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# Low-intensity MALL in a Japanese Context, Part 3: Discourse & Communication in Crisis

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## Abstract

*This study is the third in the series beginning early 2019 on low intensity mobile assisted language learning for improving Japanese college students' English conversational acquisition. Studies 1 and 2 included a replicated study of student mobile communication versus e-mail. Study 1 focused on the need for better methodology and more quality language teaching in Japan. Study 2 looked in detail at dialogic teaching's origins and its application via MALL, Mobile Assisted Language Learning. We now look at two central language acquisition concepts, discourse and communication, with an updated questionnaire, investigating students' ideas about MALL. We extend the earlier studies, showing the effectiveness of mobiles with the freeware application LINE for conversation and communication. Some deep-rooted discrepancies between actual and translated meanings of discourse and communication are closely examined to highlight the need for more clarity in derived Japanese concepts. This explains some of the theoretical obstacles facing Japanese learners. We identify relevant aims for MALL methodologies, discussing Gee's work to re-conceptualize relationships between language learning and acquisition. Next, we address some of the potentials and limitations of the cyber age for employing mobiles in order to improve learning and acquisition. We attempt a reality check of some meaning breakdowns threatening conversation, addressing central problems facing learners. The imbalance between literacy and oracy in TEFL is discussed. We compare conversation with other spoken forms, then reconfirm the potential of photos (see Wood, 2015, etc.) via recent interactional fluency analyses, detailing various important points of the overall approach. Previous and new student feedback indicate the degree to which impressions of the method consistently motivate. Finally, we consider barriers to TEFL in Japan, reiterating a MALL approach as a viable, albeit partial, solution. A post scriptum addresses how a crisis unfolded during the time of writing.*

## 1. Introduction: New MALL Survey

A questionnaire replicated in the two previous MALL studies (2019 and 2020) suggested that student mobile use for conversation acquisition can be effective with certain methodology. Students in the most recently taught third-year-college conversation class used mobile phones to communicate in and out of class regularly to develop their conversational English ability. An expanded survey was conducted. It indicated mobile phones were used as reference sources, teleprompters and a ready source of photos for class. Phones were used to build confidence by prompting communication.

Less than 25% previously used phones for other classes, and then only for memos or as a dictionary, independently, not as part of the class. When invited to, all 30 students in the target class used phones spontaneously in multiple ways. When asked specifically (see **Appendix 1** for the survey questions) MALL use was cited as prompt and effective for the following (only items chosen by 50% or more of the 30 students are included):

- 90% used phones as a dictionary
- 80% used them for taking memos
- 70% for listening and homework
- 60% used them for test preparation
- 50% also cited such advantages as:
  - \* receiving and communicating information for homework and so on;
  - \* weekly spoken reviews of previous class conversations; and,
  - \* final spoken test review, showing photos and catching up when absent.
- 90% taken as a whole approved of class mobile phones for or as:
  - \* spoken grammar; \* repeat listening;
  - \* receiving mail from the teacher;
  - \* checking what had been said; \* improving listening speed;
  - \* selecting and taking pictures, including various materials;
  - \* learning from the teacher's pronunciation;
  - \* taking memos conveniently (c.f. paper notes); and,
  - \* an all-in-one device with a wide variety of uses.

These and various other elements are important in using MALL for Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TEFL and TESOL). However, there also needs to be an integrated methodological focus to maximize and consolidate

effectiveness. This must encompass both the subject matter and medium of employment. The rationale for students' own photo use has been extensively proposed and examined, nationally and internationally, in book, presentation and research paper forms (Wood 2011 to 2020, referred to in **5. Pedagogy and Purpose**) along with communication in a TEFL context. This study will also extend to communication's relation to discourse, as well as to language acquisition's meaning in a global sense, as described by Gee (e.g. 2008).

## 2. Communication, Discourse and Mistranslation

Communication and discourse belong together. The former can be defined as "human interaction, referring to sequenced interrelated acts, the context they create, and the meanings formed at both relational and content levels and in both linguistic and extra-linguistic forms" (Fairhurst, 2008).

If we break this down further, communication includes:

- Silence as "a unique element of meaning generation in sequenced interaction" (Brown and Coupland, 2005);
- Listening as "a central element of communication and preliminary stage of speech" enabling "(i) the constitution of a relational basis, and (ii) the intersubjective generation of new meaning between speaker and listener" (Jacobs and Coghlan, 2005); and,
- Interactional Context as "routine interactional events or episodes with fairly defined roles and sequences of action" (Nevile, 2006).

Most English taught in Japan does not take into account these meanings or communication's relationship with discourse. Without communication, acquisition is harder if not impossible. English has long been the West's spontaneous lingua franca. Now, it is increasingly that of the East, too. Other Asian countries' English communication language skills have progressed, leaving Japan further behind Asia in linguistic openness and English aptitude (e.g. ETS, 2019). Japan can't go forward without accepting communication. To recover, it must accept such vital precepts as the following:

1. Communication is best achieved with more effective teaching.
2. Conversation needs to precede writing to acquire language via sound.
3. English is the most difficult language to learn for Japanese speakers (FSI).

A dichotomy is created by foraging foreign loan words (Wood, 1984, excerpted in **Appendix 2**) like *komyunike-shon* without observing meaning beyond Japan's insular shores. Loan words are part of Japanese, but their origins and meanings can't be ignored. Openness makes language a sound communicative container, enabling users to interact globally. The Japanese loan word

“communication” is different from its international counterpart. Reduced to decoration, it avoids objective clarity. Instead of attempting communication, many choose or create their own interpretation, intensifying insularity and miscommunication. The belief is loan words mean whatever one likes, with one of several possible meanings (or a completely new one) used to the exclusion of all others, serving dubious personal designs. Where does this ambiguity originate? Japanese-to-English dictionaries’ failure to specify meaning feeds into the Japanese tendency to defer to random hierarchical control. *Kenryusha*’s unabridged Japanese-to-English dictionary, updated annually for the last hundred years, defines *komyunike-shon* as a single word “communication” (1974) leaving the meaning blank; so do Microsoft’s Japanese-English “Translator”, Cambridge’s online Dictionary, and most of the other online predominantly available alternatives.

High schools often use “communication” in English course names, but if we delve deeper, each individual use may seem incongruous with all others, and is usually unconnected to the worldwide meaning of the concept as used by billions abroad. Such concepts can’t be twisted into new meanings to suit selfish motives. In English, “communication” originated from the Latin word “communis” meaning “to share”. It is most widely understood to mean: *giving, receiving, expressing and exchanging information, ideas and feelings multi-directionally to create a shared understanding*. It can’t be a one-way process, and the interaction that it involves cannot be predetermined.

Communication’s primary form is conversation. Writing is slower, editable and time-lagged. This makes it less flexible and less communicative. The Japanese word “tsutaeru” seems closer in meaning to “communicate” but is one-directional, just as “oshieru” (“to teach”) means one-way “telling” and not multi-directional discovery. “Iken koukan” (“exchange of opinion”) might seem to suggest communication, but it is mere camouflage in a fixed hierarchical society, controlled more through coercion than communication. The Romanized Japanese loan word *komyunike-shon* (pronounced “ko” as in cod, “myu” as music, “ni” as in knit, “ke-” as in kettle, but longer, and “shon” as in shone, all pronounced with equal stress) like many other loan words that suffer a similar fate, has been quite cut off from its original role. Communication is a two-or-more way process, best served initially when learning English by listening then interacting. Without interaction, any “knowledge” is passive and dormant. It may surface anyway eventually, but direct conversational interchange is more effective than current practice, which prioritizes reading, excluding sound and interpersonal development.

Discourse is commonly defined as “communication” (e.g. *Webster*’s, since 1953) and more specifically, as “the verbal interchange of ideas; especially: conversation” (*Merriam Webster*, accessed online, 2020). As the most current definition suggests, more than academic in meaning, discourse is about people interfacing communicatively. It is the precursor of everything else in teaching,

learning and acquiring a language, whether it be one's first, one of two or more in which someone is multilingual, or, in the case of this study's concern, any language acquired after one's first language or languages have formed one's essential discourse and identity. Discourse's hybrid meaning in the field of linguistics ignores high frequency facets of communication needed for acquisition. Tannen's "definitive" study of discourse (2015) has no indexed reference to communication in 1,000 pages. Yet the terms discourse and communication are inseparable synonyms.

The standard concept of discourse and communication (*komyunike-shon* in Japanese) conveyed by Japanese scholars of English linguistics, errs on the academic side, or completely evades definition. Discourse is translated as "lecture" (*ko-gi*) "thesis" (*ronbun*) and so on (e.g. *Kenkyusha*, since 1918) with no suggestion of conversation, communication or interchanging ideas. This may explain why so many Japanese, including teachers, are unfamiliar with the term's essential connotations in any major international context.

More detailed definitions exist, but are the exception. Most (if not all) alternatives echo the single-word renderings above. The standard for dictionaries is the all-Japanese *Kojien* (7<sup>th</sup> ed., 2017). The latter's entry for communication is more involved than most, but still just a short sentence: "The transmission of viewpoints, feelings and thought, when people engage together in social activity." The definition hinges on the meaning of two words "transmission" and "engage" (*dentatsu* and *baikai to suru* in Japanese) which are ambiguous as they don't specify communication's most essential aspect, interaction a prerequisite to mutual development, as defined in the examples above. It doesn't distinguish writing from talk, or define "social". So, while indirectly implying communication, it never specifically defines it.

### 3. Communication in Context – Discourse and Situated Learning

There is no single global standard of English communication. It is no-one's personal property. Yet all varieties are valid. In our connected world, we all need to develop the ability to use diverse varieties to take part actively. To achieve a wider perspective on communication means determining how we define language in its context. Communication includes a wide range of concepts. It may be more practical to reduce the range by focusing on social interaction as one of its key aspects in TEFL. Gee's analysis (2008) helps by conceptualizing language as ways of doing, being and relating. He asserts that, rather than a high level of grammatical ability, use and context are more fundamental to communicative fluency. By context, he means: "Who you are and what you are doing when you communicate" (p.151). Using a register that does not concur with one's situation can cause communication breakdowns, even if one's grammatical and linguistic content is accurate. This is what Gee calls "socially situated language" (1992).

This means making clear “who we are” and “what we are doing”. He refers to this usage as “Discourse” (Gee’s capital) that is, the way of speaking that we need to function communicatively within our primary community. Our original identity-forming conduit with our community, or *primary Discourse*, is the “everyday language” we grow up with. This may re-form itself during the periods up to and including adolescence and even beyond, till it becomes our *lifeworld Discourse* (Gee’s italics) staying with us throughout our entire existence. Subsequent language sets are acquired outside our “initial socializing group” as part of the “public sphere”. Once acquired, such sets combine as coordinating determinants to who we are, and can include extra languages (such as English for speakers of other languages.)

What distinguishes acquisition is:

- \* exposure to models; \* process of trial and error; and
- \* practice in social groups (Pinker, 1989).

Learning on the other hand involves:

- \* conscious knowledge gained through being taught; or,
- \* certain life experiences that trigger conscious reflection (ibid).

Acquisition “must (at least, partially) precede learning” according to Gee. He asserts that classes not distinguishing between the two cause problems which can stymie appropriate development. Mastery of a language may lead to unawareness of using it, while communication breakdown may increase our awareness, meaning that those outside the core Discourse group may actually have greater insight into a language than those more firmly based within it, especially if monolingual. As English has become a spoken Asian lingua franca, such competence is a necessity, leaving those not striving for English fluency increasingly at a loss, just as computer literacy is an essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skill. Without it, we could be isolated from the rest of the world.

Students naturally use their phones to communicate in and out of class to enhance their English development. Phones are their reference source, their tele-prompters and a continually growing photo library. These issues may seem unconnected, but without attempting to grasp the meaning of such factors, we can never navigate MALL, TEFL or indeed any matter bound to human communication. Both grassroots Japan and especially its upper echelons of power resist linguistic transparency, making social honesty and openness, keys to achieving meaningful communication, less evident.

Japan’s entrenched conservatism virtually quashes active vocal opposition. Most crucial decision making is beyond public reach. This is reflected in its highly formal top-down “communication” with the prevalent use of the passive voice and unspecified agent. The system is reinforced by an educational style of obedience first, and questions last or never. Words and their meanings melt into the desired ulterior motives of powerful users. Despite the unfounded claims of a society

supposedly run by consensus, fear and attrition invariably silence the few voices of dissent and disagreement.

When it comes to Japan's TEFL, "conversation" and listening are garbled by L1 translation, grammar and writing interference. Major entrance exams and texts feature only scripted dialogue with questions confined to a single correct answer, the examiner's predetermined answer. However, diversity of genuine communicative expression and outcome can't be dictated in advance.

#### 4. Spoken Communication or Conversation?

Gee suggests language use equals social practice situated at the intersection of the discourses and social relationships that people bring to their sites of engagement or periods of real-time social action (2004). Communication is social practice, operating at the junctions of/subject to:

- social norms and values;
- relationships between the interlocutors;
- the ideas that our discourses entail; and
- all the routine-based practices we bring to these moments of interaction.

This broad mapping of human activity accounts for more than just a process at any particular time. It takes into account all of the elements we bring with us which are actively foregrounded or backgrounded during these interactions (Wood, 2017).

To teach or learn extra or foreign languages, we need a working definition of communication. The expanding digital universe is accelerating communication's importance exponentially, at the same time as twisting it out of shape. Yet its essence remains. No interaction means no communication. The Japanese use of the word is problematic, decorative, and sidesteps meaning altogether. To qualify as language teachers in Japan, students are limited to hollow, archaic concepts, lacking surface validity, enforced by hierarchic imposition. English is a global language, but in Japan it sometimes expresses instead rather a nation's self-containment.

Historically, conversation has waned in importance due to the imbalance between its study and that of written communication (Carter, 2016). Spoken communication alone is too ambiguous to mean conversation. The former invites the opposite – non-interactive monologues, addresses and speeches. Conversation embodies important differences from "written communication" even if language teaching doesn't default to literacy, favoring monologue. That is not communicative in the sense that presentation-style speech is mono-directional, failing to achieve the interaction necessary for dynamic spoken development. Many words have changed meaning positively as a result of conversational interface, something less likely with a single speaker.



## 5. Pedagogy and Purpose

The teaching style employed with mobile phones has been detailed previously (Wood, 2015) but as it is a process that evolves each time it has been employed for over a decade, and, as the previous description may not have been seen by all readers, the main points and developments need mentioning here. The bare bones of the method are as follows:

- Two students bring their own photos each class.
- These are often about, but not limited to, places they went.
- They are enlarged to make them easily visible to everyone.
- The teacher describes the pictures for basic vocabulary.
- Students ask question strings for basic information.
- They ask far-ranging questions in Round Two.
- The conversations can be two-way • The teacher videos the exchanges.
- Interventions are needed for communication breakdowns (“Pardon?”)
- Videos can be edited to review and improve accuracy. (Wood, 2015)

Mobile phone use was not written into the original approach to respect students’ privacy, which often seems flouted in teacher directed MALL as well as in many other ways. Students, both pre- and post-adult, are seldom given the option of NOT using their own personal property and confidential information. Providing students voluntarily use their phones or not requires a Plan B, namely, no mandated mobile use, which is guaranteed in the original method by not having included it. This also explains why it is called a “low intensity MALL” approach (Wood, 2019 and 2020).

After suitable classroom setting arrangements are made allowing face-to-face positioning for better eye contact with a circle of chairs minus desks, the onus is firmly on communication. In fact, these arrangements are also ideal for spontaneous mobile phone use as it’s much easier to use one than a pen and piece of paper. Step 2 is for the teacher to make the aim of the course clear and establish a rapport with students to ensure the free flow of interaction that the approach needs to function best. The third step is for the teacher to use his or her own photo as an example.

Point 8 (videoing exchanges) needs detailing. Personal privacy is a basic student right so videoing is best done as a teacher selfie. This ensures only the teacher’s face appears. The final point, editing, is to transform exchanges from MP 4 video format to MP3 audios. There are various practical reasons. The videoing is best done using the teacher’s own mobile phone (which also serves as an example of MALL’s various potential uses). If done at the end of the class as a review of all that preceded, the pace of the interchange usually accelerates, increasing interactional fluency, one of the approach’s central aims.

The MP3 file is sent each week to students via the school's server, so at this point, they can start to use their mobile phones as an optional alternative to listening on a school computer. Almost without exception, students chose to listen on their phones as it is far more convenient. This promotes various MALL uses as students perceive the convenience and effectiveness for themselves. As a result, the list of uses indicated in the survey responses expands to the power of their imaginations.

### **6.1 Conversation Sample, Student A: In Class, End of November 2019**

120 seconds; 153 words; 193 syllables; 1.7 per sec.

Q 1: Where (did you go)? A 1: In New Zealand.

Q 2: Why did you go? A 2: Studying abroad.

Q 3: When did you go? A 3: I went this summer

Q 4: How long did you stay? A 4: About 1 month

Q 5: What did you eat? A 5: I ate ice cream and fish and chips.

Q 6: Was it delicious? A 6: Did you get new friends? Yes.

Q 7: Tell me more. A 7: My friend is Korean, Brazilian, Chinese, Poland.

Q 8: What did you eat in NZ? A 8: I ate fish & chips & ice cream & bread.

Q 9: Did you go shopping with your host family? A 9: Yes, I did.

Q 10: What did you buy? A 10: I bought clothes.

Q 11: Did you play with your host family? A 11: Yes.

Q 12: How was it? A 12: Exciting.

Q 13: How many hours did you study in NZ? A 13: I studied 6 hours a day.

Q 14: How many teachers? A 14: Five teachers.

Q 15: Was there a time difference? A 15: Four hours.

Q 16: Are you homesick? A 16: Yes.

Q 17: Do you want to live in New Zealand? A 17: Yes.

Q 18: Why? A 18: New Zealand people is very kind.

### **6.2 Conversation Sample, Student A: Final Test, Mid-January 2020**

180 seconds; 315 words; 420 syllables; 2.3 per sec.

Q 1: Tell me about your photo. Where did you go? A 1: In New Zealand

Q 2: Why did you go? A 2: To study.

Q 3: Where did you stay? A 3: In Auckland.

Q 4: With a host family? A 4: Yes.

Q 5: How many people were in your house? A 5: Six people.

Q 6: Okay, was it a big family? A 6: Yes.

Q 7: Okay, so how many children were there? A 7: Two children.

Q 8: How old? A 8: 10 & 6.

Q 9: So could you communicate then? A 9: Yes.

Q 10: And did you play with them a lot? A 10: Yes.

Q 11: Did you have a good time? A 11: Yes.

Q 12: How about your host parents? Were they friendly? A 12: Yes.

Q 13: How about the food? Was it delicious? What was your favorite food?

A 13: I ate Thai food.

Q 14: Did you make them any Japanese food? A 14: Yes.  
 Q 15: Did they enjoy it? A 15: Yes.  
 Q 16: What kind of food did you make? A 16: I made *okonomiyaki*.  
 Q 17: Ok, tell me about your teachers. Were they good? A 17: Yes.  
 Q 18: How many teachers did you have? A 18: About twenty. (?)  
 Q 19: Okay, which was the best teacher? A 19: Japanese teacher.  
 Q 20: Oh, I see, and could he speak English well? A 20: Yes  
 Q 21: Okay, and did you communicate in English or Japanese? A 21: English.  
 Q 22: Did you ever speak to him in Japanese? A 22: Yes.  
 Q 23: What about? A 23: Pardon?  
 Q 24: What did you speak to him about? A 24: I spoke (about) in New Zealand.  
 Q 25: Okay so okay he doesn't live in Japan now? A 25: Yes.  
 Q 26: How long has he lived in New Zealand? A 26: Maybe about ten years.  
 Q 27: Why did he go to New Zealand? A 27: He was studying abroad.  
 Q 28: And which part of Japan is he from? A 28: Pardon?  
 Q 29: Which part of Japan is he from? A 29: He is from Tokyo.  
 Q 30: Ok, I see, so how many friends did you make? A 30: About 20 students.  
 Q 31: Who was your best friend? A 31: My best friend is Korean friend.  
 Q 32: And what other nationalities were your friends? A 32: Pardon.  
 Q 33: Nationality. Were there Japanese? A 33: Yes.  
 Q 34: Anyone else? What other countries? Was there other countries?  
 A 34: Oh, there was Korean, Chinese, Brazilian, Pole.  
 Q 35: Do you want to go again? A 35: Yes.

### 6.3 Conversation Sample, Student B: In Class Early, December 2019

108 seconds; 114 words; 170 syllables; 1.6 per sec.

Q 1: Where is? A 1: Cambodia.  
 Q 2: What's this? A 2: It's Ankor Wat.  
 Q 3: Do you like taking picture? A 3: Yes.  
 Q 4: Is this your best? A 4: Yes.  
 Q 5: Where else did you go? A 5: Vietnam.  
 Q 6: How was it? A 6: Food is delicious.  
 Q 7: How long did you stay in Cambodia? A 7: Three days.  
 Q 8: What did you do there? A 8: Fun.  
 Q 9: When did you go? A 9: September.  
 Q 10: Who did you go with? A 10: With university student friends.  
 Q 11: What did you eat in Cambodia? A 11: Amok.  
 Q 12: What's that? A 12: A traditional Cambodian food.  
 Q 13: What's language in Cambodia? A 13: Khmer.  
 Q 14: Can you speak? A 14: No.  
 Q 15: Do you like Cambodia? A 15: Yes.  
 Q 16: Why? A 16: Local people is friendly.  
 Q 17: Do you like travelling abroad? A 17: Yes.  
 Q 18: What country do you like the best? A 18: Thailand.  
 Q 19: Tell me something in Cambodian. A 19: *Kun churan churan*

### 6.3 Conversation Sample, Student B: Final Test, Mid-January 2020

170 seconds; 292 words; 2.2 per sec.

Q 1: Tell me about your photo. Where did you go? A 1: Cambodia.

Q 2: Why? A 2: Why? Because I'd like to go to Ankor Wat.

Q 3: What's Ankor Wat? Is that a temple? A 3: Yes, and it's a world heritage.

Q 4: So you took a lot of pictures? (Uh?) You took a lot of pictures? A 4: Yes.

Q 5: Do you like taking pictures? A 5: Yes.

Q 6: Okay, is that your favorite? A 6: Yes.

Q 7: Ok, where else did you go?

A 7: In Cambodia? (Yeah.) Climb the mountain.

Q 8: How many days did you go for? A 8: Four days.

Q 9: Who did you go with? A 9: With university friends.

Q 10: Okay. Did you have any problem? A 10: Yes.

Q 11: Could you communicate with everybody? A 11: Yes.

Q 12: Did you use English or Japanese?

A 12: I used English but local people. Local people didn't speak English.

Q 13: So, how did you communicate? A 13: Body language.

Q 14: Okay, all right, and how was the food? A 14: Yes, good.

Q 15: What kind of food did they have in Cambodia? A 15: Amok.

Q 16: What is it? Vegetable, fish, meat, rice? A 16: Like curry rice.

Q 17: I see, okay. Delicious? A 17: Yes.

Q 18: I suppose it was, wasn't expensive? A 18: Uh uh. Cheap.

Q 19: Okay, and what did you enjoy most? A 19: Ankor Wat.

Q 20: Ok. How long did you spend at AW? How long did you spend at...

A 20: Six hours.

Q 21: All right, and, so what did you learn about Ankor Wat?

How old is it or what kind of place is it? A 21: It's so big.

Q 22: All right. Okay. So, can you speak Cambodian? A 22: No.

Q 23: How about your friends? A 23: No

Q 24: Okay. So do you like Cambodia? A 24: Yes.

Q 25: Why? A 25: Local people are friendly.

Q 26: And do you like travelling abroad? A 26: Yes.

Q 27: Where else have you been? Where else? A 27: Um, eight countries.

Q 28: Okay, which is your favorite? A 28: Thailand.

Q 29: I see. Why? Why? A 29: Food is delicious.

30: Okay, thank you.

## 7. Analysis and Comments

Two recent conversations sets are given below. In syllables per second, both show interactional *fluency* (c.f. *competence* or *repertoires*, Hall, 2018) rise from 0.6 (1.7 & 1.6 syllables per second to 2.3 and 2.2). The tests were longer and more challenging. TOEIC Listening scores for the entire class rose on average 75 points (also over 30%) from students' previous attempts.

*Comparative Tables of Students' Conversation Samples*

Student A	Length	Syllables	IF Speed	Difference
CLASS	120 secs	193	1.7 p.sec	-0.6 / -35%
TEST	180 secs	420	2.3 p.sec	+0.6 / +35%

Student B	Length	Syllables	IF Speed	Difference
CLASS	108 secs	170	1.6 p.sec	-0.6 / -37%
TEST	170 secs	292	2.2 p.sec	+0.6 / +37%

Both subjects' response and production speeds indicated interactional fluency increases of 35% and 37% between classes and tests. The classes were 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of a weekly 15 x 90-minute class course. The test was in the final class. So after an average 6 hours, students achieved almost identical gains, confirming increase was consistent. Results support IF increases in former conversation classes (Wood, 2020). Other important factors for assessment, like complexity and accuracy, also need considering. Student A mistook some questions and oversimplified answers. Student B was able to grasp meaning and used an advanced technique of repeating the question to confirm. This is confirmed by their respective TOEIC listening scores.

### 8.1 Class Evaluations

Again, we attempt an objective assessment by considering the effect of the non-text low-intensity MALL approach from various viewpoints. As with former findings, 3 viewpoints indicate significant differences, reinforcing IF gains presented in **7. Analysis and Comments**.

- There are approximately 25 conversation classes from first to third year only, taught by 10 native speakers, all using texts, except this writer.
- The number of classes that each teacher has ranges from 1 to 6, the average being 2.5. This writer has 2 classes. Class sizes vary from 15 to 34, with an average of 28 students, which is this writer's average class size.
- The percentage of students responding to the anonymous course-end questionnaire ranges from 10 to 90%, and this writer's is 50%, just above the average, but the percentage of respondents writing comments (see examples below) for my class is twice the average (of 10%) at over 20%. Numerical evaluations are given out of 5.0 points, ranging from 3.8 to the maximum 5.0, with the average at 4.6. Out of the 25 teachers, the writer's was one of only two teachers with multiple maximums.
- While not necessarily a strong indicator of better received teaching (there are 600 students in differently composed classes) it is at least possible to directly compare scores for individual classes taught with other teachers teaching the same groups. The average for same classes

taught by the writer was 5.0, but dropped to under 4.5 when taught before or after by others.

- One other indicator is the actual comment type received. Nearly everyone with several comments gets some negative feedback, which of course is subjective, but looking at the approximately 100 comments for all the classes, the only frequently recurring complaint was when a teacher's voice was too loud, which was not a criticism made of this writer. Also see **8.3** below.)

## **8.2 External Proficiency Testing**

Conversation class students' TOEIC scores indicated listening ability rose significantly, while reading scores fell. Year Three Reading is not taught by this writer. The number of my students ratable as independent listeners more than doubled from their previous scores. Where less than a third had scored 275 points plus on TOEIC Listening before, well over two thirds achieved this equivalent score of B 1 (Independent Listener) on Europe's CEFR scale after the course. No students achieved the same level on their Reading scores.

- Combined with 30 other students who had the writer's MALL Conversation class the same year (Wood, 2020), or the writer's TOEIC Listening class and no Conversation, the top 10 averaged 420, near native listening level. All other class students (50, all text taught) averaged 200, none achieving 275.

- This strongly suggests that the approach presented above has a profound impact. Anonymous student feedback also indicated satisfaction as both the conversation classes evaluated the course with the maximum scores for the ten items on the schoolwide anonymous end of semester questionnaires.

## **8.3 Student Comment Samples**

Below are a random selection of comments received during the school-wide **Class Evaluations** mentioned above when students had the opportunity to vent either dissatisfaction or approval about their 15-class courses. They indicate that students felt their conversational ability had improved greatly:

- *Classes moved on quickly and was very understandable. It helped me a lot.*
- *I realized that outputting aloud is more important than the other language skills because speaking is the driving force for learning.*
- *It's good to use photos to share and enjoy speaking without fear or shame.*
- *Sitting in a circle and speaking to each other face to face in English was difficult at first, but I soon began to enjoy it and like English more than before.*
- *Your class was the first time for me to be able to communicate in English with everyone and my speaking ability has improved a lot as a result.*

- *We learnt to speak faster so my listening ability is much better than before.*

## 9. Discussion and Conclusion

The essential reform for Japanese students' English acquisition is to find more meaningful pedagogy than dominates most classes at present. Better approaches cannot be achieved without first assessing the situation students are in, and the obstacles it has created. The basic building block of language is meaning. This study has demonstrated the irreconcilable paradox caused by mistranslation obstructing learners from learning, society's failure to grasp the meaning of communication and its equivalent, discourse. In this environment, absurd ideas about foundation English study like grammar, machine translation and the written word reign, holding back acquisition.

In an age where words are twisted out of shape, written "chat" and soundless "conversation" are communication's mono-directional substitutes. Meanings have become so loose and tenuous, they defy communication. Therefore, to counter this, any form of teaching needs a sound rationale, which is why it is so important to challenge English-Japanese dictionaries and texts as they curtail communication before it can begin. The mindset they represent is often regurgitated in the redundant views expressed by self-appointed "experts" appearing in media. One such (Takamitsu, 2020) opposes pre-adolescent English education, claiming bilingualism and conversational communication prevent proper first language development. He justifies this only anecdotally. Instead of conversation, he proposes:

- rote memorization solely for right-or-wrong-answer exams;
- reading books and newspapers instead of trying to speak or listen;
- acquiring knowledge by passive reading instead of active discussion;
- English-to-Japanese translation, Googling everything to translate; and,
- avoiding face-to-face communication by using laptops and software.

The points listed above must be the least appropriate for Japanese people wishing to acquire English. "Langue" (the French root prefixing language) means tongue and TESOL is for Speakers. Conversation is the priority as most languages, are primarily conversational, and only secondarily written. Defaulting to the second stage by avoiding oracy delays and interferes with acquisition. After we know the standard sounds of English, it is actually easier to read, as we can relate sounds to written words. We learn to hear those sounds in our heads, making what we read more meaningful and memorable. Communication is a multi-person process, best served initially when learning English by listening and interacting. Without interaction, all our "knowledge" is passive and dormant. It might surface eventually, but direct spoken interchange is far more effective than excluding or delaying sound and inter-personal development for reading and written grammar.

The central obstacles to acquisition for Japanese learners are systemic and conceptual. Most “English” teaching is post-adolescent. The crucial pre-adolescent phases of education require more conversational communication. English teaching has begun in the later years of elementary school, but with teachers recycled from other subjects, it is superficial. Worse still, it leads nowhere, as high school English is often grammar translation and exam cramming. It risks more aversion to and less capacity for conversational communication. At colleges, most English or English-related departments have few native-speaking teachers. While that doesn’t have to be a problem, if Japanese teachers focused on conversational communication more, most avoid it out of shyness, deference or disinterest. English departments teach mainly literature, linguistics and odd aspects of culture, largely in Japanese. English doesn’t get learnt or acquired as there is not enough spontaneous interaction or living content. The aim is low-level literacy modelled on first language English universities in the West, not TEFL-based. Its failure shows in Japan’s embarrassingly low English reading skills as in TOEIC, creating a vicious circle as this failure is taken to justify more reading classes only.

MALL has the potential both to help and to hinder. The cyber age can easily block the live, face-to-face interaction needed to stimulate acquisition and increase real learning. The latter is best achieved by combining spontaneous class conversation, augmented by mobile phones’ advantages as described above. Students respond positively to a medium they prefer, provided teachers use sincere discretion and openness. Unreasonable incursions into their private communication spaces must be avoided.

The methods presented through these studies are for native and non-native speakers of English alike, but need better TEFL training and more tact. Teachers at all levels, regardless of nationality, need a minimum one year post-graduate TEFL qualification. Higher education in Japan doesn’t foster communication, and proper primary level English has yet to begin. To take the first step forward requires retraining to increase communication expertise and a more open and accountable system.

## **10. Post-scriptum: MALL in an Age of Crisis**

The 2020 pandemic has enforced a global age of tele-work, tele-play and tele-teaching of unknown duration. More than ever, MALL’s potential offers hope, but the vicious cycle of inept teaching and general failure to grasp communication’s spirit remain. Most tele-teachers opt for one-directional monologue. LINE is not customized for teaching, but alternative school systems will never be students’ first choice for communicating. LINE is *their* communication medium of choice, while alternatives are mandated, limited and ingrown. Whatever communicative potential



they might offer is usually snubbed by the teacher's convenience, and, or ancillary support issues.

LINE doesn't guarantee communication, but the reality is that nearly all students use it or its equivalent as a medium for open communication. School options neither aim for nor sustain free interaction. Without a clear idea of communication among its users, official platforms continue to fossilize. Support is inconsistent. Staff use media for the same reason as many teachers, to safeguard territory and exert authority. LINE taps into students existing digital literacy practices and communicative routines. It can be a valid and interactive alternative to the limited, fixed learning platforms at most schools.

"Remote" (*enkaku*) classes hide problems in silence and alienation, often risking the quality of education because of the human element. The long-term, underlying crisis in Japanese foreign language teaching is now being fully exposed through the sudden COVID-19 crisis confronting it. This should offer a chance to reflect on previous flawed practices. Systems that students prefer are the way to go. Real-life tools and digital literacy practices need respecting not enforcing, to counter schools' self-serving inflexibility.

Universities dictate methods used with classes, but their creators and purveyors are prehistoric compared to student's first-choice preferences, which are grounded in real communication. Compromise and timely support are essential, but are inconsistent at best. Existing school e-mail systems are roundly disliked and avoided by students who know better what suits them. The LINE versus school e-mail use surveys of this 3 year MALL study series suggest the old-style media teaching will falter before it can even begin. Students and teachers are often less willing to communicate in mandated tele-teaching than in class. Computers are only extensions of people, not our cure, but it is still possible to develop one's own microteaching environment.

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## Appendix 1

ANSWER IN ENGLISH OR JAPANESE. REFER TO THE COURSE YOU JUST COMPLETED.  
 DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME.

1. Do you agree with using your mobile phone for this Conversation Class?
2. How did you use your mobile phone for this Conversation class?
3. Which of the following did you use your mobile phone for?
  - (i) As a dictionary;
  - (ii) For pronunciation;
  - (iii) To keep memos;
  - (iv) As reference;

- (v) To prepare for class;
  - (vi) For homework;
  - (vii) For listening;
  - (viii) For communication;
  - (ix) For class tests;
  - (x) To catch up after absence.
4. Besides this class have you used your mobile phones for other classes?
5. If you answered “Yes” to Question 4, how did you use your mobile phone?

## Appendix 2

Without specifying communication per se, the Guest Forum article indicated the tendency to ignore such vital concepts, and replace them with different meanings as follows: *Japanese publishers' government supported monopoly over school English texts not only excludes a lot of foreign thought, but is also helping incubate an artificial (English Language) vacuum packed in (Japanese) wrapping ... words may not be censored, but the concepts on which they depend are sometimes disturbingly absent* (Wood, 1984).

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