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Issues in Discourse on the Decline in Japanese Students' English Language Ability: A Journal Exploration

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Abstract

This study examines issues revealed in discourse that points out that Japanese students' English language ability has been declining. To investigate this, this study analyzes 11 articles between 1999 and 2019 in one journal, *The English Teachers' Magazine* (英語教育), which featured the decline in Japanese students' English language ability. The findings of this study present three types of issues according to their character: 1) issues revealed in the feature articles as a whole, 2) issues revealed in some feature articles, and 3) empirically based issues in the articles that lack sufficient explanation. This study also explores the background of the discourse's spread, such as the changes in values and policies associated with English language education.

Keywords: foreign language education / English language education / English language ability / academic ability / educational discourse

1. Introduction

This study examines issues exposed by the discourse on the declining English language skills of Japanese students. It also explores the background in the spread of the discourse regarding the decline. As evidence, this study examines articles from a journal on English language education.

There has been widespread discussion regarding the decline in Japanese students' scholastic performance (e.g., Ichikawa, 2002; Kaminaga, 2008; Kodama, 2013; Okabe, Tose, & Nishimura, 1999). In the field of English language education, it has been often pointed out that Japanese students' language ability has recently been declining. Furthermore, when students' English language ability is discussed, most of the recent discourse, to the best of my knowledge, points to or implies a decline in ability. This decline in proficiency seems to be almost an indubitable fact. However, researchers should not rush to generalize about the deteriorating English language skills of Japanese students and Japanese people more generally. The data suitable for generalizing Japanese students' English language abilities are insufficient; in fact, no Japanese survey has properly sampled participants on a national basis, measuring and recording their abilities over time (Watanabe, 2011).

In addition, the method of assessing "English language ability" is not fixed, and it changes with time. This is because education content is determined based on social conditions or necessities in each time period (see Tanaka, 1998, pp. 17–39; 2005).

Despite these difficulties, English language ability is still discussed, and some of the discussions assume that the decline in language ability is almost an unquestionable fact in Japanese English language education circles. Of course, it is quite possible to argue that Japanese English language standard has declined, depending on the definition of “English language ability.” However, there are some problematic arguments in the claim the details of which will be clarified in this paper.

Thus, our concern is to clarify issues revealed in discourse that points to the decline in students’ English language expertise and consider the background in the spread of the discourse. What are the advantages of addressing educational discourse related to a decline in English language ability? This discourse can have a significant societal influence, as it can affect education policies (see Ichikawa, 2002). With regard to English language education in Japan, some researchers associate the decline with the English language education policy. Watanabe (2011, p. 9) notes that it was in the pre-war period that the decline in English language ability was recognized, and it even resulted in arguments for the abolition of English language education. Recently, the decline in Japanese English language ability has been referred to as grounds to criticize recent English language education policy in Japan (e.g., Abe, 2017; Torikai, 2018).

Concerning the significance of educational discourse study, Imazu (2010, p. 8) indicates that studying the social, political, and historical backgrounds of the discourse and identifying problems, such as vagueness revealed in the discourse, are significant for future educational studies. Moreover, understanding the issues is important to consider what future English language education should be like.

2. Method

To collect the discourse data related to declining English language ability, this study analyzed the discourse found in *The English Teachers’ Magazine* (英語教育) published by TAISHUKAN Publishing (大修館書店). As the objective is to analyze the discourse, the journal is considered suitable as it has covered the English educational situation of Japan and published educational discourse by researchers and professionals concerned with English language education in the post-war period from 1952 to the present day. Moreover, in 1999, the journal featured articles on the decline of English language ability, demonstrating interest in the issue of Japanese students’ English language proficiency and its transition.

To abstract the journal discourse, the author first reviewed all tables of contents from 1952 (April issue) through 2021 (March issue), and then identified all articles for analysis that seemed relevant. These were then perused to identify articles to analyze. Twenty-six articles¹¹ between 1955 and 2019

¹¹ 新制大学の語学力の問題 (1955, March issue) / 週3で中学英語は学力アップ? (1986, May issue) / 英語を「読む」技術 日本人の英語読解能力: 大学生の実態から (1994, September issue) / 日本の学生の英語力に明るい未来はあ

were found relevant to this study. Seven feature articles on the decline in Japanese students' English language ability and four that pointed to its decline and included problematic discourse were then identified for a total of 11 articles extracted for analysis. This study adopts the approach of an educational discourse study (e.g., Imazu & Hida, 2010; Hirota, 2001) and describes the contents of each article and its issues.

3. Results

This study examined 11 items in total: seven feature articles on the decline in English language ability in 1999 (Amenomiya, 1999; Kōga, 1999; Miyahara & Yamamoto, 1999; Okada, 1999; Okihara, 1999; Takahashi, 1999; Toyota, 1999)² and four other articles between 2006 and 2019 that highlight the decline but also include issues over the arguments made (Erikawa, 2006, 2019; Ono, 2006; Saida, 2014b).

The findings of this study show issues with the 11 articles analyzed; the following themes collect three types of problems according to their characteristics: 1) issues revealed in the seven feature articles as a whole, 2) issues revealed in two feature articles, and 3) issues revealed in four empirically based articles that lack sufficient explanation. In presenting the findings of the second and third categories, namely, issues revealed in individual articles, the Results section shows 1) discourse regarding the decline in Japanese students' English language ability, 2) ground(s) for the decline, and 3) circumstance(s) underlying the decline before clarifying issues with each article. This three-point description is designed to help readers understand the issues fully.

るか: 'can't do society' の会話に対応できる力を (1999, September issue) / 何が「思考能力」を奪ったか: 一般学力の低下を考える (1999, September issue) / 英語力の低下と文法力: 文法のおもしろさを学生に知ってもらうために (1999, September issue) / 「実践的コミュニケーション」の展望 (1999, September issue) / 「大学生の英語力」とは何か: 必修英語の目的を考える (1999, September issue) / 受験勉強でつく力・つかない力 (1999, September issue) / 英語学力の国際比較: 中・韓両国の英語教育が教えてくれるもの (1999, September issue) / 追跡: 研究開発学校で英語に接した児童のその後の英語能力 (2001, extra issue) / 「学力低下」 vs. 「総合的な学習」 vs. 「コミュニケーション」 (2005, May issue) / 大学英語教師のアカウントビリティって (2005, May issue) / 基礎英語力低下の現状と改善策 (上): 中・高・大学生の英語力はなぜ下がったか (2006, January issue) / 基礎英語力低下の現状と改善策 (下): e-learning 学習の検証実験と英語教育への提言 (2006, February issue) / コミュニケーション重視と学力低下 (2006, May issue) / 学力と因果関係 (2007, February issue) / 日本の中学生、高校生の英語力調査 (2007, June issue) / 英語教育における評価: これまでの10年とこれからの10年 (2007, October issue) / 大学生の英語学習意識構造について (上): 学力の中間層が危ない (2010, January issue) / 大学生の英語学習意識構造について (下): 自律した学習者を育成するために (2010, February issue) / 小学校から英語を始めた生徒の中学以降の英語力を調べたい (2010, May issue) / 英語教育キーワード2000年版 学力低下 (2000, October issue) / 生徒の「英語で表現する力」は今: 現状と改善策 (2012, June issue) / 英語力はどう測るか: テストの経年比較からわかること (2014, January issue) / グローバル化に揺れた平成の英語教育 (2019, May issue)

² The journal featured the decline in English language ability with seven articles in 1999: *Feature articles: To stop the decline in English language ability: Is there a bright future for Japanese students' English language ability?* (translated by the author) ([特集] 英語学力の低下に歯止めを: 日本の学生の英語力に明るい未来はあるか).

3.1. Issue revealed in the feature articles as a whole

As mentioned, the journal featured a decline in English language ability in 1999, with seven feature articles on this topic (Amenomiya, 1999; Kōga, 1999; Miyahara & Yamamoto, 1999; Okada, 1999; Okihara, 1999; Takahashi, 1999; Toyota, 1999).

Most of these do not directly deal with the decline in English language ability in its entirety. This may be inferred from the articles' titles below (all titles translated by the author).

- What has robbed students of the ability to think? Considering the decline in general academic ability (Amenomiya, 1999)
- The ability to gain and not gain from studying for entrance examinations (Kōga, 1999)
- International comparisons of English language abilities: What China and South Korea tell us (Miyahara & Yamamoto, 1999)
- The decline in English language ability and grammatical knowledge: Getting students to know the fun of grammar (Okada, 1999)
- What are university students' English language abilities? Considering the purpose of compulsory English language subjects (Okihara, 1999)
- Perspectives on practical communication (Takahashi, 1999)
- Is there a bright future for Japanese students' English language abilities? The ability to handle "can't do society" conversations (Toyota, 1999)

Indeed, Amenomiya (1999), Okada (1999), and Toyota (1999) refer to the transition of Japanese students' English language ability, but only Amenomiya (1999) and Okada (1999) clearly point to the decline in English language skills and English grammatical knowledge, respectively. Accordingly, five of the seven articles, which should address the decline in English language ability in a feature article, do not deal with the topic comprehensively. This may be a problem with the editor(s) of the journal, but in any case, the feature articles could lead to a vague understanding that Japanese students' English language ability has been declining, and this perception could spread among persons concerned with English language education in Japan, despite the fact that most of the feature articles do not explicitly point out the decline.

3.2. Issues revealed in the two feature articles

3.2.1. Article 1: Amenomiya (1999)

3.2.1.1 Discourse regarding the decline in English language ability

Amenomiya (1999) states that “it can be said that English ability of university students is getting worse” (p. 11, author’s translation).

3.2.1.2. Ground(s) to point out the decline

Amenomiya (1999) does not show any concrete evidence but points out the decline based on his impressions, although he admits a shortcoming in his arguments:

I have not statistically analyzed the scores of English tests of entrance examinations for a long time, nor have I been in charge of English classes. Therefore, it is inappropriate to assert it [the decline in English ability of students], but I cannot help thinking so. (p. 11, author’s translation)

3.2.1.3. Circumstance(s) behind the decline

Amenomiya (1999, p. 12) mentions that the abilities in not only English, but also other subjects have declined, which means a decline in the “ability to think.” According to Amenomiya (1999), this is caused by exposure to TV.

3.2.1.4. Issue revealed in the discourse

The issue is that the discourse is based only on personal opinions and impressions, although the author admits the inappropriateness of this “evidence.”

3.2.2. Article 2: Okada (1999)

3.2.2.1 Discourse regarding the decline in English language ability

Okada (1999) states (all translations by the author):

- “It has recently been said that the academic ability of students is declining.” (p. 17)
- “There is a concern that English language ability and grammatical knowledge of students supporting it has declined.” (p. 17)
- “I feel the decline in students’ English grammar knowledge mainly when I feel the decline in their ability to read and write English.” (p. 18)

3.2.2.2. Ground(s) to point out the decline

As evidence, Okada (1999, p. 18) mentions that in recent years the amount of teaching material content used in universities has decreased, and that some universities need to prepare special English

lessons for English literature majors to write their graduation theses in English.

3.2.2.3. Circumstance(s) behind the decline

Okada (1999) points out two reasons for the decline:

- 1) A change in education policy: The new education guidelines for junior high school were announced in 1977; the junior high school grammar curriculum was altered or cut back.
- 2) A change in teaching methods: The communicative approach became popular in the 1970s.

3.2.2.4. Issue revealed in the discourse

As in Amenomiya (1999), the discourse is not based on clear evidence indicating the transition of Japanese students' English language ability, but only on personal experiences and impressions. This kind of discourse is inappropriate because biased data cannot be used to generalize the decline in English language ability.

3.3. Issues revealed in the four empirically based articles that lack sufficient explanation

As stated above, this study found four articles based on empirical studies that lack sufficient explanation. This means that although the discussion is based on empirical studies, the discourse does not provide enough information about the basis for referring to it.

3.3.1. Article 3: Ono (2006)

3.3.1.1. Discourse regarding the decline in English language ability

Ono (2006) states that "with regard to English language ability that can be measured via testing, the English language ability of Japanese people as a whole is seriously declining" (p. 63, author's translation).

3.3.1.2. Ground(s) to point out the decline

Ono (2006) provides some test results and studies to show Japanese students' English language skills. As reasons for the decline in ability, Ono (2006) introduces Saida (2003) and Yoshimura et al. (2005). Ono (2006, p. 65) explains that Saida (2003) used the test items of basic skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and listening comprehension in annual examinations that were conducted in a prefecture and that indicated a decline in the students' English language ability. Ono (2006) states that Yoshimura et al. (2005) used English tests provided by the National Center Test for University Admissions, analyzed the results using the same method as Saida (2003), and identified a decline in English language ability after 1997.

3.3.1.3. Circumstance(s) behind the decline

Ono (2006, p. 63) points out the English language education policy focused on communication skills in recent years, and, thereby, infers the reasons for the decline as follows:

- Hours of English lessons in junior high schools decreased.
- The conventional ways of teaching English vocabulary and grammar via writing have changed to an emphasis on communication.

3.3.1.4. Issue revealed in the discourse

Ono (2006) cites Yoshimura et al. (2005) as a basis for claiming the decline in Japanese students' English language ability and states that these authors used English tests of the National Center Test for University Admissions; the results were analyzed using the same method as Saida (2003), and showed a decline in English language ability since 1997. However, Ono (2006) does not mention that Yoshimura et al. (2005) used only Part 2 of the tests, which mainly measures vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Moreover, although Yoshimura et al. (2005, p. 57) advised researchers not to jump to the easy conclusion that student academic ability had declined based on the results of their study, Ono (2006) does avoid this matter. Similarly, Saida (2003) is cited without sufficient explanation. Saida (2003, p. 21) mentions that the study does not address the whole ability to communicate, which is the aim of the education guidelines, and points out the need for other studies to comprehend the transition of ability that Saida (2003) does not address. In this respect, Ono (2006) does not fully explain Saida's (2003) notes.

3.3.2. Article 4: Erikawa (2006)

3.3.2.1. Discourse regarding the decline in English language ability

Erikawa (2006) states that "the English language ability does not cease to decline" (p. 41, author's translation).

3.3.2.2. Ground(s) to point out the decline

Erikawa (2006), like Ono (2006), also refers to Saida (2003) and Yoshimura et al. (2005) as evidence for the decline.

3.3.2.3. Circumstance(s) behind the decline

Regarding the circumstances for the decline, Erikawa (2006, p. 41) states that the decline in Japanese English language dexterity will require a review of the focus on communication in the English language education policy that the education guidelines have promoted since the 1990s, although he notes that a causal relation between education policy and the decline in English language ability has

not been proven completely.

3.3.2.4. Issue revealed in the discourse

As with Ono (2006), Erikawa (2006) does not fully explain the position of Saida (2003) and Yoshimura et al. (2005).

3.3.3. Article 5: Saida (2014b)

3.3.3.1. Discourse regarding the decline in English language ability

Saida (2014b, p. 17) introduces studies that examine the transition of students' English language ability in a prefecture using a post hoc equation method. Using the results of these studies, she points out that under the revised education guidelines (1989), students' basic English skills at the time of entering high school declined year after year.

3.3.3.2. Ground(s) to point out the decline

Saida's reasoning (2014b) refers to Saida (2003), Saida and Hattori (2008), Yoshimura et al. (2005), and Kumagai et al. (2007).³ Saida (2014b, p. 17) explains the method of Saida (2003) and Saida and Hattori (2008), and states that the results indicate that basic English language ability declined year by year when the participants entered high school under the revised 1989 education guidelines. Saida (2014b, p. 18) states that the findings of Yoshimura et al. (2005) and Kumagai et al. (2007) show that after the 1989 education guidelines were enforced, there was a sizeable decline in the average scores of English tests⁴ by high school graduation.

3.3.3.3. Circumstance(s) behind the decline

Saida (2014b) does not clearly identify circumstances but implies that English language education under the revised 1989 guidelines has influenced students' English language ability. Saida (2014b, p. 18) also argues that English language education should be reviewed if it negatively affects students' English language ability.

3.3.3.4. Issue revealed in the discourse

Saida (2014b, p. 18) states that the findings of Yoshimura et al. (2005) and Kumagai et al. (2007) show that after the 1989 guidelines were enforced, there was a large decline in the average English

³ There is no reference list in Saida (2014b), but in her discussion, the author provides in-text citations (authors and publication dates) when referring to the work of Saida (2003), Saida and Hattori (2008), Yoshimura et al. (2005), and Kumagai et al. (2007).

⁴ "The average scores of English tests" is "英語スコア平均" in Saida's original Japanese.

test scores by high school graduation. However, Kumagai et al. (2007) point out that the results of this study do not indicate such a decline. Therefore, it might be better for Saida (2014b) to explain Kumagai et al. (2007) more explicitly.

3.3.4. Article 6: Erikawa (2019)

3.3.4.1. Discourse regarding the decline in English language ability

Erikawa (2019) points out that:

According to Saida (2014a), the English language ability measured in entrance examinations to high school declined almost continuously for 14 years since 1995, after the educational policy was shifted to one emphasizing communication [under the revised 1989 guidelines], thereby resulting in a 7.4-point drop in total in the values calculated in deviation scores. (p. 39, author's translation)

3.3.4.2. Ground(s) to point out the decline

As evidence, Erikawa (2019) refers to Saida (2014a).

3.3.4.3. Circumstance(s) behind the decline

Erikawa (2019) points to the education policy in the *Heisei* era (1989–2019) to emphasize communication skills and implies the possibility that it has negatively affected students' English language ability.

3.3.4.4. Issue revealed in the discourse

First, although it seems merely Erikawa's misunderstanding, Saida (2014a) does not analyze the data of high school entrance examinations. Moreover, as with Ono (2006), Erikawa (2019) does not sufficiently explain the basis for referring to it. Saida (2014a, p. 102) mentions that the results should not be overgeneralized because the representativeness of the data is limited, but Erikawa (2019) does not mention this.

4. Discussion

As described above, there are issues in the discourse regarding the decline in Japanese students' English language ability in some of the journal's articles. Some of the feature articles in 1999 do not deal with the decline but feature it, potentially contributing to a poorly grounded belief that the English language abilities of Japanese students have declined; this perception may have spread in English language education circles. The present paper has also identified a discourse based on personal experiences and impressions.

In addition, this study has investigated discourse based on empirical studies since the 2000s, and many of the articles introduce particular studies based on item response theory, such as Saida (2003, 2014b) and Yoshimura et al. (2005), while discussing the decline in Japanese students' English language ability. However, the arguments lack sufficient explanation in reference to the studies.⁵

Next, this section discusses the background of the discourse production issues concerning Japanese students' English language ability, although it should be noted that this discussion is merely one interpretation of this study's findings. One inference is that personal experiences and impressions rather than empirical studies or objective data promoted the discourse that points to the decline in English language ability. As evidence, it can be said that the changes in educational policy and teaching methods, at least partially, promoted the discourse (see Okada, 1999).

It can also be said that a sense of crisis over changed values—that is, greater societal attention on communication/speaking skills rather than grammar/writing skills—or policy associated with English language education in Japan has resulted in empirical studies, such as Saida (2003, 2014b) and Yoshimura et al. (2005), and the discourse that refers to these studies. As the Results indicate, articles based on empirical research since the 2000s (i.e., Erikawa, 2006, 2019; Ono, 2006; Saida, 2014b) are related to changes in these values or English language education policy. Remember, for instance, that English language education policy has focused on communication skills in recent years (Ono, 2006, p. 63) and this suggests that the reasons for the decline in ability are reduced hours of English lessons and the introduction of teaching methods based on the communicative approach.

Finally, it is important to review the fundamental problem that likely generated the problematic discourse discussed here. Importantly, no comprehensive survey has ever investigated the changing English language abilities of students in Japan, as noted in the Introduction. The lack of such a survey may well be one of the reasons for the creation of a discourse based on insufficient evidence. Minimally, it has been difficult to clearly grasp the transitions of English language ability in Japan due to a lack of comprehensive surveys.

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⁵ Kumagai (2008) explains what attention should be paid to interpreting the results of these studies (Kumagai et al., 2007; Saida, 2003; Yoshimura et al., 2005).

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