

English Curriculum at Elementary and Secondary Schools in Japan

— Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going?¹ —

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Abstract

The English curriculum at elementary and secondary schools in Japan will change in 2020, and entrance examinations to universities will change in 2021, due to the important role that English has under globalization today. English has become a Lingua Franca, and English education should contribute to raising our awareness as global citizens and developing empathy toward one another. Teaching ethics, relevant to the globalized world today, is desired so that children will be able to make friends with people from all over the world.

Key Words : The New Course of Study, English education, globalization, educational reforms

Introduction

Globalization today changes English into an international language, and lately discussing English education has been more difficult.

Understanding a language and its cultural background is one of the main objectives of foreign language education in the Course of Study announced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2017. English, however, has been evolving into an international language, which makes its cultural background difficult to be defined simply.

Kachru (2006) examines the stratification of English usage under the internationalization of the world, and advocates “three concentric circles (p.242)” (i.e., native speakers, speakers of

English as the second language, and speakers of English as a foreign language). Globalization today expands the latter. This means that the cultural background of English is not only the one of native speakers, but also of those who speak different native languages.

English is now a Lingua Franca: “the means of communication among people from different first language backgrounds, across linguacultural boundaries” (Seidlhofer, 2005, p.339), and not only one English but many types of English exist as Bolton and Kachru (2006) argue. Holliday (2006) suggests that “educators and students from outside the English-speaking West have immense abilities to make English and TESOL² what they wish them to be” (p.11).

The Japanese government has undertaken

many measures to cope with globalization, and English education in Japan will reach another milestone in the year 2020. This article will discuss the historical overview, and some present or future challenges of English education at elementary and secondary schools in Japan.

1. Historical Overview

Formal foreign language education in Japan started in the middle of the 19th century (Imura, 2003; Butler, 2007a), existing in two forms of curriculum, (1) the national curriculum by the government and (2) the examination practice at schools, for the students' success (Sakui, 2004; Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006; Chang, 2012), and both forms will change radically from 2020.

(1) English Education for Communication

The Japanese Ad Hoc Council of Education was established in 1984, and regarding English education, it criticized knowledge-cramming and memorization, and emphasized communication. The word "communication" first appeared in the Course of Study in 1989 (Torikai, 2018). The council also opened the way to so-called "Yutori" education, (lighter curriculum), and a concern about declining academic abilities spread throughout the society (Honda, 2002).

English teachers in Japan were struggling with the contradiction: lofty English educational goals, and fewer teaching hours, since the 1980s; it has not changed to this day. In addition, harsh criticism towards English teachers "who can't speak English" unsettled many. The government started to invite young native English speakers to Japanese schools for the reform of English classes, under the

encouragement of the economic policy to reduce trade surplus. The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program was launched in 1987, and around 5,000 English speakers are now working in classrooms of Japanese elementary and secondary schools³.

(2) Fostering "Global Human Resources"

The curricula discussed in the 1980s became practiced in the 1990s, and the five-day school system was fully implemented in 2002, when "Yutori" education was completed. However, the government continued to release plans for educational reform, including "The Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities⁴".

This educational reform included changes in the achievement levels both for students and teachers, inclusion of listening comprehension in the National Center Test for University Admissions, utilization of standardized proficiency measures such as TOEFL or TOEIC, and the creation of Super English Language High Schools (SelHi). It also emphasized the importance of early English education, and the inclusion of English Activities in grade 5 classrooms started in 2008. However, as Kikuchi and Browne (2009) indicated, through their research of classroom practices at senior high schools, "students didn't feel that the goal of the Course of Study was being effectively implemented by their teachers in the classroom" (p.187).

Since the burst of the Bubble Economy in the early 1990s, the domestic economy in Japan could not recover from the "lost decade" slump. The long-term recession of the domestic economy lasted more than 20 years, and Japanese enterprises had to find ways to survive in

serious economic competition. This increased anxiety concerning domestic human resources under the Japanese education system.

In 2011, the Council on Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development was established directly under the Prime Minister and the Cabinet (Yonezawa, 2014). The Great East Japan Earthquake occurred on March 11th, 2011, and the Council's report which was released on June 4th, 2012 expressed serious concern on the future of Japan as follows;

After having achieved "economic prosperity" by 1980, the frontier spirit has been lost, and advanced technology or the existence of domestic market may cause "Galapagos Syndrome" of Japan.

Under current situation, qualified personnel who should be the motive power of economic growth medium-to long-term perspective will run out. Japan will miss an opportunity for its revitalization, and gradually withdraw in the rapid change of the globalization era with the gain in power by BRICs or VISTA.⁵

Reflecting the growing impatience of industries, the Council for the Implementation of Education Rebuilding (CIER) compiled renovation plans for English education in its third proposal in 2013. This included utilizing standardized proficiency measures for university entrance examinations, shifting down the age at which children start to learn English (from grade 5 to grade 3), and teaching English in English at junior high schools. The New Course of Study was announced in March 2017, and transition measures began in 2018.

Regarding college entrance examinations, the need to test four skills (reading, listening,

writing, and speaking) was discussed for many years, and finally on July 13th, 2017, MEXT announced the policy to implement a new "joint testing" to replace the National Center Test for University Admissions. The National Center for University Entrance Examinations will no longer give a standardized English test, and alternatively, examinees would take accreditation tests, such as TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, etc., and the Center would provide each examinee's test score and his/her corresponding CEFR⁶ grade for the universities upon request (Haebara, 2018).

Thus, many changes have occurred, and Torikai (2018) terms all of these events as "chronic reform syndrome (p.26)".

2. Current Condition of English Education in Japan

How is the current condition of English education in Japan? For example, what is the percentage of students who achieved the level MEXT indicated? English proficiency of the students in Japan is expected to be equivalent to, or over, grade 3 in Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) (equivalent to A1 level in CEFR) at the end of the 9th grade, and grade pre-2nd (equivalent to A2 level in CEFR) at the end of the 12th grade. According to a survey by MEXT in 2017⁷, 40.7% of grade 9 students and 39.3% of grade 12 students are at this level. These achievement levels have increased incrementally, but still by less than 50%.

Students, parents, and teachers have been struggling because of the difficult conditions, (e.g., limited teaching/learning hours, human resources, financial support, etc.). In addition, although the importance of being able to use

English is widely understood, the reality is that English is a foreign language, not the second language in Japan, and children rarely find places to use English in their daily lives. Parents, who were not satisfied with the Japanese education system, started to seek alternative learning opportunities for their children. Therefore, commercial English schools or semi-immersion schools increased in number to receive these children. According to Nunan (2003), “the fortunate students whose parents can afford it will receive supplementary instruction in private, after-school classes” (p.608).

At an elementary school where Ukita once worked⁸, the number of enrollees from international pre-schools or English-immersion pre-schools rose saliently, and the percentage has now reached almost 20%. Ukita also worked at an International Baccalaureate (IB) school⁹ in 2017, where almost 40 students per grade are IB diploma candidates. Many of those students aspire for college education abroad.

These phenomena could be “side-effects” of the strategy or policies of the government itself. CIER advocated that the number of IB schools in Japan ideally should be 200 by 2018. However, it has currently led to the creation of only 47 schools¹⁰. An IB school was established in Karuizawa in 2014, and it became the first United World College in Japan in 2016¹¹. The Hiroshima Prefecture intends to open a boarding IB school in April 2019¹².

Not only at IB schools but at some prestigious academic high schools, there are students who enroll in schools abroad, as referred to by world university rankings such

as the one by Times Higher Education.

Ryugaku Fellowship¹³, an association for the enhancement of studying abroad, whose main establishing members were alumni and teachers of Nada Junior and Senior High School, one of the most prestigious schools in Japan, is actively encouraging Japanese students to aspire for studies at Harvard, MIT, Stanford and other prestigious schools. Their slogan is “what I want to study is overseas.”

Losing young people who seek education elsewhere, due to insufficient attraction of the Japanese education system, could become a serious problem in the future.

3. English Education from 2020

(1) English at Elementary Schools (EES)

Regarding EES, Japan was rather a “slow starter” among East-Asian countries, and BEH (2007) suggests, because of Taiwan’s experience, that three things should be contemplated when Japan would start EES; (1) who teaches, (2) what is necessary for teachers’ training, and (3) what should be taught. Over a decade after this suggestion, teacher shortage is a serious problem at many schools in Japan.

After EES started at public schools in 2008, homeroom teachers have taught English, with Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) by the JET program, or some proficient local English speakers. More than 5,000 ALTs are now working in Japan³. However, this is insufficient as the number of the elementary schools reaches 20,000, along with 10,000 junior high schools and 5,000 senior high schools¹⁴.

According to Nunan (2003), the JET program costs are extremely high, and similar to the NET (Native-speaking English Teacher)

Scheme in Hong Kong, it has “had mixed success” (p.608). Butler (2007b) examined if native speakers (NSs) are ideal in EES, and found that teachers with lower English proficiency tended to support the idea that “English is best taught by NSs at the elementary school level” (p.26). Nunan (2003) suspected such a notion that only proficient English teachers (native or native-like speakers) with enough training are worthy of investment (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow, 2000), and suggested that “technology and rich, input-based programs” (p.608) would support teachers with lower proficiency. He also argues the necessity of an appropriate pedagogy for teaching younger learners.

Fifteen years after Nunan’s insight, English-speaking robots with Artificial Intelligence (AI) were introduced by NHK news on September 26th, 2018¹⁵. Teachers have previously used CD players or videos in class; therefore, it is no surprise that these devices are being replaced by more advanced technologies. In fact, one AI robot costs around ¥100,000, far less expensive than hiring a human teacher. Despite the educational advantages of AI, they are best used in collaboration with human teachers, and therefore, more teachers are needed.

(2) Teaching English in English

The current Course of Study from 2011 requires that Oral Communication at senior high schools should be taught in English. According to a survey by MEXT⁷, the percentage of Oral Communication classes, where more than half of the teachers’ utterance is English, was 42%, and teaching English in English becomes difficult when teaching complex content.

Torikai (2018) points out five problems concerning teaching only in English. Firstly, teachers’ attention is primarily on their own speaking in English, rather than on course material. Secondly, students may not understand fully, and consequently lose confidence. Thirdly, the content tends to be shallow, which leads to students having lower intellectual curiosity. Fourthly, it becomes difficult for students to notice the wonder or profoundness of the language because they have no opportunities to analyze English from a linguistic perspective. Lastly, students will lose opportunities to think about the role of English as a tool for communication.

There could be an argument made that teachers with higher levels of English proficiency may decrease these worries, but the fact is that teachers best respond to the government’s expectation; the percentage of teachers at senior high schools whose English levels are equivalent to, or over, CEFR B2 level, as indicated by the government⁴, is 65%, and this is much higher than any other figure in the aforementioned survey by MEXT⁷.

(3) Reform of Entrance Examinations

Educational reform is not only for primary or secondary education, but also for higher education, but universities in Japan are rather reluctant to open their gates wider to domestic students whose academic histories are unconventional. One example is the examinations for IB students in Japan. Many universities created new admission processes including ones for the IB-diploma candidates. However, there were many problems due to insufficient understanding of IB (e.g., the conflicting

schedules of IB-diploma examinations and university interview tests, or unfeasible combinations of required courses). The reform of the relation between secondary and higher education is one of the focuses of the current argument, and changes on one side should be relevant to the other side.

Current educational reform in primary and secondary education is said to be different from the former ones, in that it includes entrance examination reform. However, the reality is not so simple. The detail of English examination reform is already mentioned in this article, but there are many complicated issues concerning this.

At the moment, eight different accreditation tests (e.g., TOEFL, TOEIC, GTEC, etc.) will be used for university admissions¹⁶. Abe (2017) argues their appropriateness, pointing that, for example, TOEIC is apparently for the business field, mentioning its slogan, "Give Your Organization a Competitive Edge¹⁷". Torikai (2018) argues that TOEFL is used for admissions to higher education in English-speaking countries; it takes more than 4.5 hours and costs around ¥25,000. Hato (2018) points out crucial differences between TOEFL-iBT and GTEC. The former requires examinees to listen to a 2-minute college-level lecture, and to summarize it orally in English. GTEC, on the other hand, gives some key words and asks the examinees to answer a daily question such as "What are you doing this Saturday?" within 15 seconds.

One of the reasons why the government is urged to reform entrance examinations is the need to improve speaking abilities of Japanese students. However, it is questionable if the role

of speaking is equally understood by those who are involved in this movement, in regard to its function, social roles, or the context in which it is situated.

Halliday (1994) discusses the role of spoken language in education. He argues that written language is the main focus, and "[s]poken language in its natural form, spontaneous and unselfconscious, was not taken seriously as a medium of learning" (p.51). This sounds reasonable, as children's English education at school begins with reading and writing, literature (e.g., story time, reading aloud, intensive reading, or interpretation), and composition. Even when the focus of the lessons is spoken activities (e.g., discussion, debating, public speech, presentation, etc.), the language used in these activities is written for speaking, namely prepared spoken language. McCarthy and Carter (1995) point out that grammar of written language is prioritized in foreign language education, and learners speak "like a book" (p.207).

One of the differences between spoken and written language is "lexical density" defined by Halliday (1994) as "the proportion of lexical items (content words) to the total discourse" (p.56), and it tends to be sparse in speaking and abundant in writing. Ukita (2009) examined the lexical density of students' written and spoken discourse. She found that the lexical density of the *written* discourse by a student recently coming back from a one-year study-abroad program was significantly sparse in contrast to *spoken* ones by other students, which suggests that exposure to natural spoken English brought strong spoken language features to the student's written mode. Differentiating

spoken and written mode in foreign language is difficult without instructional intervention, nevertheless we have fairly good and natural commands on them in our native languages. McCarthy and Carter (1995) advocate that understanding the difference between spoken and written language facilitates learners' flexible operation of the target language.

The role of English as a *Lingua Franca* also complicates this issue. Are the examinees tested by their phonological accuracy, and if so, what is correct, and who judges that? In the literature on teaching English phonology as a *Lingua Franca*, published at the turn of the 20th century by Jenkins (2000), a perceptive discussion is given concerning the role of Native Speakers (NSs) in the education of English as an International Language (EIL). She advocated that “[c]orrectness can no longer be assessed in relation to ‘NS’ phonological norms” (p.212), and “optimum pronunciation model for EIL are those of fluent bilingual speakers of English” (P226), as this model incorporates intelligibility in EIL settings, in contrast to the so-called L1 model from the inner circle (Kachru, 2006). In addition, she asserts that from a sociolinguistic point of view, the percentage of speakers, of pure Received Pronunciation (RP), is less than 3 % of British people, and that of the General American (GA) accent is about 33% of the total population of the USA and Canada, which indicates the existing variation of L1 English.

Inclusion of a speaking test in university entrance examinations gives rise to intrinsic complexity. Examinees will be assessed by various types of measures, which can cause a feeling of anxiety about unfairness and

inconsistency in selective examinations. In addition, the question remains as to whether these different types of tests fit the admission policies of each university. The usage of various types of tests perplexes examinees as well as teachers at secondary schools.

3. Globalization and Foreign Language Education

Now, we should think about our future; where to go? We may see many AI robots in classrooms, and high school students are already studying hard to take TOEFL or TOEIC examinations, as the reform will start in three years. These may solve the problems to some extent, but teachers and learners will likely become too busy studying a new set of examinations, which will not likely ensure “well-being, feeling of contentment, or spiritual prosperity⁵”. Foreign language education should not be used only as a way to win against the global competition; it should lead to a better future. From this perspective, the final part focuses on globalization and education.

(1) English as a Tool

As aforementioned, the Japanese government or enterprises raise their crisis awareness concerning fostering global human resources, and they are eager to strengthen competitiveness through the reform of education. In 2012, the Council on Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development defined “global human resources” by three aspects: (1) linguistic and communication skills, (2) self-direction and positiveness: a confident mindset, a spirit of cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission, and (3) an ability to

understand other cultures and sense of one's identity as a Japanese person⁵.

The Council indicated detailed levels of linguistic communication skills such as level 1: skills for traveling abroad, level 2: skills for everyday conversation, level 3: skills for business conversation or paperwork, level 4: skills for bilateral negotiation, and level 5: skills for multilateral negotiations. According to the Council, Japan has an increasing number of people acquiring up to level 3, and at the moment continuous cultivation of levels 4 and 5 is awaited (Yonezawa, 2012). However, these levels cannot be attained without the enhancement of the abilities shown as factors (2) and (3). Torikai (2018) argues that improvement in linguistic or communication skills remain impractical if these skills are regarded only as tools. Fischer (2012) asserts that language learning is "not only a means to improve communication, but more importantly, a key avenue to promoting global understanding" (p.23).

(2) From Non-Native Language Education to Cosmopolitan Education¹⁸

It is not disputed the important roles of foreign language education in political or economic domains. However, language education also plays a key role in nurturing a child's constructive and creative view on life. Hinton (2012) takes a line from a poem by Saul Williams, a Haitian-American contemporary poet, and argues that his poetry shows his feelings of being torn apart¹⁹. She states that people are tangibly interconnected on a global level, and education should address the changing needs of the society. According to her, what is desired for

school education is to "nurture a cosmopolitan ethic of care" (P.410).

Why does foreign language education play such a crucial role in the globalized world? "Fish is Fish" (Lionni, 1970) is introduced in literature by the National Research Council (2000). A fish was eager to know the world on land. His tadpole friend grew into a frog and went outside the water. The fish heard the frog's story about birds, a cow, and a human family, but the fish could only understand these creatures as fish-like: a fish with wings or a fish family in colorful clothes. Later in this tale, the fish jumped out of the water, but soon he got into a crisis as he could not breath without water, and the frog saved him.

In the aforementioned literature, "Fish is Fish" shows us an example of the role that pre-existing knowledge plays in learning, and teachers must pay careful attention to learners' interpretation being affected. In addition, the latter part is in line with della Chiesa (2012); "until taken out of it, a fish does not know what water is" (p.440). This could be well applied to language as Goethe said, "those who do not know other languages know nothing of their own"¹⁸ (cited in della Chiesa, 2012, p.440). Learning foreign languages contributes to raising a child's self-understanding and awareness of his/her own history, culture and language.

It also plays a crucial role in facilitating children's understanding of others. The world today has witnessed nationalism as being beneficial for only one's nation or people. However, according to della Chiesa (2012), François Mitterrand, the 21st president of France, said that "nationalism is war" (p. 450), and della Chiesa (2010) suspects that some

politicians regard openness to different cultures and languages as opposing to so-called nationalism, and they are reluctant to open their gates.

Foreign language education should raise “cross-cultural awareness and understanding [of children, leading to] tolerance (and beyond, respect, if not more) toward others, [and] certainly contribute to the development of empathy, [which is similar to ethics in that] they are both concerned with how we feel about and treat others” (della Chiesa, 2012, p.455). Thus, foreign language education should always be thought about from the viewpoint of nurturing ethics relevant to the globalized world. To date, competitiveness-oriented foreign language education, viewing English as just a tool, is far away from what has been desired.

The fact is that children are ready to be members of the global community, because “[their] brains are wired to connect” (Lieberman, 2013). Smaller and weaker human beings have evolved in a way such that they can cope with bigger and stronger creatures by being social, i.e., cooperativeness and collaboration²⁰. This could be explained in the biological or neuroscientific discourse as follows (Hinton and Fischer, 2010);

Children and adolescents learn in a social context, and the human brain is primed for social interaction. The brain is tuned to experience empathy, which intimately connects us to others’ experiences (p.126).

Conclusion

The slogan of international exchange and intercultural understanding at an elementary school where Ukita worked from 2010 to 2015⁸

is “let’s make friends with people all over the world.” For example, it invites students studying at an affiliate university²¹ for a week every summer. They come from more than 80 countries or regions, and introduce one another to the various languages, traditional cultures, clothing, food, music, and dancing of their own countries. This event is called “World Week,” and in the farewell party, it is hard for children to keep from crying. Grade 5 and 6 students can join a study-abroad program, and study at a boarding school in Australia for 10 weeks. They stay at its dormitory, and study with Australian students and international students from neighboring countries. This program gives the participants confidence and brings them substantial changes both physically and mentally. Sending small children abroad for such a long time entails risks, but it is necessary for young children to know that wherever they go, there are friends who share tears, hopes and dreams with them.

As shown in “the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development²²”, co-prosperity and coexistence on a global scale is what we welcome most. It is sincerely desired that the new Course of Study from 2020 will bring our children happiness. Children are our future.

Notes

- 1 Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) painted one of his most famous works titled “Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?” in Tahiti. A local woman once said to Ukita that she could not use Tahitian language at school when she was young.
2. Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages

3. <http://jetprogramme.org/en/history/>
4. <https://jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/730-what-2003-mext-action-plan-proposes-teachers-english>
5. <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/singi/global/1206011matome.pdf>
6. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
7. http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kokusai/gaikokugo/1403468.htm
8. <http://en.ritsumei.ac.jp/primary/>
9. http://www.ujc.ritsumei.ac.jp/ujc_e/
10. http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kokusai/ib/
11. <https://uwcisak.jp/>
12. <http://www.higa-s.jp/>
13. <http://ryu-fellow.org/>
14. http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/chousa01/kihon/kekka/k_detail/1388914.htm
15. <https://www.nhk.or.jp/ohayou/biz/20180926/index.html>
16. <http://4skills.jp/>
17. <https://www.ets.org/toEIC/organizations>
18. According to Hinton (2012), the word “cosmopolitanism” originates in “the Greek words for ‘citizen’ and ‘cosmos,’ and reflects the philosophical idea that all humans are part of a shared global society” (p.410).
19. “I must remember and gather the scattered continents of a self once whole…they plant flags and boundary my destiny… I need a passport just to simply reach the rest of me”
Saul Williams (cited in Hinton, 2012)
20. http://www.ritalabo.jp/mg/wpcontent/uploads/2016/09/RitaLabo.vol_3.pdf
http://www.ritalabo.jp/mg/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/RITA%EF%BC%93号_参考文献リスト.pdf
21. <http://en.apu.ac.jp/home/>
22. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transforinourworld>

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