

English Language Education in Japan: Transitions and Challenges ⁽¹⁾

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Introduction

English language education is a highly controversial issue in Japan. Some claim that the Japanese education system had been generally recognized as one of the most successful ones in the world, with the exception of its English language curriculum. English language education in public schools has been especially and constantly criticized for its failure in communicative language acquisition. Some point out that Japanese high school graduates cannot even carry on a simple daily conversation in English after six years of learning English in school. Others warn that the average TOEFL score for Japanese is one of the lowest among countries in Asia. They all place the blame on English language education in schools.

In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) made an assertion in its official report that "it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English," and in the following year in 2003, it announced an "Action Plan" to cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities." It was the first time that MEXT clearly and specifically stated its aim to improve the national standard of English language education. The pros and cons

of this issue are numerous, and the issue itself is still controversial even among scholars and educators. However, many would agree that English language education in Japan has entered a new era to cope with the challenges of the global age.

This paper briefly examines the history of English language education in Japan, elaborates on the present situation and controversial issues, and suggests several points of improvement for English language education in Japan.

History of English Language Education

English language education as a system started in 1854 when Japan concluded the Treaty of Peace and Amity with the United States (U.S.) and opened its doors to the West. Since then, the purpose of English language education has changed as the country itself has changed politically, socially, and economically. As Fujimoto-Adamson (2006) has argued that the tracing of the influences upon general English language education in the past would lead us to an understanding of the current complexities of English language education, it is essential to have knowledge on these changes, especially the transitions of English language education during the last four eras—the Meiji, Taisho, Showa, and Heisei eras.

Meiji Era (1868—1911)

The government policy of the Meiji era was to transform the entire country in aim of Westernization. The newly established Ministry of Education decided to send students to Western countries

to acquire foreign knowledge, and the first group of four students was sent to the U.S. in 1871. In 1872, Arimori Mori, the acting ambassador to the U.S., and later, the first Minister of Education even wrote a report called "The Use of English as the Official Language in Japan" (Imura, 2003).

In less than ten years, however, the purpose of English language education gradually changed and English language education started to fall into decline. The students who were sent to Western countries returned to Japan and started to teach English at universities in place of foreign teachers. They also started to translate the technical terms of their fields of study into Japanese, compile them into academic books, and teach these subjects to Japanese students in Japanese. Imura (2003) points out that these changes influenced the Japanese people's attitudes toward English. While the government's policy was still to import modern methodologies from the West, English gradually became one of the regular school subjects and the means to enter universities, and not the means to access Western culture and knowledge. As Fujimoto-Adamson (2006) claims, this quick turn-around created two trajectories in English language education at the end of the Meiji era. One was the authentic English language education supported by the government, and the other was English language education for the purpose of preparing students for entrance examinations into universities and secondary schools. These two trajectories have been in existence for more than 100 years, and they still continue to exist in present-day English language education.

Taisho Era (1912—1925)

These two trajectories in English language education continued throughout the Taisho era. The Japanese government invited H. E. Palmer from the United Kingdom, who contributed to English language education in Japan by introducing the Oral Method. Therefore, awareness about teaching methodology rose among teachers. However, at the same time, the purpose of English language education shifted toward examination preparation which focused on grammatical analyses and translations into Japanese. The status of English as a tool for Westernization continued to decline and there was even a movement to abolish the teaching of English that became stronger towards the end of the era (Imura, 2003).

Showa Era (1926—1988)

Japanese democracy ended after the military took over the government in 1932, and Japan's lead-up to World War II (WWII) spurred anti-English language education sentiments among Japanese, resulting in the abolition of English language education in the school curriculum.

The U.S. occupation after WWII influenced Japanese attitudes toward English. An English conversation radio program raised people's interest in English, and English language lessons resumed in junior high schools in 1947. As the Japanese economy grew, Japanese businesses needed employees who were equipped to conduct international business. As a reaction to these changes in society—especially the increased demand from the business community—"Practical English" entered the limelight. "Jitsuyou Eigo

Kentei," the nationwide Practical English proficiency examination of the four language skills — reading, writing, speaking, and listening — started in 1963 and became popular among people. Following the enactment of various policies that aimed at cultivating students with practical skills, the government continued to invite English language teachers from foreign countries to spread "authentic" English teaching methods. However, significant changes in the English language curriculum in schools were not made, and English was taught using the traditional translation methods to prepare students to pass the entrance examinations. The two trajectories of English language education reappeared again.

In 1964, close to 20 years after the end of WWII, the Tokyo Olympics took place in Japan, and in the 1970s, almost two million Japanese went abroad (Imura, 2003). Even though the English language curriculum in schools was still examination-oriented, these social events influenced both the people's motivations to learn English and the teachers' motivations to try new approaches to teaching English. While the popularity of the Audiolingual Method was declining, the Communicative Approach started to gain popularity among teachers in the mid-1980s. In 1987, the government started the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program to hire foreign nationals as language instructors for junior and senior high schools to improve foreign language acquisition in Japan. The JET Program's aim is to promote internationalization in Japan's local communities by improving language education and developing opportunities for international exchange. According to the JET program's official homepage, 4,334 people from 36 countries participated in the

program in 2010.

Heisei Era (1989—present)

In this era, people were more exposed to English and had more chances to meet native English speakers in their daily lives. The introduction of the Internet and the growing popularity of the JET program were two of the most significant and influential social events that affected people's motivations to learn practical English (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). In response to the needs of society as well as the business community, the purpose of English language education in schools — especially colleges and universities — drastically shifted from academic English to more practical English. In 1997, the government announced its official slogans, "globalization," "cultural diversity," and "international understanding" and the MEXT established an "Action Plan" to cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities" in 2003 (Imura, 2003).

It has been more than 150 years since Japan opened its doors to the West in 1854, and the significance of English has vastly changed in tandem with the ages. At times, English was viewed as a necessary means to acquire Western knowledge, and in other circumstances, it was rejected as a representation of the West. In spite of these changes, there have always been two trajectories of English language education. Even though the acquisition of practical English gradually came to receive wider recognition, the educational value of learning English to pass the entrance examinations remained, and these two trajectories still exist in present-day English language

education in Japan.

The Present Education System

The Organization of the Japanese School System

The Japanese education system was reformed after WWII. The present system is similar to the American system—a 6-3-3-4 system—and the length of compulsory education is 9 years from elementary through junior high school. Nearly 100% of children are enrolled in compulsory education. High school is not compulsory, but the enrollment rate has been growing and in 2008, the rate of enrollment was 97.8%: the enrollment rate in universities and junior colleges was 51.5% (MEXT, 2008, pp. 10-11).

English Language Curricula

English language education in public schools starts in the first year of junior high school and continues until the third year of high school, for a total of six years. English is one of the elective foreign languages in the curricula of junior high schools. However, in the 2003 "Course of Study for Lower Secondary Schools," MEXT encouraged the teaching of English by stating that, "For compulsory foreign language instruction, English should be selected in principle" (MEXT, 2003). In actuality, almost all junior high school students and more than 99% of high school students take English language classes (MEXT, 2010, p. 4). Most universities have an English language section as part of their entrance examinations, so all the applicants study English very seriously to pass the tests. English is

emphasized in most university curricula, and almost all students—even non-English majors— have to take English language classes during their first two years.

The number of English language classes at public junior high schools has gradually decreased since the Meiji era from six to three fifty-minute classes a week. With 105 classes a year for three years (a total of 315 classes), students engage in 262.5 hours (315 classes x 50 minutes = 262.5 hours) of English language instruction by the time they graduate from junior high school. In public high school curricula, there are four courses (Aural/Oral Communication I & II, English I & II, Reading, and Writing), and the total class time for three years is 735 classes or 612.5 hours of instruction. The decrease from six to three fifty-minute English classes a week in junior high school is in a sense, a retrograde step, and there is a strong demand for an increase. However, the system has not undergone any changes due to the belief in the importance of maintaining adequate classroom time for the development of the students' native language (i.e. Japanese).

MEXT's Guidelines: The Course of Study (National Standards for School Curricula)

MEXT closely supervises the curricula and textbooks of public elementary, junior high, and senior high schools. Therefore, the contents of the classes are very similar throughout the country. As a result, the standard of education can be maintained. The first guideline was issued in 1958, and it has been revised approximately every 10 years. The objectives of the foreign language courses

have been reflections of Japan's national situation. The most recent revision in 2003 emphasizes the importance of communication skills by stating that the overall objectives for junior high school are "to develop students' basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages." The overall objectives for senior high school are also to develop communication abilities on a higher level.

English in Elementary Schools

English language instruction will be introduced into elementary schools for fifth and sixth graders as an official subject in April 2011. The official title for this class is "Gaikokugo Katsudou" (Foreign Language Activities), but in reality, it involves English language activities, and schools will be required to offer English language classes once a week for 35 weeks throughout the year. It will be a compulsory part of the elementary school curriculum. As the title contains the word "activities," the aim of this class is not to emphasize rote learning of linguistic elements but to cultivate experience-based understanding. It has almost been 20 years since the idea of introducing official English language instruction into elementary schools was first proposed in the Provisional Administrative Reform Council Report, released in December 1991. While Japan was debating this change, the neighboring countries of Thailand, South Korea, and China made English language instruction compulsory in elementary schools in 1996, 1997, and 2001, respectively (Fukuda, 2010).

Controversial Issues

Although the quality of English language education in schools has been blamed as the main cause for the failure to cultivate students' communication skills in English, the following issues have also been raised as possible causes for such shortcomings.

The Purpose of Learning English

The acquisition of communication skills is one of the most important purposes of learning English in Japan nowadays. However, this has not always been the case. Communicative English skills were not necessarily the means to achieve success in Japanese society. Rather, entrance into a prestigious university was seen as the key to success, and therefore, passing the entrance examination was the main reason to study English. As a result, reading and writing skills were prioritized over communicative English skills by both students and teachers.

Class Size and the Traditional Teaching Style

The traditional teaching style was teacher-centered and involved lecture-style instruction—which is considered less effective for the cultivation of communication skills. One of the reasons for the dominance of such a teaching style was the large number of students—more than 40 students in one class. English was the crucial means to pass entrance examinations, so students were trained to read and write in English, relying on grammatical analyses and translations to and from Japanese as the primary methods. In

class, students practiced a lot of drills and repetitions, and there were almost no opportunities for students to engage in discussions, express opinions, or engage in group problem solving. Teacher-centered, lecture-style instruction worked very effectively to achieve these entrance examination-oriented goals in large classrooms.

According to the current national standard, junior high school and high school classrooms are in principle, not allowed to exceed 40 students. Grammar-focused teaching remains popular and teacher-centered instruction still dominates in the typical classroom where a teacher introduces new words and explains new grammar rules. Students listen attentively, take notes, and do a lot of repetition drills and memorization. This type of instruction is commonly seen in any classroom. Although English language teaching in Japan is being improved as many teachers are striving to adopt communicative methods in their teaching styles to foster the development of their students' communication abilities, there are also many teachers who tend to apply traditional methods that involve translations from English to Japanese and place stress on grammar.

The Teaching Abilities of English Language Teachers

In the report, "Developing a Strategic Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'," MEXT (2002) pointed out five key policy foci to foster English abilities: 1. boosting the motivation of learners; 2. improving educational content; 3. improving the qualifications of English language instructors and upgrading the teaching system; 4. enhancing English conversation activities in elementary schools; and 5. strengthening mother tongue—or Japanese

language-acquisition. As the report states, making improvements in the qualifications of English language teachers and their teaching abilities is important because many of junior and senior high school teachers are more educators than language teachers, and do not specialize in teaching English as a foreign language.

The Japanese Learning Environment and the Characteristics of the Students

The characteristics of Japanese students are shaped by Japanese society and culture, and some have argued that these societal and cultural influences have hindered the effective acquisition of communicative English skills.

Based on the work of anthropologists T. Rohlen and G. LeTendre as well as the experiences of many language teachers in Japan, including himself, Aspinall (2006) listed the common characteristics of Japanese adolescents and adults in learning environments. He concluded that the following typical characteristics of the Japanese learner as well as their learning environments could inhibit effective English language teaching and learning.

1. "Deference to the authority of the teacher" would lead learners to acquire passive learning attitudes in which they cannot develop their own learning strategies.
2. "Emphasis on humility" leads learners to refrain from displaying their advanced skills in front of their peers in fear of appearing to be overly confident.
3. The idea that there is one "correct" answer or way to the teacher's question makes learners timid in expressing

themselves freely and inhibits the development of communication skills.

4. "The egalitarian approach of education" is a barrier to fostering "able" students as well as students with learning difficulties.

Improvements for the Future

English language education in Japanese schools is currently at a crossroads. In line with MEXT's assertion regarding the importance of practical communication abilities in foreign languages, the improvement of the English language curriculum is one of the significant challenges that Japan must address. The following suggestions for improvement by Mantero and Iwai (2005) are commonly considered and supported by many in the field of Japanese English language education.

1. The implementation of small classes

It is essential to downsize the number of students per class in order to create more effective teaching/learning environments and to specifically cultivate students' communication skills. In a small class, it is much easier for teachers and students to interact with each other under student-centered instruction. MEXT is currently trying to implement a smaller class size system.

2. The upgrading of the teaching abilities of English language teachers

English language teachers were trained under the traditional

teaching style that emphasized grammatical analyses and translations into Japanese. Therefore, many of them do not have a strong background in communicative language teaching. MEXT has employed measures to upgrade the abilities of English language teachers by offering domestic as well as overseas teacher training.

3. The use of assistant language teachers (ALTs)

The JET program is another controversial issue regarding the effectiveness of language teaching. As it started with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other countries, the participants are not required to have any teaching experience as part of their qualifications. Improvements to the program are expected, but in the meantime, this system should effectively be used for English language education. Opportunities to use practical English with the ALTs could motivate students to learn English.

Conclusion

The author had a chance to observe several English language classroom settings in the United States where all of the students were Japanese college students who were in their fourth month of their language/study abroad program. The first surprising finding was the students' attitudes and behaviors in the process of learning English. They responded very quickly to the teacher, expressed their opinions voluntarily and freely in front of their peers, were

not afraid of making mistakes at all, and seemed to really enjoy using English as a communicative medium. Additionally, the ways in which the teachers approached the students stood out. Using their years of experience teaching Japanese students, they used the teaching methods that worked most effectively for the students. The classes involved task-based instruction and were full of group and pair activities. Since the size of each class was about 15 students, each student was able to get enough attention and support from the teachers. The teachers completely filled the facilitator role. They listened to the students carefully, encouraged them to speak out, and approved and praised their efforts to produce English. The students seemed to have acquired the feeling of using English as a communicative medium—which is one of the hardest elements for them to develop in English learning environments in Japan.

One of the biggest differences between English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) is the amount of inputs and interactions in English. With ESL, learners are exposed to English in their everyday lives in which they are required to communicate in English. They are able to gain the feeling of using English as a communication tool—something that most learners hardly experience in their EFL curricula in their home countries.

Japanese English language education has gone through drastic changes as the country itself has changed. As mentioned above, debates on the ideal form of English language education still persist. However, Japan has surely entered a new era to cope with the global age. Continuous debates on effective English language teaching methods are necessary in search for new breakthroughs in pedagogy

that will better assist Japanese learners in acquiring communication skills in English.

Notes

- (1) This paper is a revised and expanded version of the paper presented at the International Speakers Series at Eastern Washington University on February 25, 2010.

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