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# ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

ABSTRACT. This paper provides a brief outline of some of the major changes in English language education (ELE) in Japan and then focuses on contemporary developments. The author identifies key problems with Japan's ELE system and provides some possible solutions. Future directions for Japan's ELE system are also discussed.

*Keywords:* English language education, Japan, Problems, Reform, Solutions.

## 1. Introduction

After the isolation of the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) came to an end, Japan underwent many major changes including its education system. In terms of English language education (ELE) the past 20 years have seen numerous proposals for change and reforms across the state system. No education system is perfect and Japan's ELE has been a target for criticism. This paper looks at some of the main problems inherent in the Japanese English language education system and some solutions are offered. Finally, the paper examines possible directions for the future of ELE in Japan.

## 2. Background

The evolution of Japan's English language education system has been well documented (Cripps, 2002; Eades, Gill and Befu, 2000; Seargeant, 2009; 2011). Below I provide a brief overview of some of the major changes.

The end of the Tokugawa period signified the start of significant change in Japan. The country was extremely receptive to Western educational philosophies and openly courted Western educators. Steps were taken to totally revamp the education system and to open it up to members of the general public. Japan looked to three countries: England, France and, to a lesser extent, Germany. In 1872 the Fundamental Code of Education (*Gakusei*) was promulgated and the modern school system was established. A period of six years of compulsory schooling was set up and public education in Japan began to expand rapidly.

During this period of reformation, English was regarded as an important vehicle for "important advanced civilization" (Koike & Tanaka, 1995, p. 15) and was firmly established as the main foreign language, followed by French and German. English language education was seen as being closely tied to Westernization and economic prosperity. Initially, Japan relied on Western scholars and texts to help teach English, however they were later replaced by Japanese texts and academics. The early adoption of the grammar-translation method has had serious ramifications on how English is taught in Japan. Significantly, Harold E. Palmer's attempt to introduce his 'oral method' in the 1920's and 1930's, and the subsequent opposition to this method, resulted in a further shift in the pedagogical spectrum (Smith, 1999). Increasingly, educators began to rely on grading students according to the level of their reading

comprehension and the prowess of their written English, rather than their ability to communicate orally in the language. The pedagogical ramifications of this shift are still being felt today.

The second major reform of Japan's education system occurred after World War Two with the promulgation of the School Education Law in 1947 which laid out a 6-3-3-4 schooling system (six years of elementary school education, three years of junior high school education, three years of senior high school education and four years of university education). The Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, Culture and Technology (MEXT) established the 'Course of Study' (CoS) which laid out standards for content material which teachers had to follow. New teaching methods incorporating discussions and revised lesson content were also introduced (see Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). The purpose of post-war reform was to rebuild the country as quickly as possible, and changes in its education system contributed to the success of Japan's post-war revival. The popularity of English dramatically increased during the American occupation, and the focus of education altered to reflect the needs of the changing economy and the country as a whole. Western observers pointed to the elementary and secondary school levels, and noted the comparative success in international tests of science and mathematics of Japanese school children. The state education system was seen as providing the perfect educational catalyst for the Japanese 'economic miracle'. These post-war reforms, however,

did little to affect significant change in the sphere of English language education and, as economic expansion began to slow down, the impetus for radical change grew stronger.

Japan's rapid post-war economic rebuilding and subsequent economic miracle saw numerous changes in its society. Obviously the need to speak and use English became more important during the Allied occupation. However, as Japan regained its freedom and became an economic powerhouse, educational reform, especially as regards teaching English, was palpably lacking (for an analysis of the post-war expansion of Japan's education system see Cripps, 2016b).

### 2.1. The New Course of Study Guidelines

As noted above, the first Course of Study guidelines were released by MEXT in 1947. These initial guidelines stressed habit formation, improving listening and speaking skills, imitating native utterances and becoming accustomed to the sound and rhythm of English initially without textbooks (Tahira, 2012, pp. 3-4). Since 1947 these guidelines have been revised every decade.

Despite many (arguably superficial) changes in Japan's English language education system, the latest version of the guidelines, which came into effect in 2011, represent a significant shift in policy. The guidelines outline major

changes in how English is taught at elementary schools, junior high schools and senior high schools in Japan. These are known as the 'New Course of Study' guidelines (NCoS). Table 1 below outlines the main changes (see Tahira, 2012, pp. 4-5):

Table 1: Overview of the New Course of Study changes

| School level | Implementation Date | Revisions |
|---|---|---|
| Elementary schools | April, 2011 | 1. Foreign language communication activities are compulsory for fifth and sixth grade students.<br>2. Homeroom teachers are responsible for teaching these activities. |
| Junior high schools | April, 2012 | 1. Class hours increased from 105 to 140 per year.<br>2. Expansion of the number of words that students should learn from 900 to 1,200.<br>3. Increased emphasis on teaching the four skills.<br>4. The increased time and vocabulary size has been created to make more time for classroom activities which promote communication (i.e. not to increase the time used for teaching grammar). |
| Senior high schools | April, 2013 | 1. Integration of language activities using the four skills.<br>2. "Classes, in principle, should be conducted in English to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English" (MEXT, 2009, p. 7).<br>3. Expansion of the number of words that students should learn from 1,300 to 1,800.<br>4. "Grammar instruction should be given as a means to support communication" (MEXT, 2009, p. 7). |

The above changes represented by the New Course of Study guidelines represent a substantial shift in how English is to be taught in Japanese schools. These guidelines, however well intentioned, have also created a number of significant challenges for teachers in Japan.

### 2.2. Efforts to Encourage Students to Study Abroad

In addition to the NCoS reforms, MEXT is trying to encourage more senior high school students to study abroad. This initiative is connected with the government's move to make Japan more competitive on the international stage. However, Japan is facing a problem because the number of Japanese students who are studying abroad has been falling rapidly. Tanikawa (2013, para. 4) summarises this predicament: "The number of Japanese students studying overseas peaked at 82,945 in 2004 and fell to 58,060 in 2010, according to the Ministry of Education. Fewer than 20,000 Japanese students studied in the United States in 2011, compared with 46,000 in 1999, according to the Institute of International Education."

The Japanese government is also developing initiatives to support 'Japanese youths' (i.e. university students) who want to study abroad. In order to do this they are going to offer scholarships to students taking short-term courses abroad from 2017 (Tanikawa, 2013). Many commentators have seen this as a clear signal to universities to create more flexible academic calendars and allow

students to join in the autumn semester. Some universities, such as Tokyo University, have come out in favour of such a shift, yet the majority of Japanese universities (including Kyoto University) have yet to express their backing.

Many universities in Japan have unilateral or bilateral study abroad agreements with overseas universities. Over the past few years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of study abroad programs being offered by (mostly private) Japanese universities. At the same time, MEXT is looking to increase the number of visiting international students through its Global 30 Project (MEXT, n.d.):

> The Global 30 Project is a funding project that aims to promote internationalization of academic environment of Japanese universities and acceptance of excellent international students studying in Japan. The selected 13 core universities have been implementing a variety of approaches to internationalize academic systems and campuses such as developing degree programs conducted in English and enriching international student support, while they are expected to enhance inter-university network for sharing educational resource and other outputs including establishment of overseas office which can be jointly used by all Japanese universities.

A further incentive for private universities in Japan to set up study abroad programs is based on economic pragmatism. With a shrinking student base due to demographic circumstances, private universities find themselves in competition with one another for students. Apart from their academic and practical attractiveness, study abroad programs are seen by many universities as strong selling points for their academic programs. Examples of such programs

are those which have been established by Kyushu International University, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Ritsumeikan University, and Waseda University.

Despite this push for study abroad programs at university level, Japan's position is quite precarious. Miller (2014, para. 1) contends that: "…students in China, Korea and Japan are in an arms race to see who can produce students with the best English, and Japan seems to be trailing far behind in third place." What are the reasons why Japan appears to be falling behind its Asian neighbours? The following section aims to answer this question by looking at some of the main problems with Japan's ELE.

## 3. Identifying Problems

The various problems inherent in Japan's English language education system have been extensively catalogued and discussed (Cripps, 2002; Eades, Goodman & Hada, 2005; Goodman, Imoto & Toivonen, 2012; Hosoki, 2011; Tahira, 2012). This section will focus on some of the main obstacles which Japan has to overcome in order to create an effective ELE system.

### 3.1. Low Oral Communication Ability

One obvious concern is that Japanese students' command of spoken English after six years of instruction is surprisingly poor. As Mizuno (2003, p.

247) succinctly puts it: "In Japan, it is often observed that students cannot communicate in English no matter how hard they study at school." Is this down to teachers failing their students? Lack of contact hours? Frailties in curriculum design? Inadequate textbooks? I would argue that the reason for Japanese students' apparent low oral communication ability is a combination of many factors, some of which are shown below.

### 3.2. The University Entrance Examination System

One of the causes of the inability of students to speak English is the unnecessary focus on entrance examinations in the Japanese education system. This is a common claim made by many who have spent time teaching and/or living in Japan. Miller (2014) reflects that many Japanese 'netizens' agree with the statement: "Why change anything unless the style of testing is changed?" (para. 5). Indeed, Mizuno (2003, p. 247) believes that university entrance examinations lie at the core of the problems inherent in Japan's ELE: "English-language teaching in Japan does not help students develop their communicative abilities, but serves only to help students pass university entrance examinations."

There is no test of English oral communication in the university entrance examination system. To a large extent there has always been an emphasis on written tests and demonstrable knowledge of grammar. The grammar-translation methods that are used at Japanese junior high schools and senior high schools

are influenced by the composition of the entrance examinations. Tokyo University and Kyoto University, to take just two examples, require students to translate complicated passages of Japanese into English and vice versa. Having taught at Kyoto University for five years, I can attest to the fact that the students' command of spoken English is well below their knowledge of English grammar.

### 3.3. English Textbooks

Anyone who has taught English in the Japanese public school system knows that the English textbooks fail to facilitate meaningful oral communication. Typically, a chapter in a senior high school English textbook will consist of 12-16 pages with the majority of the first 10 pages focusing on reading, grammar and vocabulary, while the communicative activities are relegated to the end of each chapter. In practice, since teachers are usually so pressed for time to get through each chapter, little or no time is left for communicative output.

Japanese Teachers of English (JTE) are pedagogically 'handcuffed' having to teach antiquated grammatical forms through dry topic chapters: "The JTEs have to teach these archaic forms through topics such as recycling plastic, people and animals dying in WWII and boring Japanese history, causing students to be apathetic" (Miller, para. 6, 2014). By contrast, English language textbooks used in South Korea are full of communicative activities that are

engaging, practical, and easy to understand. Yuasa (2010, p. 157) provides an overview:

> Korean English textbooks show that they aim for the practical usage of English by emphasizing function over grammatical knowledge: they do not use grammatical terms but help students acquire key sentence structures by repetition through dialogues, reading materials and various activities. They are designed to require students to use English as actively as possible rather than focusing on grammatical correctness. They have a lot of advantages that Japanese English textbooks can use although not all of them can be imitated, considering students' motives and their burden.

Even a cursory examination of an English textbook which is used in Korea shows marked differences in the number of grammatical patterns taught, the number of vocabulary items, and the sheer breadth of topics. One textbook, '*Middle School English 1'*, has ten units which are to be covered over an academic year and has 268 pages (Yin, 2014). By contrast '*New Crown 1*', a popular junior high school textbook used in Japan, has nine units and only 119 pages (New Crown 1, 2012). Of course quantity is no substitute for quality but the activities and design of '*Middle School English 1*' appear to be far more 'user friendly' for teachers and students alike.

### 3.4. Teaching Style and Resistance to Change

A further problem with the Japanese English language education system, I would argue, is the way classes are taught. Obviously, with the intense focus on teaching to help students pass entrance examinations, this affects how English is

taught and what kind of English is taught. There is a distinct lack of English use in English classrooms in Japan as Japanese Teachers of English: "…often teach all the grammar in Japanese, and check that the students can follow the textbook by translating the English into Japanese" (Miller, 2014, para. 7). An over-reliance on rote learning serves to further compound the problem of boring and test-based classes (Jardine, 2012).

Efforts to introduce a communicative approach to English language teaching in Japan have largely failed. This could be down to the focus on entrance examinations, inadequate teacher training, or the inability of teachers to grasp the principles and methods behind the communicative approach. It has also been argued that resistance to the communicative approach is a further reason why such an approach has not been embraced by the teaching profession. One reason for this could be the overall low level of English of English teachers in Japan as a recent survey highlighted: "Only a little more than half of English teachers at public high schools are certified with advanced levels of English proficiency tests, and the rate is less than 30 percent for those at junior high schools, according to an education ministry survey" (Japan Times, 2015, para. 1). For such teachers to be asked to embrace a communicative approach is to spread credibility a little too far (see Humphries & Burns, 2015).

### 3.5. Unrealistic Demands on Teachers and Teacher Burnout

Related to the above is the unrealistic demand by MEXT for teachers to 'teach English through English' which the NCoS tries to emphasize. If teachers have (or feel that they have) a poor command of English then it is unlikely that they will choose to teach English in English. Many English teachers are already finding it hard to cope with the demands of their teaching load and other responsibilities. Arguably, the NCoS places a further burden upon them. It is a fact that many English teachers have a low command of English and this, coupled with a lack of confidence in their English ability, does little to create the ideal conditions for classes to be taught entirely (or even mostly) in English.

A further important consideration is that many teachers actually do not believe that 'teaching English in English' is the best way to meet the needs of their students. There is still strong support for the traditional grammar-translation approach. This will perhaps remain the case as long as new teachers continue to be mentored by seasoned teachers who support the grammar-translation approach, and the university entrance examinations continue to focus on testing grammar and reading, rather than the ability of students to understand spoken English and express themselves in English orally.

Teacher burnout is also a major problem that needs to be addressed: "The number of first-year teachers who leave their jobs for health reasons has increased over the past 10 years" (The Japan Times, 2011, para. 1). Put simply

teachers are being asked to do too much without adequate support and training. In 2009, 8,600 teachers in Japan took a leave of absence for health reasons and two thirds of them cited psychological problems (The Japan Times, 2011, para. 3). Although some prefectures have started to monitor the emotional state of teachers, more needs to be done to help teachers.

## 4. Providing Solutions

With the above points in mind, below are some practical solutions to the problems inherent in Japan's English language education system. Of course, many of these may be hard to implement, but I would argue that these are achievable goals given the right backing from MEXT, politicians, parents, English teachers, and other interested parties.

### 4.1. Change the University Entrance Examination System

Many educators have identified the current university entrance examination system as being at the core of one of the problems with the Japanese ELE system. If teachers and students are focusing on entrance examinations which stress grammar translation, reading and vocabulary they are, understandably, less likely to concentrate on improving speaking and listening skills. An additional hurdle, which is a consequence of the university entrance examination system, is the fact that senior high schools mirror the focus on grammar

translation, reading and vocabulary. Thus, the reality is that as soon as children start learning English in the Japanese education system it is clear, if they want to go to renowned university, they will need to focus on the skills necessary to pass the entrance examinations.

One idea that has been mooted is to incorporate testing English speaking skills into the university entrance examination system. With so many students taking the entrance examinations logistically this proposal could be problematic. However, one solution could be for MEXT to approve the use of the speaking section of the new Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam. A basic standard could be set which all students should try to achieve before their entrance examinations. Realistically, the actual percentage of speaking as part of the entrance examination could be adjusted. I would argue that the act of making speaking part of the entrance examinations would act as a catalyst to raise the level of English speaking skills. In short, if speaking skills were woven into the entrance examinations then schools, teachers, and students would focus on improving students' speaking skills.

### 4.2. Improve English Textbooks

English textbooks used in Japanese junior high schools and senior high schools have been the target of much criticism. Generally speaking the content is dry and does little to support a communicative approach to language teaching

and learning. Japan needs to look outside and learn from other countries. Leading Asian countries in particular, such as South Korea and Singapore, provide sterling examples. A typical English textbook used at a Korean middle school is twice as thick as a Japanese junior high school English textbook, and contains more vocabulary and advanced grammatical patterns (Yuasa, 2010). Of course quantity does not necessarily equate with quality, however, the construction of Korean textbooks, with their focus on fun and useful communicative activities, puts Japanese textbooks to shame.

### 4.3. Improve Pre-service and In-service Teacher Training

As I have argued in recent papers and presentations (2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2016a) the current system of pre-service and in-service teacher training needs a radical overhaul. University students who wish to take a teaching license in Japan only receive three to four weeks of training at a junior high school or senior high school. Their instruction is usually overseen by a senior teacher who often has little time to provide meaningful mentorship. Consequently, the students who obtain a teaching license are often inadequately prepared for the practical challenges of teaching English on a daily basis. To further exasperate this situation, in-service teacher training support is negligible. Typically, a novice teacher is assigned a mentor during the first year of his or her tenure but in reality the fledgling teacher is thrown into the deep end of the teaching pool

and left to fend for themselves. This 'sink or swim' policy results in an extremely high attrition rate for new teachers. More support for prospective teachers is vital (The Japan Times, 2011, para. 7):

> University students who plan on becoming teachers need more and better instruction in pedagogy and psychology. Motivational techniques, classroom organization, lesson structure and leadership values need to be learned at early stages in their studies. Walking into a classroom without a broad sense of where students are coming from and where they need to go is unproductive, confusing and very stressful.

### 4.4. Subsidize Study Abroad Programs

Hosoki (2013) notes that despite the falling numbers of Japanese students studying overseas, study abroad programs are still looked on favourably by Japanese universities. She does caution that there are limitations to these programs (ibid, p. 3): "However important such programs are deemed to be, university-sponsored overseas language programs have limitations in length due to the costs students have to pay in the present unfavorable economic climate." For those students who want to study abroad a certain percentage of their costs should be subsidized. The government needs to provide financial incentives and support for students willing to go overseas.

Other improvements that need to be addressed (but cannot be expanded on here due to space constraints) are reducing the number of students per class, performing systematic 'support checks' on English teachers, introducing

qualified English teachers into the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program (see Amaki, 2008), and increasing the number of 'English villages' in Japan.

## 5. Future Directions

Making predictions in any academic field is fraught with difficulty and of course uncertainty. Japan faces many challenges to its social fabric and it is likely that these will grow as its population shrinks and it struggles to cope with its aging population. Economic pressure from its Asian neighbours, such as China and South Korea, may serve to accelerate further reforms of the Japanese ELE system. Japan's domestic economy cannot sustain the country by itself. One of the keys to economic strength, I would argue, is the ability to be able to compete with international counterparts. In order to do this, Japan needs a workforce that can communicate effectively in English and other languages.

If Japan's international competitiveness appears to be suffering due to the lack of English skills of its population then I predict that steps will be taken to strengthen the teacher-training infrastructure and the ELE system as a whole. It is likely that incentives will be introduced to encourage more people who have a good command of English to enter the teaching profession. A system to reward 'outstanding teachers' should be introduced into the teaching infrastructure and they should be given significant financial rewards. These teachers will be asked to run teacher-training academies which will train English teachers on a regular

basis i.e. every six months through teacher-training workshops run at the prefectural level. These workshops would be compulsory for all English teachers regardless of age and experience, with the most qualified teachers being invited to help run the workshops.

In tandem with these teacher-training workshops, I believe that universities will be encouraged to significantly improve their teaching license courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The licensing system could be reformed to create a teaching license for teachers who specialize in English teaching across three levels i.e. at elementary schools, junior high schools and senior high schools. These specialist teachers would be asked to teach at any of the three levels. They would be given a coordinator's role which would require them to oversee the ELE system at their respective schools across the grades e.g. an elementary school specialist teacher would oversee the ELE curricula for grades one to six. Similarly, junior high school and senior high school specialists would be responsible for grades one to three at their institutions.

A further refinement to the ELE system would be to introduce practical 'Can do' statements for each tier of the public school system. For example, by the time they leave elementary school children should be able to read basic English sentences, ask and answer rudimentary questions, and have basic listening skills. These targets would be communicative based and speaking tasks would be implemented at the junior high school level and beyond. These

speaking tasks would be similar to the PET, FCE and CAE speaking tasks (see Cambridge, 2016). I must stress here that I am not advocating another layer of tests – as to do so may be counterproductive and demotivational. However, I am arguing for the introduction of a series of practical tasks that students should be able to carry out such as those used on the Cambridge (KEY) for schools at the junior high school level (Cambridge, 2016). At the university entrance level, however, it may be useful to introduce an 'exemption system' related to a student's English level e.g. if a senior high school student has obtained the Cambridge English First (FCE) qualification then they will be deemed to have obtained the required level of oral proficiency for entering university – an FCE qualification: "demonstrates that a student has the language skills they need to communicate in an English-speaking environment" (Cambridge, 2016).

The above ideas are just some examples of possible future directions which ELE in Japan may take. I feel that economic imperatives may act as the strongest agent for change. However, Japan's traditional university entrance examination system is so engrained in its culture that changes at this level would require a seismic cultural and political shift.

## 6. Conclusions

Japan is a country where change is frequently mooted but rarely instigated, and the field of education is a perfect example of this trait. Despite the myriad

opinions on the problems inherent in Japan's English language education system there is one constant that remains – everyone agrees that the current system needs to be changed. However, how that change should be implemented is the current battleground for educators.

In the interest of balance it should be pointed out that the Japanese English language education system has many positives. Arguably the strongest of which is the fact that that students who go through the system have a strong grasp of English grammar coupled with functional reading skills. That being said, these strengths cannot disguise the numerous weaknesses of the ELE system. The main problem seems to be that despite (or as a result of ?) their six-years of formal English instruction, students cannot communicate effectively in spoken English.

Who is to blame for this apparent failure to produce students who cannot communicate effectively in English? Since finger pointing rarely leads to constructive change, perhaps the fairest answer is that we are all to blame. By 'we' I would include teachers, students, parents, politicians and everyone else in Japanese society. We should take responsibility for allowing the emasculating system of entrance examinations to continue to dominate the educational landscape in Japan.

In 2002 I published a paper titled '*The Changing Face of English Language Education in Japan: A Step in the Right Direction?*' In this paper I

looked at ELE reform in Japan, the pressure for change, contemporary changes in schools and universities, and teacher training. Now, 14 years later, I find myself writing about almost exactly the same topics. What has changed since I first wrote that paper? I would say that the rhetoric of change certainly has not changed. The same parties are still talking about the need for change without providing practical solutions. This paper has tried to take a realistic look at some of the problems which the Japanese English language education system is facing. I have offered some practical solutions to some of the major problems inherent in the ELE system. My hope is that 14 years from now I will not be writing about the same need for change, and instead I will be writing about the positive changes that have taken place.

What this paper has shown is that despite the various reforms in the English language education system in Japan they have not resulted in meaningful change. Teacher training, textbook overhaul, curriculum reform, and a rethinking of the importance of English for Japan's future represent the tip of the 'iceberg for change'. The rhetoric of change must be replaced by practical solutions – only then can Japan become the 'international' country that its political leaders want to create.

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