

Dealing With Change in Student English Language Ability

Gary V. Ireland*

Abstract

This paper examines the opinions of experienced native English teachers who are working in Japanese universities and colleges. Thirty-four teachers answered an in-depth survey regarding the abilities and attitudes of their present students in comparison to students of previous years. The paper aims to learn teachers' opinions on three issues. Firstly, do teachers believe that students' English proficiency levels have declined, and if so at what level of institutions is this relevant? Secondly, if this is indeed the case, in what particular areas of English language proficiency levels have abilities declined? Thirdly, what actions are teachers taking to deal with such a perceived decline?

Introduction

In recent years, one of the most discussed topics amongst college and university teachers in Japan is the declining level of students' English language skills and general educational ability. There seems to be a general perception that standards have declined and that this is now a serious dilemma for educators at college and university level. At language learning conferences, in teacher meetings and in staffrooms across the nation, teachers engage in hours of debate regarding a whole series of issues connected to this problem: Why is this trend happening? What are the biggest problems? How does it affect our teaching? And, what can we do about it? The discussions do not just involve native teachers of English, they also include Japanese teachers, who lament the decline of standards and show their frustration in having to adapt to the changing situation. However, this paper is primarily concerned with the level of English language ability and the survey was conducted exclusively with native English teachers.

Several theories for this perceived decline are usually put forward. Many educators feel that the problem is basically one of demographics. Therefore, the continuing decrease in the numbers of students entering college and university each year means that institutions are forced to compete more and more fiercely to achieve student quotas and thus, subsequently, to accept lower proficiency

* 准教授 / TESOL

students each year.

Others blame the continued changes made to the Japanese tertiary education system in recent years. These changes are referred to as *Yutori Kyoiku* in Japanese, or *Relaxed Education* in English. These changes included a reduction in the number and kind of subjects studied and the amount of time students spent at school. This resulted in the introduction in the 2002 academic year of five-day (as opposed to six-day) weeks at all public schools, and the drastic reduction in academic curriculums. However, the education ministry did subsequently expand school curriculums again.

Another, often quoted reason is the changing of Japanese society in recent years and the different attitude that young people have nowadays towards school, education and to life in general. Every aspect of Japanese society has changed drastically since the economic boom of the 1980s, and there is no question that high school leavers of today have very different lifestyles and values than their parents and especially their grandparents. Some teachers suggest that modern young Japanese students simply do not respond to the kind of teaching methodology and philosophy that generations before them have accepted.

If indeed the level of education amongst students entering colleges and universities has declined, then all of these reasons are almost certainly contributors to a larger or smaller extent. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to analyze the causes of such a decline.

Aims of this research paper

The aim of this research paper is three-fold. Firstly, to establish whether or not, and perhaps more importantly, to what degree, teachers do believe that students' level of English ability and general educational skills are in decline. Secondly, if this is indeed the case, to identify what particular areas of English learning abilities have declined, and thirdly to learn more about what actions teachers are taking to deal with such a perceived decline

For this purpose, a survey was created and distributed to 40 native English language teachers working at colleges and universities throughout Japan. The survey was divided into three sections. The first section asks teachers to give their opinions regarding whether or not they believe levels of English, and general education, have declined, and to identify in what kind of institutions this is happening.

The second section of the survey narrowed the information and concentrated only upon the teachers who had said that levels had declined either significantly, seriously or critically.

The third section of the survey again narrowed the information and concentrated only on teachers from section two who are currently teaching communicative/speaking courses in college or university. Naturally, as the field of information became more defined, fewer teachers were involved and therefore the amount of data available decreased.

It should be understood that the survey answers are very subjective and that different teachers may have different interpretations of both the meaning of the questions and the choice of answers. Therefore, this paper does not state that any of the opinions given or results of the survey represent concrete and unarguable facts. The purpose of the paper was to find out how teachers feel about the three areas on the survey, to promote better understanding and cooperation amongst teachers and hopefully, to encourage further research and discussion regarding problems facing teachers and techniques to overcome them. However, although the paper does not in any way claim proof or concrete evidence to any of the results, it should be remembered that the answers collected were given by a significant number of very well qualified and experienced teachers in the appropriate teaching environments in Japan.

The survey

The survey given to teachers was as follows:

Section 1

Please fill in the questionnaire and return it by e-mail as soon as you can. Please **highlight** or **underline** your answers for the appropriate questions and **copy** and **paste** where appropriate.

Please be as honest and accurate as possible with your answers. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. How long have you been teaching in college/university in Japan?
 More that 20 15 to 20 10 to 15 5 to 10 less than 5
2. How many colleges/universities are you currently teaching in?
 5 4 3 2 1
3. At what level would you class your college/university(s)? **(Please copy and paste)**
 A) High level B) Middle to high level C) Middle level
 D) Middle to low level E) low level

* **(Please highlight College or University in the boxes below for this question only)**

College / University 1	
College / University 2	
College / University 3	
College / University 4	
College / University 5	

4. Would you say that students' overall (average) level of English ability has declined in any or all of your institutions **during your time teaching in college/university in Japan?**

To what degree has the overall level decreased? (Please copy and paste)

- A) not at all B) a little C) significantly
D) seriously E) critically

College / University 1	
College / University 2	
College / University 3	
College / University 4	
College / University 5	

5. Would you say that students' overall (average) level of general education has declined in any or all of your institutions **during your time teaching in college/university in Japan?**

To what degree has the overall level decreased? (Please copy and paste)

- A) not at all B) a little C) significantly
D) seriously E) critically

College / University 1	
College / University 2	
College / University 3	
College / University 4	
College / University 5	

Section 2

1. In institutions that you feel levels of English and general education have changed between significantly to critically, please grade the problems below between 0 – 5 with regard to the seriousness of each problem. 0 represents not a problem, 5 represents a very serious problem.

A	Students often do not listen properly to instructions and information	
B	Students are easily distracted in class and tend to have short attention spans	
C	Students have little or no experience of common classroom language learning activities and skills	
D	Students have insufficient knowledge of modern technology. E.g., computers and the Internet.	
E	Students often do not seem to know what is expected of them in the classroom	
F	Students do not have sufficient knowledge of international news and current affairs	

G	Students do not have sufficient knowledge of domestic news and current affairs	
H	Students are not enthusiastic/willing to do homework and extra assignments	
I	Students find it difficult to communicate with peers from outside their immediate group	
J	Students lack interest and enthusiasm for their studies in general	
K	Students have little or no experience in communicative language learning activities	
L	Students are not able to express their opinions in L1 (Japanese) or L2 (English)	

2. In your opinion, which are the three biggest problems above? Please write the letters (A, E, G, etc) in order, from most serious, 1, to least serious, 3.

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Section 3

To be completed by teachers who are teaching communicative/speaking classes.

1. In your opinion, in which areas of English language skills necessary for communicative classes have student levels declined the most?

Please grade the areas below between 0 – 5 with regard to how much you feel the level of ability in each of these areas have declined. 0 represents not at all, 5 represents a very serious decline.

A	Knowledge of vocabulary	
B	Understanding of syntax	
C	Intonation/pronunciation	
D	Reading skills	
E	Listening skills	
F	Presentation skills	
G	Ability to express ideas/opinions	

2. Do you believe that it has become more difficult to teach students in a communicative manner?

Yes

No

(Please highlight or underline)

3. Do you feel that your communicative/speaking classes (particularly lower-level classes) have become more difficult to teach, or at a critical situation, in any of the institutions that you indicated as having seen significant to critical declines in? (A critical situation means that effective

communicative language learning at an appropriate level for college/university is extremely difficult, or no longer possible).

Please choose one of the following: (Please copy and paste)
 no yes, difficult critical situation

4. Have declining levels of English and education in general forced you to change the way you that teach communicative/speaking classes at any of your institutions?

Yes No (Please highlight or underline)

5. If you answered “Yes”, please check ✓ (in the first box) the areas below in which you have made changes to your classroom methodology.

In the second box, please order the areas 1 – 5 in order of the importance you attach to the most important changes you have made. 1 should reflect the most important.

A	Choose lower level textbooks than previously		
B	Skip difficult activities of textbook units		
C	Use of more technology in class and/or for homework		
D	Teach at a less than acceptable pace		
E	Use of less technology in class and/or for homework		
F	Use (more) drilling/repetition activities		
G	Repeat/review lessons several times		
I	Increase number of speaking activities		
J	Reduce number of speaking activities		
K	Eliminate most or all unguided speaking activities		
L	Use more listening activities in class		
M	Give more frequent tests		
N	Give less frequent tests		
O	Create simpler tests		
P	Assign more homework		
Q	Assign less homework		
R	Explain classroom goals more often		

Open questions

Please give brief answers to the following questions if you have any suggestions.

1. How can institutions help English teachers to make communicative/speaking lessons effective for low-level students?

2. What suggestions do you have for teachers with low-level students in communicative/speaking classes?

Results and analysis of the survey

Though the responders were asked to differentiate between university and college, in many cases this information was not given, and therefore, this section has been divided into the level of the institution only and not by institution type.

It has to be understood that in some cases teachers may not be aware of exactly the ranking that their institution has. Therefore, there may be some error in the levels chosen.

The results of the survey were as follows. Forty native English-speaking teachers at colleges and universities in Japan were asked to complete the survey. Of those, 34 teachers completed the survey. In total, the teachers are currently working at a total of 114 institutions. A mix of full time and part time teachers were surveyed, though the majority were part time teachers. From this data, we can see that the teachers surveyed work at an average of 3.3 institutions each. This is quite normal for a group of (mostly part time) native teachers, who often work each day at a different institution. Naturally, some of the teachers work at the same universities and there is therefore an overlap on some of the data given. In addition, eighteen of the schools listed were marked as N/A (not applicable) on the surveys. Where answers are marked as N/A this could mean that teachers do not feel they have taught in the institution for long enough to make a judgment, or in some cases it means that the teacher does not teach communicative/speaking classes in that institution.

Section 1

In response to question 1, (*How long have you been teaching in college/university in Japan?*), the average amount of time teaching at universities and colleges was 9.3 years. This figure may seem quite high, but teachers were chosen for the survey based on the fact that they were known to have had long-term relevant experience in the appropriate institutions. Eleven of the teachers surveyed have more than 20 years of experience.

In response to question 2, (*How many colleges/universities are you currently teaching in?*), we can see that the 34 teachers are working at a total of 114 institutions. Therefore each teacher works at an average of 3.3 institutions.

In response to question 3, (*At what level would you class your college/university(s)?*), the kind

of institutions that the teachers are working at broke down as follows.

Table 1

High level	11
Middle to high level	31
Middle level	27
Middle to low level	35
Low level	10
Total	114

Though the responders were asked to differentiate between university and college, in many cases this information was not given, and therefore, this section has been divided into the level of the institution only and not by institution type.

It has to be understood that in some cases teachers may not be aware of exactly the ranking that their institution has. Therefore, there may be a few discrepancies.

Question 4 on the survey, (*Would you say that students' overall (average) level of English ability has declined in any or all of your institutions **during your time teaching in college/university in Japan?***), was the most important question and was at the centre of the research purpose. The results were as follows.

Table 2

Level of school	A) Not at all	B) A little	C)Significantly	D) Seriously	E) Critically	N/A
High level	6	3				2
Mid to high	11	15				5
Middle	5	13	3	1		5
Mid to low	4	7	13	7		4
Low level			3	7		
Totals	26	38	19	15		16

We can easily see from the responses that many teachers do indeed feel that the level of their students' English has dropped in recent years. We can see that in total teachers feel that levels have dropped a little in 38 institutions, and more interestingly, either significantly or seriously in 34 institutions. The research also shows that 18 of the **B** (*A little*) answers were from middle to low-level schools. Most significantly, and of most importance to this research is the fact that all 34 of the **C** (*significantly*), and **D** (*seriously*) answers came from middle to low-level schools.

Question 5 on the survey was, (*Would you say that students' overall (average) level of general education has declined in any or all of your institutions **during your time teaching in college/university in Japan?***). This question is very relevant, but for the purpose of this survey was probably placed in the wrong area of the survey. The important information from this question was related

to the 34 institutions where teachers believed that English proficiency levels have changed between significantly to critically. Therefore, perhaps this question would have been better placed in section 2 of the survey. As some of the data collected is therefore not entirely relevant to this paper, this section has been cut to simplify understanding. Therefore, only institutions where teachers feel that levels of English proficiency had declined between significantly to critically (question 4) were compared.

To what degree has the overall level decreased?

(Please copy and paste)

- A) not at all B) a little C) significantly
 D) seriously E) critically

College / University 1	
College / University 2	
College / University 3	
College / University 4	
College / University 5	

From Table 2 Question 4 Levels of decline in English proficiency

	Significantly	Seriously	Critically
Middle	3	1	
Mid to low	13	7	
Low level	3	7	
Totals	19	15	0

Table 2B Question 5 Levels of decline in general education proficiency

	Significantly	Seriously	Critically
Middle	2	2	
Mid to low	10	8	2
Low level	2	7	1
Totals	14	17	3

We can see, that generally speaking, the answers given to both of these questions were very similar. This was also borne out in the answers given regarding institutions where teachers felt English levels had not declined. It is interesting to note that where there are differences, teachers seem to feel that overall levels of general education have declined to a slightly greater degree than those of English proficiency. The fact that general levels of education seem to have also declined in recent years should not be a surprise to teachers. English does not exist in a vacuum in schools. It would be more surprising if students who had good overall academic ability should only struggle in English classes. It is much more likely that their level of English is representative of their overall

level of academic proficiency. It is also true that one thing is not the cause of the other. Though, however, it is certainly possible that a student could be generally poor at school, but have very good English skills, this is probably very rare. On the contrary, as we can see from other parts of the survey, teachers obviously feel that having poor general education skills and knowledge is an additional barrier blocking students from being able to achieve good English proficiency.

The answer to the first research question seems to be quite clearly shown. This data shows that whilst higher-level institutions seem to be to a large degree maintaining the ability level of their freshman students, it is the middle to low-level schools where things have changed and therefore where teachers may be finding it most difficult to carry out effective communicative English teaching. It is this data that the paper will now focus upon.

Section 2 of the survey concerns only schools where teachers felt levels of English and general education have changed between significantly to critically (though there were no answers given for **E** (*critically*)). Fourteen of the teachers surveyed identified 35 universities or colleges, where they felt that levels had declined either significantly or seriously. Of these teachers, three worked in more than one institution and therefore the answers for those teachers were considered only once. Therefore, the feedback for this section is taken from 11 survey papers.

Section 2

Question 1 – In institutions that you feel levels of English and general education have changed between significantly to critically, please grade the problems below between 0 – 5 with regard to the seriousness of each problem. 0 represents not a problem, 5 represents a very serious problem.

Table 3

A	Students often do not listen properly to instructions and information	4 5 3 2 1 5 1 0 4 3 3 = 31
B	Students are easily distracted in class and tend to have short attention spans	4 3 4 2 2 5 2 5 0 3 3 = 33
C	Students have little or no experience of common classroom language learning activities and skills	5 1 2 0 2 4 1 2 5 5 2 = 29
D	Students have insufficient knowledge of modern technology. E.g., computers and the Internet.	2 0 4 0 1 4 0 4 1 4 2 = 22
E	Students often do not seem to know what is expected of them in the classroom	4 2 4 0 3 5 1 5 3 3 3 = 33
F	Students do not have sufficient knowledge of international news and current affairs	2 3 4 0 2 4 1 5 5 5 4 = 35
G	Students do not have sufficient knowledge of domestic news and current affairs	2 3 2 0 2 4 1 5 5 5 3 = 32
H	Students are not enthusiastic/willing to do homework and extra assignments	4 2 4 1 0 5 3 2 5 3 3 = 32
I	Students find it difficult to communicate with peers from outside their immediate group	5 4 3 2 2 4 1 1 5 3 4 = 34
J	Students lack interest and enthusiasm for their studies in general	3 2 3 0 2 5 3 2 4 3 2 = 29

K	Students have little or no experience in communicative language learning activities	4 2 3 0 2 5 1 3 5 3 2 = 30
L	Students are not able to express their opinions in L1 (Japanese) or L2 (English)	4 4 2 0 2 4 2 2 3 3 3 = 29

The most surprising fact from this information is that teachers seem to find almost all of the items equally problematic. The average totals show that each of these items scored very highly, which is obviously not a positive result.

Question 2 – In your opinion, which are the three biggest problems above? Please write the letters (A, E, G, etc) in order, from most serious, 1, to least serious, 3.

Table 4

A	Students often do not listen properly to instructions and information	3 2 3	8
B	Students are easily distracted in class and tend to have short attention spans	1 1 3 2 3	10
C	Students have little or no experience of common classroom language learning activities and skills		
D	Students have insufficient knowledge of modern technology. E.g., computers and the Internet.	1	1
E	Students often do not seem to know what is expected of them in the classroom	3 2	5
F	Students do not have sufficient knowledge of international news and current affairs	1 1 1	3
G	Students do not have sufficient knowledge of domestic news and current affairs		
H	Students are not enthusiastic/willing to do homework and extra assignments	1 3 2	6
I	Students find it difficult to communicate with peers from outside their immediate group	3 1 3 2 2 2 2	15
J	Students lack interest and enthusiasm for their studies in general	1 3 1	5
K	Students have little or no experience in communicative language learning activities	2 1	3
L	Students are not able to express their opinions in L1 (Japanese) or L2 (English)	2 2 3 3	12

Answers were assigned 3 points for first choice (most serious problem), 2 points for second choice, and 1 point for third choice (least serious problem).

The data is interesting in that points allotted to each of the above criteria came out much more evenly than expected. However, when asked to select the three most serious issues, teachers very clearly identified three particular items.

Teachers clearly felt that **item I** (*students find it difficult to communicate with peers from outside their immediate group*) was the most serious problem in the classroom.

The second most serious problem identified was **item L** (*students are not able to express their opinions in L1 (Japanese) or L2 (English)*).

The third most serious problem identified in these results was **item B** (*students are easily distracted in class and tend to have short attention spans*).

It is particularly interesting that teachers felt that **item I** and **Item L** represented the biggest problem areas. Clearly these answers point to serious issues regarding attitudes towards fellow classmates and L1 (first language) communication difficulties.

The fact that **item B** was regarded as the third biggest problem, and that this was closely followed by **item A** suggests basic problems that students often display in the classroom environment. These items are obviously not solely connected to the English language classroom environment, but are clearly a concern for any classroom situation.

Section 3

These questions were only answered by teachers currently teaching communicative/ speaking classes at the institutions in question. Two of the eleven teachers did not complete this section of the survey. Teachers were able to choose between 0 for least serious and 5 for most serious problem.

Question 1 – In your opinion, in which areas of English language skills, necessary for effective communicative learning, have student levels declined the most?

Table 5

A	Knowledge of vocabulary	3 0 1 1 3 3 3 4 1	19
B	Understanding of syntax	3 2 1 2 5 3 2 3 1	22
C	Intonation/pronunciation	0 2 1 3 5 2 0 2 1	16
D	Reading skills	3 2 1 0 5 2 2 1 0	16
E	Listening skills	2 3 1 1 4 3 3 3 1	21
F	Presentation skills	2 3 0 0 5 4 0 2 0	16
G	Ability to express ideas/opinions	2 4 1 0 5 3 4 3 0	22

Once again, it was interesting to see that all of the items in this question scored quite highly. The total scores ranged between 16 and 22 points. The average points allocated were also surprisingly high at between 1.7 (for 16) and 2.4 (for 22). This seems to suggest that teachers consider the level of each item listed to have significantly declined, and therefore to represent a considerable problem in the classroom.

The item identified as the biggest concern was **item B** (*understanding syntax*). Traditionally, Japanese university and college freshmen have been considered as false-beginners. This usually

implies that students have better than beginner level knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, but are not able to communicate at the level of this knowledge. This has always been understood to be the result of extensive exposure to the grammar translation method of teaching in schools, and a lack of exposure to communicative approach teaching. Therefore, generally speaking, at college and university level native teachers have used the communicative approach to language learning to build upon this foundation and to bring communication skills up to the level of vocabulary and structure known. If indeed the overall knowledge of grammar and syntax has significantly declined, and therefore the foundation is not in place, this poses serious problems for teachers to consider in teaching communicatively.

The item identified as the second biggest problem was **item G** (*ability to express ideas/opinions*). The fact that this item was chosen is not a surprise considering the answers given earlier in the survey. It is an issue that relates to general communication skills and not just English language proficiency.

The item identified as the third biggest problem was **item E** (*listening skills*).

Question 2 & 3

The results of answers to questions 2 (*Do you believe that it has become more difficult to teach students in a communicative manner?*), and 3 (*Do you feel that your communicative/speaking classes (particularly lower-level classes) have become more difficult to teach, or at a critical situation, in any of the institutions that you indicated as having seen significant to critical declines in?*) on the survey were as follows: Teachers working at the middle-level schools agreed that communicative teaching had not become difficult to teach. Teachers who work at the middle to low and low level schools had divided opinions. 60% agreed that communicative teaching had become difficult, whilst 40% disagreed. Nobody chose the answer critical.

Question 4 – Have declining levels of English and education in general forced you to change the way you that teach communicative/speaking classes at any of your institutions?

Yes

No

It was interesting, and perhaps a little disappointing, that two of the teachers who had checked several answers to question 2 and had agreed that communicative approach teaching had become difficult answered ‘No’ to this question. The survey does not allow for an explanation for this, though it seems surprising that, if teachers feel there are problems, they are not doing anything differently to deal with those problems. Perhaps, taking part in this survey, and considering the

questions asked, may encourage those teachers to consider implementing some of the suggestions listed.

Question 5 – If you answered ‘Yes’, please check ✓ (in the first box) the areas below in which you have made changes to your classroom methodology.

In the second box, please order the areas 1 – 5 in order of the importance you attach to the most important changes you have made. 1 should reflect the most important.

Table 6

		Responses	Total	Average
A	Choose lower level textbooks than previously	1 1 1 3 1 2 4	13	1.9
B	Skip difficult activities of textbook units	5 2 2 1 5	15	3
C	Use of more technology in class and/or for homework	4 3	7	3.5
D	Teach at a less than acceptable pace	4 3 1	8	2.7
E	Use of less technology in class and/or for homework			
F	Use (more) drilling/repetition activities	2 1 3 5	11	2.6
G	Repeat/review lessons several times	1 5 2 4	12	3
H	Increase number of speaking activities			
I	Reduce number of speaking activities	1 5 2 3	11	2.75
J	Eliminate most or all unguided speaking activities	1 1 2 1	5	1.25
K	Use more listening activities in class	4 1 3 3 1 3	15	2.5
L	Give more frequent tests	4 5 3 4	16	4
M	Give less frequent tests			
N	Create simpler tests	3 1 4 4 4	16	3.2
O	Assign more homework	5	5	1
P	Assign less homework	1	1	1
Q	Explain classroom goals more often	4 1 2 4 1 2	14	2.5

Again it is interesting to see that at least some teachers selected almost all of the items in

this question. It is most interesting to note that **item L** and **item N** received the highest points totals of 16. It is clear that many teachers are creating simpler, shorter tests and giving these more often than they previously had in order to help students with low proficiency to pass their communicative classes. None of the teachers checked **item M**, which shows that teachers are not allowing students to pass courses without sufficient testing. From a professional point of view, this is a very relevant and positive statistic. However, it does seem to suggest that discussion between teachers, and perhaps, the implementation of guidelines from the institution or course directors is extremely important in creating a fair and comprehensive testing system. Naturally, students tested once a month, by shorter, simpler tests, would probably receive better scores and grades than those tested only twice in a semester by longer and more difficult tests.

Item K (*Use more listening activities in class*) received 15 points in this question. When we consider that **item E** (*Listening skills*) in Table 5 was the third most selected item, this shows that teachers do recognize that this is a serious issue in relation to communicative language teaching and are taking steps to improve students' listening ability.

Item A (*Choose lower level textbooks than previously*), and **item B** (*Skip difficult activities of textbook units*) received 13 and 15 points respectively. Teachers are clearly concerned that textbooks they have previously used are now becoming too difficult for their present students. In addition, we can see that teachers are choosing to skip certain exercises in textbook units, which they consider too difficult for low-level students to cope with. We can see from **item I** that some of these exercises will include some of the more difficult speaking tasks. This is obviously a serious issue for teachers who believe in the communicative approach, and are trying to teach communicatively.

Instead of using some of the more difficult exercises, teachers seem to be incorporating more drilling/repetition type exercises, (**item F**), and also choosing to repeat and review lessons several times, (**item G**). These ideas show good teaching and a sensible approach to the situation. However, by choosing to skip some of the more difficult speaking tasks, and instead, relying more on repetition and drilling, teachers are in fact moving away from the way of teaching false beginners and towards methods associated with teaching genuine beginners. This is a very revealing and significant consideration that comes to light in this survey.

The other item with a high points score in this question of the survey is **item Q** (*Explain classroom goals more often*). It is interesting that teachers have changed their teaching in order to explain classroom goals more often. It is clear that the students in question often may not really

know what is expected of them in the classroom and what purpose some of the activities aim to achieve. Sadly, this is a reflection of students' lack of exposure to communicative language learning and lack of general communication skills.

Open questions

Rather than try to analyze the feedback given to these questions, it may be more interesting and useful simply to show some of the more detailed and thought-provoking answers that were given. This is a short selection of ten answers to each question.

1. How can institutions help English teachers to make communicative/speaking lessons effective for low-level students?
 - I Teach students skills tactics for how to study and learn properly both in the classroom and outside of the classroom.
 - II Low level students should be placed in the same class with books assigned for them to meet their levels, and the pace of teaching should be at their level of learning and no set targets should be made. For example, like they have to do up to Unit 6 in the first semester. If they cannot digest the first few units, it makes no sense to rush them when they can not learn anything just to meet some target for a syllabus.
 - III I think schools need to allocate more time to doing remedial lessons before we can even approach usual first year English. Students are missing basic grammar, vocabulary and knowledge about the world they live in.
 - IV Focus on the relevance of English to students' current realities or conceivable futures, rather than on rehashing language forms without context.
 - V Have Internet in each classroom. Make unified syllabi with realistic goals.
 - VI Drop textbooks, at least for first semester students, in favor of a set of targets. It's impossible to know what text to use with any given class before they arrive.
 - VII They should ensure that in class media technology is compatible with modern devices. They should take measures to ensure students understand that university-level classes are not a "free ride", or unimportant. Institutions should integrate second language studies

with the rest of the curriculum, emphasizing the globally interactive nature of the modern world.

- VIII Make available, in English, as much information as possible about what students are doing in other parts of their degree and explain how the university sees communicative English classes as fitting into the degree as a whole.

Consult with teachers (verbally and extensively) before making curriculum and textbook decisions, which will affect their communicative classes.

- VIII Institutions should offer more flexibility to teachers in terms of curriculum design and material selection. Teachers can then choose material that would be appropriate for the level of the students.

2. What suggestions do you have for teachers with low-level students in communicative/speaking classes?

- I Consider other approaches and methods rather than sticking with one approach or text.
- II Patience, repetition, and a sense of humor. Mix basic grammar drills into the speaking material.
- III Try to go to their level of understanding and use both Japanese and English for them to understand the lesson to say that teachers not use any Japanese in the class is nonsense as without it is pouring water over a duck's back. Nothing will get through and it will be a waste for both teacher and student. As much as we don't like to use their First language, we need to in order to reinforce their understanding. Hard work but worth it I feel.
- IV Be friendly. Have students working in groups for a large percentage of class time. Sit down with students and talk to them as often as possible. Be flexible. Have realistic expectations and keep your frustrations to yourself. Praise small achievements with genuine enthusiasm. Spend time on non-verbal communicative basics such as facing your listeners, smiling, maintaining eye contact and using an enthusiastic tone. Don't get bogged down in a textbook; and steer clear of anything that could be seen by the students as 'grammar'. Give low-level students tasks that feel like they are college level, but which they can achieve.

- V Set realistic goals. Forget about getting students to an impossibly high fluency level. Focus instead on raising students' awareness of how they can communicate now, and thereby boost confidence and motivation.
- VI Lots of repetition. Also, don't be afraid to treat them like elementary school students. Low-level students respond to points systems and clear rules.
- VII This is a difficult question to try and answer briefly, as there a number of fundamentally complex reasons, pedagogically and socio-culturally, why the communicative approach is experiencing problems in Japanese universities, and there are hence a number of different measures that teachers could potentially take in terms of solving these problems. However, I feel that it is important for foreign teachers to bear in mind the type of English teaching that students have been exposed to for the last 6 years at state high school, and junior high school. Whilst native English teachers are trained and `set up` to teach communicatively, and therefore implicitly expect students to behave proactively in the classroom, the students are used to learning by rote based instruction, and the lower level students in particular often expect to be spoon fed English. Hence, I find that the trick is to try and work around this as best one can, at times following the teacher led (TTT) model that students are used to, whilst discretely integrating a more communicative approach, which necessitates more STT, as the semester continues. A western style STT approach generally works very well with high to mid level students, but a too forcefully imposed communicative approach, especially in the early stages of a semester, often tends to alienate lower level students, leading to them switching off. Getting the balance right with this is, of course, easier said than done!
- VIII Low-level classes should obviously be taught at a comfortable pace, but not a glacially slow one. Students need to be challenged and engaged.
Test frequently, at least twice a month (weekly is better). This way, tests become less daunting, and give more immediate feedback. Use a variety of test types to reduce tendencies to "Study for the test".
- IX Teachers of low-level students must have patience. They should constantly evaluate their teaching style and take notice of the students' reactions to the lesson material. I also suggest they regularly and adequately evaluate the students' abilities in order to make successful adjustments or modifications to the course.

Conclusions

The first research question that this paper addresses was: ‘Do teachers believe that student English proficiency levels have declined, and if so in what level of institutions is this relevant?’ The survey clearly shows that many teachers do indeed believe that students entering colleges and universities nowadays do have lower English proficiency levels than in previous years. However, the survey also clearly shows that this problem is much more significant for teachers working at mid-level through to low-level institutions. It seems that whilst higher-level institutions are still able to maintain the level of their freshman, mid to low-level institutions are no longer able to attract the level of student that they have in the past. This is obviously a serious concern and something that both administrators and teachers need to recognize and take action to deal with. It is also especially important for institutions to remember that it is not only the students’ ability in English that is at issue, but more importantly, their overall academic ability. This must be seriously taken into account whenever changes to curriculum or methodology are discussed.

In section 2 of the survey, teachers were asked to identify particular problem areas that they are facing with lower-level students. When teachers were asked to allocate points values to each item, each of the items scored almost identically and very highly. We can conclude from this feedback that there are not simply one or two areas of concern to be dealt with, but in fact, a serious number of different issues that need further thought and discussion. However, when asked to choose the most important three problems, the results were much more conclusive and revealing.

Teachers clearly felt that **item I** (*students find it difficult to communicate with peers from outside their immediate group*) was the most serious problem in the classroom. The second most serious problem identified was **item L** (*students are not able to express their opinions in L1 (Japanese) or L2 (English)*). These answers give a clear indication that students at the lower proficiency level have serious problems with their general communication skills in their own native language. The rote learning system that has always been preferred in Japanese tertiary education does not promote student interaction or discussion and does not encourage students to have, or express, their own opinions and ideas. This issue is clearly a serious matter for the Ministry of Education to recognize and take steps to try to improve upon. From the perspective of foreign language teachers, it is a frustrating situation. Clearly, it is a very difficult task to get students to communicate with each other in English if they are not able to do so effectively in their own language. This strongly suggests that institutions taking in such students need to instigate their own programs in order to firstly facilitate better L1 communication skills. In the meantime, teachers need to consider their own ideas on how promote/encourage better communication and cooperation

in both L1 and L2 in the classroom. One thing that English language teachers can do is to create a seating plan that automatically moves students around the classroom and forces them to sit with different students each week. This idea does help to promote better interaction between students. This is definitely one area where discussion and cooperation between teachers regarding idea is very important.

The third most serious problem identified in these results was **item B** (*students are easily distracted in class and tend to have short attention spans*). This was closely followed by **item A** (*students often do not listen properly to instructions and information*). The fact that these items also scored highly also shows basic problems that students often display in the classroom environment. Again, these items are obviously not solely connected to the English language classroom environment, but are clearly a concern for any classroom situation. Sadly, both of these examples of attitude would seem to be more normally associated with behavior at elementary or junior high school level education rather than college or university. For any teacher, regardless of subject matter, these are serious issues and a huge hindrance to effective teaching and learning. Extensive orientation and constant reminders are perhaps the best way to try to overcome these problems. Institutions, which are now accepting students with these difficulties, need to give extensive guidance upon entrance to explain what is expected and what is acceptable or not acceptable from students at colleges and universities. This needs to be regularly backed up by teachers of all subjects and not just English teachers.

The second research question addressed was; 'If there is indeed a decline in proficiency, in what particular areas of English have learning abilities declined?' It was interesting, and perhaps alarming, to see that teachers scored all of the items in this section almost equally, and more importantly, very highly. This suggests that teachers see a wide variety of problems with regard to declining levels of proficiency.

The fact that **item B** (*understanding syntax*) was identified as the biggest concern may surprise some teachers, and perhaps, most of all, those who are teaching English at the tertiary level in Japan. As mentioned earlier, traditionally, Japanese university and college freshmen have been considered to be false-beginners. This usually implies that students have better than beginner level knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, but are not able to communicate at the level of this knowledge. This feedback has to be taken very seriously by teachers who are responsible for teaching communication classes. The obvious conclusion to draw from this is that in the present day, the grammar translation method used at the tertiary level of education is failing to have any recognizable impact on English

language ability in a large number of students. Whilst this methodology has never been successful in giving students communicative ability (and indeed, was never really supposed to do that), it has been tolerated to some extent because by at least creating false-beginner freshmen, this enabled successful communicative approach teaching in college and university. This is now no longer the case for many students. Many other countries have stopped using the grammar translation method of language teaching a long time ago. Recently, even Cambodia, a country that has only been teaching English in schools for a very short time, has implemented a plan to abandon this method of teaching in favor of the communicative approach. Perhaps, it really is time for a genuine review and evaluation of how English is being taught in schools. This also leads to a more compelling conclusion.

The conclusion that many teachers will draw from considering this data is that perhaps in many institutions, we can no longer simply think of students as false beginners. Moreover, with such poor syntax, vocabulary, listening skills and communication ability, these students must be considered as true beginners in learning English as a foreign language. This revelation leads to the further conclusion that if these students are basically at beginner level, then they must be taught more in the manner that beginners are taught and not as false-beginners. There are several differences in methodology between teaching real beginners in a language in comparison with false-beginners. One fundamental difference is the use of repetition drilling exercises. With true beginners it is useful and necessary to have student do a lot speaking repetition exercises for syntax and intonation/pronunciation practice. This is normally not necessary for false-beginners. On the other hand, false beginners may be exposed to both guided-speaking exercises and role-playing exercises, whereas, real beginners are not capable of role-playing or creating their own utterances and conversations. We can see in section 3 of the survey that both of these ideas are mentioned. For the institutions in question, and their English teachers, it may now be time to accept that their freshman students are basically beginners in English. In this case, there needs to be both discussion and cooperation between an institutions' course directors and its English teachers in order to create the ideal framework of materials and methodology necessary for successful language learning.

The third research question was: 'What actions are teachers taking to deal with such a perceived decline?' The first conclusion that can be drawn is that almost all teachers surveyed have been making changes to the way they are teaching their communicative/speaking classes in order to deal with the decline in proficiency at their institutions..

The fact that **item L**, (*Give more frequent tests*), and **item N** (*Create simpler tests*) received the

highest points totals of 16 makes it clear that many teachers are creating simpler, shorter tests and giving these more often than they previously did in order to help students with low proficiency pass their communicative classes. This is an excellent idea. However, it is important that this is done across the board in any institution. Once again, dialogue and cooperation between course directors and teachers is of paramount importance. It would be totally unfair to students if some teachers apply this idea to classes, whilst others test in the same way that they always have. More than ever, it is now extremely important to have a properly coordinated program of English language courses.

Item A (*Choose lower level textbooks than previously*), and **item B** (*Skip difficult activities of textbook units*) also received high points totals. This was backed up in many of the answers to the open questions at the end of section 3. Many teachers put great emphasis on the choosing of appropriate materials. Once again, discussion and cooperation is extremely crucial in resolving the situation. In addition, we can see that teachers are choosing to skip certain exercises in textbook units, which they consider too difficult for low-level students to cope with. We can see from **item I** (*Reduce number of speaking activities*) that some of these exercises will include some of the more difficult speaking tasks. We can also see from the open question answers that several teachers are also now employing more repetition and drilling exercises. Whether consciously or subconsciously, teachers are actually adjusting their teaching a little away from the communicative approach for false beginners, and more towards teaching genuine beginners. Once again, choosing appropriate materials and discussing how best to utilize those materials is crucial.

Item K (*Use more listening activities in class*) received 15 points in this question. Teachers obviously feel that this is a serious issue too, and are now using more and more listening exercises. Not only are lower level students unable to properly take part in communication tasks without better listening skills, they are often unable to understand what the teacher wants them to do in the classroom.

The other item with a high points score in this question of the survey is **item Q** (*Explain classroom goals more often*). This is crucial with low-level students, whom, as we have seen often have short attention spans and do not listen to instructions well. They must be made aware of what they are doing and why.

In summing up; we can see that teachers do indeed believe that there has been a serious decline in the level of English proficiency in students entering many colleges and universities. However, we can also see that this decline is only especially prevalent and concerning at middle to low-level

institutions. Furthermore, this decline is not only in students' English proficiency, but also in their general education (academic) proficiency. We can also conclude that teachers recognize a large number of areas for concern in both general problems of attitude and behavior and also specific areas of English skills ability. Finally, we see that teachers are concerned about this issue and are already adapting their own teaching techniques and materials in order to try to deal with the decline in the respective institutions. Most importantly, we can conclude that it is crucial for institutions and course directors to be aware of this situation and accept that there is need for a change of thinking and attitude. Finally, further research, experimentation and especially collaboration by teachers facing these problems is necessary in order to help develop teaching practices to cope with these changes.

Further research

Hopefully, the results of this survey may encourage a wealth of further research by other teachers and researchers into all of the research areas covered in the survey. The author has already begun to set up student surveys at a variety of institutions in order to better understand things from a student perspective. The first survey asks students to explain why they find it difficult to communicate with others in the classroom that they don't know well, and also why they find expressing ideas and opinions difficult in their own language. A future area of research planned is to survey teachers using the same textbook with different low-level classes to find out how each teacher adapted the materials and what ideas worked and didn't work well in the classroom.

Another area of research, which may be particularly beneficial to teachers, would be to set up trial classes, in which different methodologies and approaches are used in the classroom and results are compared with results for similar level classes within the same institutions.

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