This reflection begins with two contradicting statements that I first heard when I arrived in Japan in the early 1990s. First, with all the money, time and resources dedicated to English language learning one would expect a greater spread of English language usage in Japan. Second, no one seems to know what they are doing, it is amazing that any English has been learned at all.

Complexity

These statements reflect the complexity of the EFL world in Japan from administration to textbooks and methodology to the classroom.

Administratively, English language programs are guided by MEXT and variously interpreted and implemented by educational institutions of all levels. The schools where I have taught followed the government guidelines, but each English program was administered differently.

Japanese and Native English teachers are often separated by curriculum with Japanese teachers teaching receptive skills (reading and listen-
ing) and the native teachers teaching productive skills (speaking and writing). Often, there is very little interaction between the two groups of teachers and little coordination of curriculum.

Textbooks often copy each other and tend towards methodologies from the UK, the United States and other English speaking countries. This in itself is not a negative tendency since English is their native language and the reasonable assumption is that they know how best to teach English.

**Methodology**

Teacher training, particularly for native English teachers, tends to be scattershot and subject to faddism such as the Input Hypothesis (i+1), Task-based Learning (TBL), or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Some are better than others, but each teacher training program is different reflecting the priorities and philosophies of each school. The programs themselves vary from a few hours of orientation at an eikiawa to a full multi-year post-graduate program at a respected university.

While Krashen’s Input Hypothesis has its advocates, it also has a rather full chorus of criticism (see Gregg 1984). His hypothesis posits that teachers ought to teach at a level just above the learner’s ability. While this hypothesis states the obvious, what is less obvious is how that level is determined. In a classroom of 20 or more students, it is quite difficult to know where that level is. Also, without an understanding of the Japanese language, it is questionable whether a native English teacher can know the ideal input level.

Task-based learning (TBL) emphasizes learner involvement and dis-
covery of language through usage or tasks. However, the TBL system is highly structured and in a class of 10 or more students it is cumbersome to implement. If the teacher has limited knowledge of Japanese language and culture, then implementation becomes that much more difficult.

Communicative Language Teaching CLT has been popular over these last few years. As it has become widely used and more entrenched, its limitations are beginning to become apparent. In the push for communicative fluency an English teacher who shares the same language as the learners may overlook certain speech patterns or pronunciations (van Hattan 2006). Hattan based this from his observations in Brazil where he teaches English. In Japan, Japanese English teachers may overlook pronunciations based on *katakana* (andoh, goodoh, etc) or accept common Japanese-English usages such as “in an island” rather than “on an island” or “she looks smart” rather than “she is slim” (Iwane-Salovaara 2006). The students are being communicative, but their errors are reinforced by their Japanese teachers.

In a similar fashion, native English teachers who do not understand Japanese can be lulled into believing that the students have acquired a certain level of English competency when all they have done is transfer a communicative form taken from their L1 to the L2, in this case English. For example as illustrated in this conversation written by two first year students.

A: Hi how are you?

B: Fine. My name is Y**** M****.

A: What did you doing the spring vacation?
B: I... I went to Namba with high school friends.
A: Why did you go to Namba?
B: We went shopping at Namba Parks.
A: Wow! What did you buy?
B: We bought T-shirts, parkrs and shoes.
   What about you?
A: I played Winning Eleven with junior high school friends.
B: Is the game interesting?
A: Oh, Yes.
B: I will play with you, someday.
A: Great! See you later.
B: See you.

Putting aside all the typographical, spelling and grammatical errors and looking instead at the communicative structure, it is apparent that this conversation, while communicative, can only be found in the classroom. Absent is a “native” English feel to the conversation. However, the conversation does reflect a Japanese conversational form or pattern with an emphasis on things and relationships outside themselves, as opposed to a more “English” style with an emphasis on personal information and commentary or opinion. This explains the absence of commitment or meaningful involvement that is expected in English—a kind of macro code-switching at the level of conversation rather than the lexical level. This is opposite to how native English speakers communicate. However, many native English teachers would accept the communicative structure of the above conversation and focus on correcting the more obvious errors.

CLT’s focus on fluency can reinforce the errors of both Japanese and
native English teachers that limit accuracy and complexity. This is not to say that CLT is inadequate or wrong but only that its limitations ought to be known. Knowing what the limitations are enables the teacher, Japanese or native English speaking, to make adjustments so that they can take their students from ignorance to competency in English. The point is that all methodologies are limited in what they can accomplish. Julian Edge makes this point and asks “how can we plan to get there if we don’t know where we are starting from?” (Edge 1996:11).

Local Context

The job of the teacher, aside from imparting knowledge, is to cultivate learner motivation. With motivated learners most anything can be taught. Of course, a poorly thought out or implemented methodology can de-motivate learners. This is partly why some have advocated a locally based methodologies. Adrian Holliday wrote of “small cultures” (Holliday 1999) to address “large culture” stereotyping of students, teachers, and institutions. In Julian Edge’s “emergent methodology” (Edge 1996) the teacher develops a methodology that emerges from the local context, as local as the classroom. Both are experienced English language teachers who see the local context as a key resource in developing methodologies that are relevant and motivating.

Going back to the two contradicting statements at the beginning of this article there is one thing that unifies them: the lack of local understanding. The first statement focuses on a stereotype of the Japanese English language learner, the schools, or the methodology or all three. Rarely, in my experience, has this statement made to suggest that perhaps these resources were mostly spent on unqualified native English teachers who
impede the learning of English.

The second statement reflects a detachment from the local culture and a reduction of how things are done in Japan to a single repeatable stereotype. Of course, language teaching is confusing and complex for the many English teachers who do not understand, to echo Edge’s point, the local culture. More often than not cultural insights shared between native English teachers are often variations of clichés and caricatures handed down from one generation of language teachers to the next. While clichés and caricatures may contain some truth, many native English teachers, in my opinion, would be hard pressed to recognize what those truths might be.

This lack of local understanding among native English teachers was not new in the early 1990s when I first arrived to teach at a large eikaiwa in Osaka, and I still hear them today in one form or another.

**Japanese Context**

The meaning of “local context” can be parsed in many different ways. An institution such as a university, junior college or a vocational school (専門学校) may develop their English program to reflect the values and priorities of their institution; a faculty or department may develop an English program that focuses on what their students are studying; or a resource centre for students to access English materials and guidance outside class—also known as a Self Access Centre (SAC)—is developed as a means to encourage students to use their English outside class. For the English language teacher the local context is the classroom and the students who fill it. It is this last local context I want to make my final point
about.

It is basic to education that the “more knowledgeable other” — such as a parent, teacher, coach, etc. — takes the unknowledgeable person from what s/he knows and understands to what has been unknown (Vogotsky 1978). This is uncontroversial. So it comes to a bit of a surprise that many native English teachers do not know or understand the linguistic ground upon which their students stand — their “known ground”. Aside from age, gender and test scores, native English teachers often know very little about their students’ understanding of “communication”.

**Kishoutenketsu**

Over the past year I have been asking native English teachers if they know the concept of kishoutenketsu (起承転結). — Briefly, kishoutenketsu has an introduction (kiku 起句) of the topic and other key information, followed by the development (shōku 承句), which continues from the introduction. Then comes the twist or climax (tenku 転句) containing the thesis and finally, the conclusion (kekku 結句) tying everything together (Maynard 1997). The key point for the native English teacher is that it is the reader who is responsible for understanding what has been written as a cohesive whole. — Regardless of education, age, or experience most people I asked did not know kishoutenketsu and the few that had heard of it were not sure what it meant or its significance. I was not surprised because neither had I until a few years ago when I started teaching essay writing to a class of adult advanced students and discovered that not one student had never been taught how to organise their essays in English. What they told me was they used the Japanese system of kishoutenketsu. Once I understood the basics of this “local” style, then I knew how to better teach
the basic 5-paragraph essay (Introduction—Body—Conclusion) and how to correct errors.

The basics of Japanese communication places responsibility for comprehension with the reader who is expected to understand the context and therefore the meaning of what is written. In English communication the placement of the responsibility is with the writer who is expected to reveal the context and make the meaning comprehensible to the reader (Hinds 1987:151). Understanding kishoutenketsu is useful beyond writing essays. There are similar responsibilities and expectations exist in spoken communication (Iwane-Salovaara 2011). Often is the case that a native English person sounds unnatural when speaking Japanese because s/he is applying an English conversational form to Japanese and similarly when a Japanese person speaks English.

Conclusion

This straightforward difference between Japanese and English is relatively unknown and unexploited in English language education in Japan. To understand this difference between Japanese and English is to be at the interface of two cultures. The native English language teacher needs to be aware of the linguistic ground upon which Japanese students stand when they begin learning English. Being aware of the “local context” native English teachers may help to more efficiently use the resources spent on English education and improve the level of English.

References


