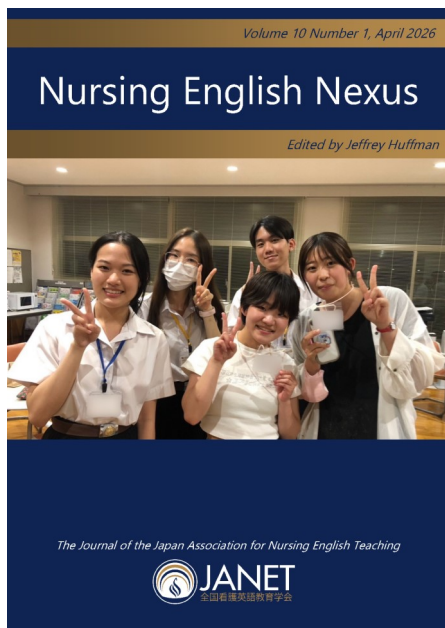


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Article citation

Crosby, A. (2026). A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Communicative Language Teaching for Japanese Nursing Students. *Nursing English Nexus*, 10(1), 29-32. https://doi.org/10.69458/nexus.10.1_29

Nursing English Nexus

<http://www.janetorg.com/nexus>

ISSN 2433-2305

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A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Communicative Language Teaching for Japanese Nursing Students

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Abstract: *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is broadly advocated as an effective method for enhancing English language proficiency. While CLT emphasizes meaningful interaction and communicative competence, its implementation in Japan may be constrained by teacher-centered traditions, exam-oriented curricula, and students' limited experience with spontaneous communication. Research on CLT in Japanese contexts has yielded mixed outcomes: some studies report an increased willingness to speak English, while others highlight student anxiety and cultural mismatches. To address these challenges, a culturally sensitive approach (CSA) is proposed, which integrates communicative principles with locally adapted strategies. A CSA encourages teachers to analyze classroom contexts, scaffold activities, adapt materials, and gradually introduce interactive learning. For nursing students, this approach may foster confidence, practical communication skills, and professional readiness, illustrating the importance of flexible, context-aware pedagogy in EFL education.*

Keywords: communicative language teaching; culturally sensitive approach; Japanese nursing students

About the Author: Adam Crosby is an English teacher at Kobe City College of Nursing. He was awarded a doctoral degree in education from the University of New England in 2024 for his research on the silence of Japanese university students in English language classrooms. His research interests include the effects of cultural norms in the classroom, the willingness to speak, and classroom silence.

As hospitals and clinics in Japan become increasingly international, nurses are more frequently required to use English to communicate with foreign patients. Yet many nursing students report that their primary motivation for studying English is for general daily use rather than for professional clinical purposes (Sakurai et al., 2022). This reveals a potential gap between classroom language study and future workplace demands. One commonly used approach to address this gap is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes the use of functional language in real-life contexts.

Issues with CLT in Japanese Classrooms

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is widely promoted as an effective approach to developing functional English proficiency. However, the use of CLT and other active learning approaches in classrooms in Japan has produced mixed results (Egitim & Garcia, 2021). Some studies indicate positive outcomes. For instance, Toyoda et al. (2021) found that Japanese students

showed greater willingness to speak English when engaged in student-centered activities. Similarly, Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) reported that students who experienced active learning in English classes demonstrated increased motivation to communicate. However, other studies highlight challenges and limited success. For example, active communication activities and tasks can be a cause of anxiety for Japanese due to cultural and pedagogical constraints and differences in language learning (Burrows, 2008; Sakamoto, 2023).

Recent research on nursing students by Porter et al. (2025) highlights how institutional priorities and curricular constraints can limit the effectiveness of communicative approaches. These findings suggest that while communicative and active learning methods have clear potential, their success may depend on careful adaptation to Japanese educational contexts, students' expectations, and classroom culture. This indicates a need for approaches that explicitly

acknowledge local norms and the particular pressures faced by learners, such as nursing students. These concerns point toward the value of a culturally sensitive approach (CSA) that retains the strengths of CLT while adapting its implementation to align with students' cultural learning backgrounds and future professional contexts.

A Culturally Sensitive Approach

Because of the challenges of using CLT in Japanese contexts, a CSA for teaching English to Japanese nursing students may be beneficial. Rather than rejecting CLT, a CSA adapts communicative principles through four key points: (1) contextual adaptation through bottom-up design, (2) structured support to reduce communicative anxiety, (3) gradual progression through manageable early-stage tasks, and (4) balanced and supportive feedback practices. As shown in Table 1, a CSA diverges from CLT by emphasizing flexibility, contextual understanding, and local responsiveness instead of applying the same communicative principles everywhere. A CSA may help provide a practical framework for integrating communicative teaching into Japanese nursing programs. It preserves the core strengths of CLT while aligning instruction with local educational traditions and the professional realities of nursing practice.

Table 1
Comparison of CLT and CSA

Aspect	CLT	CSA
Method	Prescriptive, communicative focus	Context-sensitive, flexible
Teacher Role	Facilitator of communication	Reflective, adapts to context
Learner Role	Active participant	Active participant shaped by context and expectations
Materials	Authentic, communicative	Contextually relevant, adapted
Implementation	Uniform principles	Tailored to the classroom micro-culture

Bottom-Up Design

One major obstacle to CLT implementation in Japan is its frequent presentation as a universally

applicable methodology. When communicative teaching is introduced without regard for teacher-centered traditions or exam-oriented systems, it may appear to undermine established classroom norms (Bax, 2003). A CSA addresses this issue through bottom-up design. Teachers analyze their specific classroom contexts and gradually introduce interactive learning in ways that respect existing expectations. Rather than abruptly shifting to fully student-led discussion, instructors can integrate short, structured communicative segments within familiar lesson formats. This approach may help students develop their communication ability incrementally. In doing so, it avoids framing CLT as a prescriptive import and instead positions it as adaptable to local educational cultures.

Reducing Anxiety

A second concern is the stress associated with active communication. Research suggests that Japanese students may feel pressured to speak in communicative classrooms (Sakamoto, 2023). A CSA, therefore, emphasizes highly supported communicative practice. Structured role-plays, clear models, sample dialogues, and visual prompts can provide learners with concrete examples of appropriate language use. For nursing students, instructors might use simplified patient interview forms addressing pain levels, medication adherence, or recent symptoms. Such materials allow students to focus on meaning and professional purpose rather than worrying excessively about grammatical perfection.

In addition, guided language frames help alleviate anxiety about making mistakes. Sentence starters such as "Can you tell me...?", "When did the pain start?", or "I recommend that you..." provide functional building blocks that students can apply across multiple scenarios. By offering linguistic scaffolding, teachers enable learners to participate in communication without feeling overwhelmed by the demand for

spontaneous production.

Manageable Early-Stage Tasks

A third difficulty lies in the open-ended nature of many CLT tasks. Students with limited experience in spontaneous communication may struggle when asked to generate extended, unscripted interaction. A CSA addresses this by implementing a gradual progression model through early-stage tasks that are manageable. Ideally, early-stage tasks should be highly structured and narrowly focused, with clear objectives and limited linguistic demands. For example, students may practice confirming allergies, identifying symptoms from brief case descriptions, or explaining medication schedules using structured prompts.

These early-stage tasks can create authentic communicative needs while keeping performance demands manageable. As students gain familiarity and confidence, teachers can progressively reduce support and increase task complexity. This staged approach aligns with findings that progressive scaffolding is particularly beneficial for learners who struggle with open-ended communicative formats (Yashima & Kojima, 2024). Over time, learners move from controlled interaction toward greater spontaneity.

Supportive Feedback Within a CSA

A fourth concern is the potential effect of feedback provided to students. Error correction during communicative tasks often heightens anxiety, especially for students accustomed to high-stakes accuracy in formal learning environments (Richmond & Vannieu, 2019). Instead, a CSA recommends a balanced feedback approach: teachers prioritize meaning-focused communication during activities and save most corrective feedback for post-task reflection. Techniques such as delayed correction and selective focus on high-impact errors help maintain Japanese students' confidence while still

promoting language development. At the same time, positive reinforcement plays a key role in lowering classroom anxiety. This balance respects cultural norms around precision and teacher authority while fostering a classroom environment conducive to risk-taking and gradual language growth.

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