

Changes in English Language Teaching: An Interview with Hironobu Tomitaka, Miyazaki Prefecture Board of Education, Educational Policy Division

著者	Christmas Julia
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**Changes in English Language Teaching:  
An Interview with Hironobu Tomitaka, Miyazaki Prefecture Board of  
Education, Educational Policy Division**

Julia Christmas

**Introduction**

English language education in Japan, always an area fraught with controversy, is receiving even more scrutiny in the last several years due to major Ministry of Education (MEXT) Course of Study guideline changes. One of these changes asks English language teachers to conduct their classes predominantly through English (MEXT, 2010) (rather than simply teaching about English language forms via the medium of Japanese) and the other major curricular change has made English language activities a required subject in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades of primary school—a requirement that will soon be lowered to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (MEXT, 2010, p.8; Clavel, 2014a). These revisions, particularly those affecting elementary education have garnered focus from the media (Clavel, 2014a; 2014b) as well as from scholars who approve of the more communication-oriented focus that these modifications could bring to secondary schools but do not anticipate great differences unless shifts also occur in university entrance testing (Clavel, 2014b).

Knowledge regarding these national curricular changes is useful for universities, like ours, that are involved in professional development (workshops, lectures, presentations) for elementary and secondary in-service teachers of English because it is essential that professional development instructors have up-to-date information in order to meet the needs of participants. It is hoped that the following interview will

help to inform professional development programs at Miyazaki International College and other universities with similar programs and that this discussion can add to the body of knowledge we have already gathered on the circumstances and needs of primary and secondary teachers in Miyazaki.

### **Background on the Interviewee: Hironobu Tomitaka**

#### **Q: What is your background? How long have you been working for the Prefecture?**

**A:** I used to be a high school English teacher. I started teaching English at Miyazaki Nishi senior high school and worked there for 8 years. Then I moved to Nobeoka senior high school and taught English there for ten years. After that, I was transferred to the Personnel Division of the Prefectural Board of Education, completely away from English education for 4 years. Then I became an English Teachers' Consultant at the Prefectural In-Service Training Center, (*Kyoiku Kenshu Center*). After that, I came to the Educational Policy Division and this is my 4<sup>th</sup> year here.

#### **Q: Can you describe your role/job working for the Prefectural Board of Education?**

**A:** I work in the high school education section which is in charge of prefectural high school education. Within this section, we are responsible for our respective subjects such as math or science, and I'm in charge of English. One aspect of this role is professional development. For instance, we visit ten high schools a year out of 39 schools, to observe classes and to give advice to improve teaching. To be more specific about English education, I have a responsibility to carry out the *English Education Improvement Project* by planning lectures and workshops for teachers.

**Q: How many, on average, workshops do English Teachers get?**

**A:** It depends on the length of service. Professional development requirements change depending on how long a teacher has been teaching in schools. First year teachers may have to attend four days per year, and this will<sup>21</sup> go down after the first year. In addition, the types of professional development also change based on their length of experience teaching. Also, professional development is required by local prefectures (nationally MEXT specifically indicates that first year and tenth year teachers must take part in professional development) but not connected to pay raises. Every year, throughout the year, there are also non-required professional development courses and programs that are available for teachers. Basically, all these programs are developed and carried out by the Prefectural In-Service Training Center.

I also planned the in-service training for English teachers as part of our prefecture's project which is separate from the Prefectural In-Service Training Center projects but also required. We require principals from each school in Miyazaki Prefecture to send one teacher to our high school seminars. For the elementary and junior high school seminars the budget is a bit too tight, so we require teacher attendance from 30 handpicked schools. Typically, the required attendance is rotated; so different teachers can have an opportunity to attend.

There are two kinds of professional development seminars/workshops going on now which have been developed by my department. One is a seminar about *CAN-DO lists* (Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which are long term goals for students and teachers. The other is a Teaching Skills Development Seminar at MIC.

**Q: Can you tell me more about the *English Education Improvement Project*?**

Every year, MEXT asks each prefecture to find ways, aside from the required professional development, to improve their English Education programs in schools. They also offer funding to prefectures which need it and this is where my department gets its budget that allows us to carry out the two types of professional development workshops we run including those done in cooperation with MIC. We think that teaching English in English is a rather big issue for teachers and thus we have enlisted MIC's help to strengthen teachers' skills in this area.

**Q: Could you explain the changes in the high school English curriculum that have occurred because of the “New Course of Study”?**

**A:** New Courses of Study have been implemented for all levels of education, from Kindergarten to high school. This year, 2013, the implementation of the New Course of Study for senior high school has taken place. The biggest change is the use of English in class. The New Course of Study states, “classes, in principle, should be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English, transforming classes into real communication scenes. Consideration should be given to use English in accordance with the students' level of comprehension (MEXT, 2010, p.8).”

**Q: The New Course of Study tells us that English classes “in principle” should be taught in English. Do you think that is realistic? What is holding English teachers back from teaching English in English?**

**A:** This is the first time for a statement like “classes should be conducted in English” to be officially included in a written document. This doesn't mean that the English teacher alone speaks English and explains language rules and grammatical points in English.

This (“Classes, in principle, should be conducted in English.”) is important for both teachers and students. Students should be given enough opportunities to share, write, and talk about their ideas and opinions in English.

I think most teachers are capable of teaching English in English. There are some reasons or excuses teachers often mention, such as; my students are not good at English so they can't understand spoken English; entrance exams should change first, and so on. In my experience, teachers tend to teach English as they were taught, because they were successful English learners when they were high school students and believe they should follow a proven example. It seems very difficult for teachers to change their way of teaching because they are worried about whether they will succeed or fail by teaching differently.

**d) Do you think that entrance exams are a barrier to learning English communication?**

Maybe they are a barrier to teaching English communicatively. If we look at what the entrance exams measure, there is no spoken test—no interview. The Center Test includes listening, which has a good “backwash” effect on those who prepare their students to take the test. When I was teaching, the Center Test did not include a listening section, so I didn't need to make my students practice that skill, but now schools have to train students in listening. This can help improve students' listening comprehension. So everyone involved sees the Center Test as having strong influences on teacher practices. Teachers at highly academic secondary schools believe that they have to cover all of the grammatical items that will appear on the Center Test and that they need time to explain and go over homework. Few teachers give time for a balanced approach to language learning. However I believe that if students are offered a balanced approach, more

English will actually be acquired. It will stay with them longer. So, actually teaching in a balanced way can help them succeed on the Center Test. But in order to do this, teachers (both ALTs and JTEs) need common goals. That is where the Can-Do list and alternative assessment such as performance assessment, not just paper-based assessment and scoring will be helpful.

**Q: Schools lose English “oral communication courses”. How will that affect the roles of ALTs and JTEs? I mean typically, “oral communication courses” were the places where ALTs had time to teach more “communication” or “conversation” based lessons.**

**A:** The subjects in the previous Course of Study consist of English I and II, and skill-based Oral Communications, Reading and Writing. It is true that most team-teaching classes have been done in Oral Communications because the subject goals of these communication courses are clear, to teach more communication, as you pointed out.

The new subjects are *English Communication*, *English Expression* and *English Conversation*. It is expected that students will develop a balance among the 4 skills, as well as logical thinking and expressions. Before the New Course of Study the required subject was either *English I* or *Oral Communication I*, but under the New Course of Study, all students will have to take “*English Communication I*” for integrative and overall development of the 4 skills.

It is becoming more and more important to set teaching goals and to use these goals to think about how to teach English and how to evaluate student achievements. It will also be important to think about in what stage or capacity ALTs can be made the best use of in the classroom.

Many academic high schools seem to have adopted the strategy of team-teaching with ALTs in the subject “English Expression I.” The main reason for this is that as the subject name suggests, this class includes communication activities such as writing and speaking. Another reason is that this subject has 2 classes a week which generally fits the ALTs and JTEs schedule and working hours.

**Q: I know part of your job entails managing ALTs. How many ALTs are there in Miyazaki (City) and Prefecture?**

**A:** The Prefectural Board of Education has employed 36 ALTs this year and there are about 90 ALTs in the Municipal Board of Education.

**Q: I also know that you are involved with training for ALTs in Miyazaki Prefecture. What kind of training do the ALTs in Miyazaki get? Has that been different in the past? Will it change in the near future? What training could enhance the ALT/JTE team teaching situation?**

**A:** Training for ALTs has been much the same for the past several years. When the new ALTs first arrive in summer, they have a one-day orientation, where they are given a general picture of English language education in Miyazaki. Prefectural and Municipal ALTs are grouped separately to observe TT demonstration and practice planning a lesson. This year ALTs were also given tips for coaching English debate and speech contests, which is one of the roles of the ALT at school.

Students at respective schools, especially high schools, have different attitudes and achievements in English, so ALTs are expected to have on the job training at each school.

In January, we have the ALT Skill Development Conference for all JET programme ALTs.

About 63 ALTs, not only the new comers but also ALTs in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year and beyond, and about 32 JTEs get together. The program includes a key note lecture and several workshops; team-teaching demonstrations, teaching strategies discussion sessions and lifestyle information forums. Last year two English teachers' consultants, Mr. Ishii and I, were in charge of the key note lecture. We believed that it was necessary and important for ALTs to understand the New Course of Study and how they can facilitate team-teaching under the New Course of Study.

We are always looking for and thinking about ways to further improve the training of ALTs and JTEs.

**Q: In your opinion, based on your knowledge of the challenges of team teaching and teaching English in English, how could the kenshu system or the system in general be improved?**

**A:** I think it is important for JTEs and ALTs to share common teaching goals. What kind of English abilities are students supposed to have by the end of the school year or at the end of their three years.

I also think that teachers should experience how to learn English in English as a student and feel successful in classroom activities. They should sometimes wear the student's hat. It also seems effective for teachers to experience microteaching and have discussions about these demonstrations, sharing problems, ideas and solutions.

**Q: MIC works with the BOE to augment your English teacher *kenshu* (professional development) program. What advice would you give to other prefecture Boards of Education who are trying to develop *kenshu* projects in cooperation with other universities?**

**A:** I appreciate your support and cooperation for the English teacher kenshu program in Miyazaki. Those who participated in the seminar enjoyed workshops conducted by MIC teachers. I think we are lucky to have MIC in Miyazaki because of its human resources, i.e. native speakers of English who teach English in English on daily basis.

My advice to other prefectures would be to find and make use of these and other resources available, to continue improving English Education in Japan.

**Q: Can you offer any other specific advice, e.g. how to make sure the universities have access to information about the realities of classroom teaching situations in elementary, junior high and high schools in Japan?**

There are two ways that could work. One is to take advantage of the “fuzoku” attached schools that are open to your university. If there are open channels between schools, professors can go and observe classes and you can also offer professional development for junior high or high school teachers similar to what is being done at Miyazaki Daigaku.

Another way is to offer voluntary workshops or seminars for teachers in the prefecture.

They would have to be done on weekends, but it is possible to attract teachers who want to improve their skills for teaching English in English.

### **Conclusions and further advice**

At MIC we can offer, through professional development, more opportunities for teachers to learn about communicative practices in classroom ESL. It goes without saying, however, that it is essential for us, and those at other institutions to have a clear picture of the teaching situations of participants in our professional development activities. General needs analysis and specific surveys of teacher perceptions should be

thoroughly taken into account when deciding specific content. Current literature that is available in English language mediums may not be accurate because of changes in the national Course of Study or never have been an accurate reflection of one's local schools (Matheny, 2005; Aline & Hosoda, 2006). Therefore it is wise to make use of the resources available through liaisons with local and prefectural boards of education. It is a disservice to already very busy teachers to offer workshops that do not meet their situational needs. Teachers may balk during professional development workshops when they encounter hands-on activities which they were not expecting (Moser et al, 2012) however this is very different from teachers' justified unwillingness to take part in professional development that is not designed with an eye to specific in-service needs (Hiramatsu, 2005).

This interview has been undertaken in the hopes that it can offer some insight into the current situation regarding changes in the national curriculum for secondary English language teachers in Japan and professional development contexts in Miyazaki Prefecture.

The trend in English language education in Japan is now leaning toward the communicative side of the pendulum. Thus, teachers at the university level who have long been making use of good practices in communicative language teaching can offer assistance to elementary and secondary veterans who are struggling with the dramatic remodeling of the national Course of Study. However, we can only help them if we are well-aware of both the guidelines and what skills need to be bolstered.

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