers were selected by the researcher from the

teacher quantitative questionnaire participants. The sampled teachers were invited to volunteer some answers to a semi-structured email. These teachers were contacted via email addresses given voluntarily during the teacher questionnaire. This method was chosen since, in my experience, people can be reluctant to give out personal information such as telephone numbers. Out of the 23 high school English teachers who voluntarily gave their email addresses in the questionnaire, eight responded (four JTs and four ALTs). These teachers were questioned via email in relation to the answers given in the quantitative research, and encouraged to elaborate on those answers. The questions were made from the results of the quantitative research. The researcher probed the participants' answers to get further insight. The JTs will be identified in this study as JT1, JT2, JT3 and JT4, and ALTs will be ALT1, ALT2, ALT3 and ALT4.

## Results

### Quantitative results

As shown in Figure 1, the teachers and students ranked their teaching pressures, with one being the greatest pressure and four being the least pressure. For the JTs, *Communication* had the highest pressure with *Grammar* and *Preparing for the university center entrance exam* being closely matched 2nd and 3rd respectively. For the ALTs or Other, *Grammar* had the highest pressure with *Communication* and *Preparing for the university center entrance exam* being closely matched 2nd and 3rd respectively. We know from Richards & Rodgers (2001) that non-native speakers face a greater challenge to teach communication so we can expect the pressure to teach communication to be higher for JTs than ALTs in a CLT environment. Interestingly *Preparing for the university center entrance exam* ranked lower in terms of teaching pressure, but not by much. For the students, the Center Test yielded the most pressure. However, not significantly more than either communication or grammar. Perhaps most surprising was that *Teaching culture* wielded the lowest pressure for all.

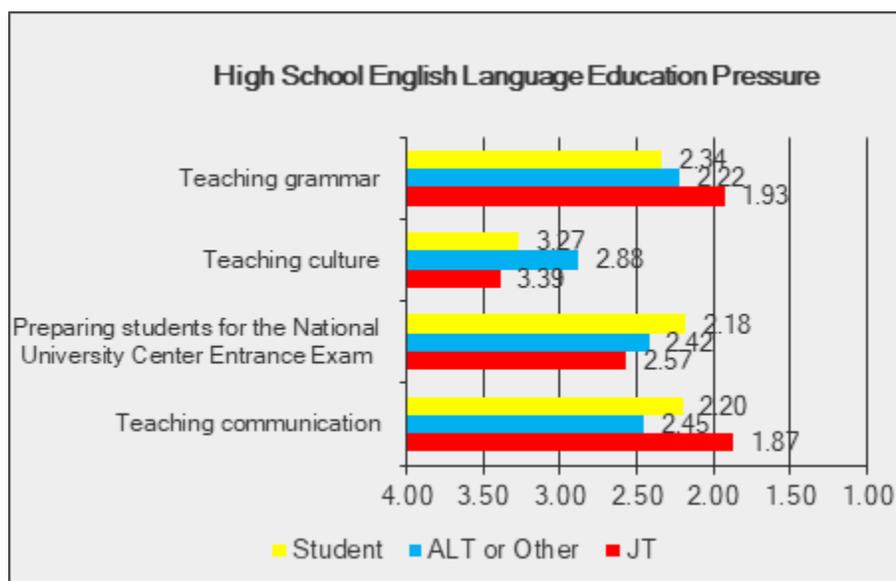


Figure 1. High school teachers and students ranking of pressure.

### Qualitative results

Explanations were given by the ALTs and JTs for the lack of pressure of teaching culture in Japanese high schools. One reason was the Center Test and there being a “lack of time” (JT2) to teach the grammar and

vocabulary for the Center Test, as well as culture. JT3 believed that “high school teachers don’t know how to teach language and culture”, therefore teachers were giving the textbook priority, to which JT1 stated that teachers use the materials in the textbook to “let students think about culture” (JT1). However, we have also seen from Schmeer (2007) that the textbooks can promote otherness. With such socio-cultural differences, conflict and misunderstandings are bound to occur. An over reliance on the textbook was further fueling the lack of culture taught in class.

Sakui (2004) acknowledged that there was a discrepancy between the definition of CLT and how to teach it. This was also attributed to a lack of time for the teacher to engage in professional development, therefore they were not getting the most up to date teaching methods proposed by MEXT and thus not feeling pressure to inject culture into their teaching. JT4 suggested many teachers still believe grammar and vocabulary memorization was the best means for high school language students.

*Nihonjinron* appears present as ALT3 suggested that “people like the idea” of teaching culture, however it was not seen as important since “Japan is a fairly homogenous country”. This was reinforced by ALT1 who made a point that Japanese “students are not interested in other countries and cultures” (ALT1), which they believed is due to the cultural interest not being introduced. This made it difficult for ALT3 to make foreign culture relevant for students’ everyday lives. ALT4 went as far to say that learning culture was “insignificant” since it was not used in testing. ALT2 also agreed with this notion.

## Discussion

It appeared both JTs and ALTs in Japanese high schools supported CLT, and there was more pressure on teachers to teach communication than prepare students for the Center Test. However, grammar was much easier for the teachers to prepare. Since teachers were “expected to progress through the curriculum at a very rigid pace” (Sakui, 2004, p. 161), which included preparation for the Center Test, the pressures to teach grammar remained high. Teachers were pushed to teach from the textbook, which we have seen from Schmeer (2007) can promote otherness. This can come at the expense of the ALT, who may “take away” Center Test preparation time (McConnell, 2000, p. 165).

We saw a push for teaching culture in the CoS, but this was not reflected in the classroom pressures. Young (2009) concluded that the best way to avoid excessive promotion of *Nihonjinron* was through approaching culture in an engaging and critical manner. If MEXT wants to change the approach, and move further away from the grammar method in favor of CLT, then further changes are needed. A greater focus on culture would be a major change. It is also important for teachers to realize that English is not just a “heuristic tool through which to access foreign culture” but it is also “a functional lingua franca for the exchange of ideational meaning between any members of the international community” (Sergeant, 2009, p. 60).

However, we must acknowledge that Japan is still in Kachru’s (1992) expanding circle, and we cannot assume that “if something works in the inner circle [...] it should work equally well in the expanding circle” (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004, p. 249). Therefore, a simple transition from the grammar method to CLT is not going to happen. Sakui (2004) acknowledged that there is a discrepancy between the definition of CLT and how to teach it. This was also attributed to a lack of time for the teacher to engage in professional development, therefore they are not getting the most up to date teaching methods proposed by MEXT.

## Conclusion

An over reliance on the textbook and underutilizing the ALT further fueled the lack of culture taught in class. While there was substantial pressure on communication, which could be seen as steps towards CLT,

there was also heavy pressure on grammar and the Center Test. Whether the washback effect of the Center Test was to blame for this or not, is more difficult to say. Certainly, it was partially to blame for its heavy grammar focus but there were many social elements involved in stifling the reforms. However, there is no reason why CLT, as defined in the CoS, cannot be used in preparation for the Center Test. Potentially it can give students a better learning experience which can prepare them for the more heavily weighted critical thinking questions.

However, the lack of pressure on culture was worrying, and suggests CLT was not being implemented in the way the MEXT reform guidelines stated in the CoS. This will do little to reduce *Nihonjinron* and will not prepare students to communicate in a globalized Japan. Giving teachers more professional development in the way of CLT training and more time to focus on their cultural teaching would be beneficial. It would be interesting to discover how much of Japanese high school language learning is devoted to studying for the Center Test, and how much those classes focus on CLT. This would reveal more about the focus of pressure of language education in Japanese high schools.

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## Appendix A

### Student questionnaire

1. Please rank the extent of pressure 1-4 to learn the following: (1 = Greatest Pressure)

下記のことを学ぶにあたって、比重の大きい順に順位付けし○をつけてください。

(1 = 一番比重が大きい)

Learning Communication コミュニケーションを学ぶこと	1・2・3・4
Preparing for the entrance center exam 大学入試センター試験対策	1・2・3・4
Learning culture 文化を学ぶこと	1・2・3・4
Learning grammar 文法を学ぶこと	1・2・3・4

## Appendix B

### Teacher questionnaire

1. Do you teach high school students who are aiming to get into university?

Yes - ALT	
Yes - JT	
Yes - Other (Please Specify)	

2. Please rank the extent of pressure to teach the following: (1 = Greatest Pressure)

下記について、授業で比重を置いている順に番号をつけてください

(1 = 最も比重を置いている)

Teaching Communication コミュニケーション英語	1・2・3・4
Preparing for the entrance center exam 大学入試センター試験対策 (英語)	1・2・3・4
Teaching culture 英語圏の文化について教えること	1・2・3・4
Teaching grammar 文法を教えること	1・2・3・4

## Appendix C

### JT qualitative responses

Teaching culture posed the least amount of pressure for Japanese teachers and ALTs. It also ranked as having a low amount of focus in high school English class. This seems to go against the current MEXT course of study, which suggests high school English should help deepen students understanding of 'language and culture'. Why is there such a low amount of pressure and focus on teaching language culture in high school?

#### JT1

If you check Japanese textbook, you know this is why. Most textbooks show us about many topics related to environment, history, language, society etc. Thus, students learn not only culture but knowledge. If students learn culture, what do you teach? If so, is there enough time to teach them?

I believe that content of textbooks is not tell about culture but teachers use that materials let students think about culture.

#### JT2

The biggest problem is a lack of time. Even though we want to teach to help students to understand language and culture, we actually only have time to go through the textbook. I explain the culture when there is a topic relating to culture. However, it sums up to a small amount of time. If there is much time, teachers will be able to have time talking about cultural thing.

#### JT3

I think most high school teachers don't know how to teach language and culture. When they were students, their teachers made them memorize English grammar, words, etc not other culture, because it has nothing to do with the centre test. Also, I think most of them haven't studied abroad for a long time. After being a teacher, they don't have enough time to study for themselves because they have many things to do in a day such as preparing for classes, grading, club activities and so on. For these reasons, they don't know how to teach culture to students

#### JT4

I think one reason is that there remains awareness that to study English is to memorize grammar and words. In particularly, the high school only for entering universities have to focus on them. So I think the tendency is partly related to the centre test or the regular written test in the school.

## Appendix D

### ALT qualitative responses

Teaching culture posed the least amount of pressure for Japanese teachers and ALTs. It also ranked as having a low amount of focus in high school English class. This seems to go against the current MEXT course of study, which suggests high school English should help deepen students understanding of 'language and culture'. Why is there such a low amount of pressure and focus on teaching language culture in high school?

#### ALT1

Japan and Japanese people are very proud of their country. Many agree that Japan is possibly the best country in the world. Many students are not interested in other cultures or other countries. Even students that really enjoy English may have no ambition to travel outside of Japan.

“If you could go anywhere, where would you go?” -- “Tokyo Disneyland! USJ! Okinawa!”

It is possible that with interest in visiting other countries being so low, people may not see a need to introduce them. In contrast, if other cultures and countries were introduced earlier on, it could spark interest.

#### ALT2

Because Japanese teachers and some ALTs lack the forethought to see the importance of knowledge. Knowing why some speak, dress, live, etc the way they do will help students realize that there are other cultures out there that live differently and possibly better than Japanese. This is hard for Japanese to consider and are ashamed when it is true. After this, most teachers feel if the content will not be on the test, what is the point of learning it? Therefore, it is given little consideration and therefore lack the pressure to be taught.

#### ALT3

I think people like the idea, but there's simply not time for it from the teachers' perspectives. Also I don't think a lot of people see it as very important or practically useful. Because Japan is a fairly homogenous country, I don't think many people see cultural understanding as very relevant to their everyday lives.

#### ALT4

The teachers are more focused on the students passing exams and getting good grades. In order to do that, grammar and vocabulary must be studied and culture learning is seen as being insignificant since it generally isn't used in grading or exams.