

Modern Foreign Languages in England : A View from Japan

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Modern Foreign Languages in England -A View from Japan-

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Abstract

Modern foreign languages are taught and learned in primary and secondary education in England. However, how to teach and learn them seems to be unfamiliar and misunderstood sometimes. In this paper, I describe the realities of foreign language learning in England compared with other European Union (EU) countries and Japan. To identify how pupils are learning foreign languages at school, I carried out a survey and found that the subject pupils had good motivations to learn foreign languages. Based upon these data, I discuss how foreign languages are taught and learned in England as well as in Japan. Finally, I suggest that Japanese pupils should have a lot more opportunities to learn foreign languages other than just English.

Key words:

language policy, foreign language learning, language curriculum

0. Introduction

In every country, language learning is necessary for school curricula. In Japan, English has been the most important foreign language for the past ten years or more. In 2002, English will be introduced into primary education as part of global understanding. However, French or German, which was once taught as one of the main foreign languages in tertiary education, has been taught less frequently. Critics point out that Korean and Chinese, which are more familiar to Japanese people culturally and geographically, have not been taught and learned in secondary education. Although it is very important for young people to foster communication skills these days, foreign language learning in Japan has been focused primarily on learning only English.

Japan is still a monolingual society actually. The fact is, however, that more and more people who do not speak Japanese come to live in this country. In the near future Japan will probably be a multi-cultural or multi-lingual society because of globalization and mobilization of people around the world. In Japan, the Japanese language is the official or national language and English is not necessary for people to communicate in daily life, but most people have studied it at school. The purpose of studying English might be ambiguous for many Japanese people from time to time. Many pupils tend to lose their motivation to learn English and drop the subject during their study at secondary school.

What about situations in other countries? In Asia, many countries are now teaching English as the primary foreign language or the second language at school. For instance, Singapore has a policy of bilingualism between English and mother tongues. Many Asian countries, including Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, Korea, and China, consider English as an important language to teach in school

curricula. In Europe, English is already a powerful language for business or in academic fields. The European Union (EU) is playing a big role for English learning diversity, although it apparently respects each country's language and recommends European citizens to learn at least three languages. However, England, which is an originally English-speaking country in Europe, is still considered to be poor at encouraging foreign language learning. Whether this is true or not is one for discussion. Further, what then is the language policy in England? In addition, is English the only language necessary for English people to use when communicating with people from other countries? By comparing foreign language learning in England with English learning in Japan, I will discuss what is happening in teaching and learning foreign languages in England.

In this paper, I will first describe how England promotes its own foreign language policy. Then, I will discuss problems relating to teaching and learning of foreign languages there in comparison with other European countries and Japan. Finally, I will argue the meaning of foreign language learning in England.

1. Current situations of foreign language education in England

Many Japanese people often mistake the United Kingdom (UK) as one country under a single system. The UK is actually comprised of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. These four countries have slightly different and independent systems, although they have somewhat common fundamental ideas and contents in many fields and they have educational linkages with one another. In this paper I will focus on language education in England to make my point clear. By understanding the education system there, we can have a clear idea of the language education situation throughout the UK.

1.1. Modern foreign languages

The subject that pupils take to learn a foreign language in England is known as modern foreign languages (MFLs). Although each school can decide which language(s) they teach in their school, many schools normally teach French, German, and Spanish. It is quite common for many pupils to select one or two among these three languages.

According to the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) (2001), MFLs are not compulsory subjects at the primary level. Schools are free to choose whether they offer foreign language teaching. Recently the government begins to provide encouragement and support for the development of foreign language teaching in primary schools. Some schools aim primarily to promote language awareness rather than the attainment of a particular level of competence in a language. At the secondary level, there is a requirement to teach at least a MFL from age 11 to 16. Although only one foreign language is a statutory requirement, many schools provide teaching in a second foreign language, generally starting at age 12 or 13. In some schools, the additional language is compulsory for all pupils. Alternatively, some schools offer the second foreign language to all or some pupils as an option. A few schools may also offer some pupils the opportunity of learning a third foreign language. These are all matters for the schools to decide. At the post-compulsory level (ages 16 to 19), the study of foreign languages is optional.

MFLs are taught to pupils from primary to post-secondary education. Each pupil has a chance to learn two or three MFLs at school, but many pupils do not usually succeed in learning MFLs. Male

pupils especially tend to fail in learning MFLs. At age 14 many pupils who learn two MFLs tend to learn one MFL because they choose another subject instead of learning MFLs. The government recommends that pupils learn MFLs but there appear to be some problems promoting such a policy in school education in England. However, it is clear that MFLs are now being focused on in England.

1.2. Community languages

From a historical and social standpoint, English is recognized as the official language in England. However, currently in England there are some linguistic minorities including the speakers of community languages such as Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, Panjabi, Chinese and Turkish. Especially in urban areas, such as London and Birmingham, many pupils who speak community languages are learning together with pupils who speak English as their mother tongue. In such cases, English is an additional language for those pupils.

Community languages are considered as part of foreign languages. In the web site of the National Curriculum, the following languages are listed as MFLs: Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Modern Greek, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Gujarati, Irish, Japanese, Modern Hebrew, Persian, Polish, Panjabi, Russian, Scottish Gaelic, Turkish, Urdu, Welsh, and others. Although most languages are not actually taught at school, England officially admits any language to be taught as a MFL. As useless as this may seem, it is nonetheless an important rule, regardless of the fact that it has not been fully utilized. Knowledge of certain community languages can be accredited by the qualification normally taken at the end of compulsory education, the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

England has tried to respect people whose mother tongue is not English. If their languages are different, then their cultures are different as well. Schools which teach such pupils with different backgrounds have to consider both their community cultures and community languages as educational background. Schools have to provide appropriate special education for some pupils who speak English as an additional language.

1.3. History of teaching and learning modern foreign languages

In order to realize that foreign languages including community languages are necessary for mutual understandings in England, it is essential to understand the history of MFL education.

According to the NFER (2001), there has been significant growth since 1960 in the number of pupils learning a language. The spread of comprehensive secondary education throughout England in the 1960's and 1970's, when pupils were no longer selected by ability for entrance to secondary school, resulted in many more pupils having the opportunity to study a foreign language, starting from age 11. This was extended to an entitlement for all pupils when the National Curriculum was introduced in England under the Education Reform Act of 1988. This meant that, for the first time, all secondary schools now had to make provision for all pupils of various abilities to study at least one modern language.

As in other countries, the language curriculum and teaching methods in England have been developed to cultivate pupils' communicative abilities of the target language. This situation is similar to the way English is taught in Japan. In the past, teaching MFLs tended to emphasize grammar and translation, while speaking and listening were neglected. Gradually however, commu-

nication in the target language has become more focused on in teaching and learning in the classroom. The most influential impact was the 1988 teaching reform. Since then MFL teachers have been trying to teach the target language following the guidelines of the National Curriculum. Notwithstanding, there still remain many problems as I refer to them in the following section.

1.4. Modern foreign languages in the National Curriculum

The National Curriculum was established by the Education Reform Act 1988. Its aims are stated as follows:

The National Curriculum sets out a clear, full and statutory entitlement to learning for all pupils. It determines the content of what will be taught, and sets attainment targets for learning. It also determines how performance will be assessed and reported. An effective National Curriculum therefore gives teachers, pupils, parents, employers and their wider community a clear and shared understanding of the skills and knowledge that young people will gain at school. It allows schools to meet the individual learning needs of pupils and to develop a distinctive character and ethos rooted in their local communities. And it provides a framework within which all partners in education can support young people on the road to further learning.

These aims were first criticized by teachers, improved several times, and then gradually understood by them. The National Curriculum seems to be rather stabilized in primary and secondary education for the moment.

As shown in the aims, this curriculum is set out not only for teachers but also for pupils and local people. Not only does the National Curriculum state that teachers and schools are responsible for MFL teaching, but it also specifically suggests the following guidelines as to what pupils should be taught:

- 1) the principles and interrelationship of sounds and writing in the target language;
- 2) the grammar of the target language and how to apply it;
- 3) how to express themselves using a range of vocabulary and structures;
- 4) how to listen carefully for gist and detail;
- 5) correct pronunciation and intonation;
- 6) how to ask and answer questions;
- 7) how to initiate and develop conversations;
- 8) how to vary the target language to suit context, audience and purpose;
- 9) how to adapt language they already know for different contexts;
- 10) strategies for dealing with the unpredictable;
- 11) techniques for skimming and for scanning written texts for information, including those from ICT-based sources;
(*ICT means Information Communication Technology)
- 12) how to summarize and report the main points of spoken or written texts, using notes where appropriate;
- 13) how to redraft their writing to improve its accuracy and presentation, including the use of ICT.
- 14) techniques for memorizing words, phrases and short extracts;

- 15) how to use context and other clues to interpret meaning;
- 16) to use their knowledge of English or another language when learning the target language;
- 17) how to use dictionaries and other reference materials appropriately and effectively;
- 18) how to develop their independence in learning and using the target language.
- 19) working with authentic materials in the target language, including some from ICT-based sources;
- 20) communicating with native speakers,
- 21) considering their own culture and comparing it with the cultures of the countries and communities where the target language is spoken;
- 22) considering the experiences and perspectives of people in these countries and communities.

Moreover, as for how pupils should be taught these knowledge, skills and understanding during key stages 3 and 4 (ages 11-16), the following approaches are suggested in detail in the National Curriculum:

- a) communicating in the target language in pairs and groups, and with their teacher;
- b) using everyday classroom events as an opportunity for spontaneous speech;
- c) expressing and discussing personal feelings and opinions;
- d) producing and responding to different types of spoken and written language, including texts produced using ICT;
- e) using a range of resources, including ICT, for accessing and communicating information;
- f) using the target language creatively and imaginatively;
- g) listening, reading or viewing for personal interest and enjoyment, as well as for information;
- h) using the target language for real purposes;
- i) working in a variety of contexts, including everyday activities, personal and social life, the world around us, the world of work and the international world.

Based on these specific contents and directions, schools offer, in key stages 3 and 4, one or more of the official working languages of the European Union (Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Modern Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish). The Curriculum also adds that schools can offer any other modern foreign language, but they have to provide one EU language. The fact is that many schools are mainly offering French, German, Spanish, and Italian to pupils.

2. Linkage between England and the EU in language learning

In order to understand MFL teaching and learning in England, it is necessary to refer to EU language policies. As for the languages that people use in Europe, the relationship between England and the other European countries is more important these days, despite the practicality for the use of English in Europe. According to the Eurobarometer Report (2001), 53 percent of Europeans say that they can speak at least one European language in addition to their mother tongue. 26 percent

say that they can speak two foreign languages. Besides their mother tongue, people in Europe tend to know English (41%), French (19%), German (10%), Spanish (7%) and Italian (3%). This data does not show their language proficiency level, so that it is not clear how capable they are of using those languages. However, English is certainly considered as a powerful language in Europe.

Not only is English a useful communicative language in Europe, but French and German are also still useful in some districts. Regardless of whether people in Europe know other languages besides their own, a majority of them tend to believe that knowing a foreign language is useful. This is a very important point. That is, EU countries certainly consider language learning to be a priority matter for them. The Council of Europe and the European Union have joined forces to organize the European Year of Languages 2001. They say, 'Language is above all a tool for communication, and the better people can communicate with each other, the more successful their relationships are likely to be. Learning one another's languages is a way of fostering tolerance and understanding between peoples, and avoiding conflict.'

According to the Report, however, a large number of European citizens who do not speak a foreign language believe that learning an additional language would be too difficult (65%) and too time consuming (64%). It is natural that many people are not keen on learning foreign languages if they do not need to use any foreign language in daily life. On this point, what is important is that the EU has the common language policy and encourages people to learn some languages to communicate with each other. The EU has considered cultivating language awareness to be one of the priority matters for its future.

3. The Nuffield Languages Inquiry

Unlike those situations in non-English speaking EU countries, it is probably unnecessary for people in England to learn foreign languages due to the widespread use of English in Europe. This is one of the main reasons why people are not motivated to learn foreign languages in England.

The final report of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry funded by the Nuffield Foundation was published in 2000. The report appeals for the necessity of foreign language teaching and learning in the UK. Their findings of the current language teaching and learning situations are summarized as shown below:

- 1) English is not enough.
- 2) People are looking for leadership to improve the nation's capability in languages.
- 3) Young people from the UK are at a disadvantage in the recruitment market.
- 4) The UK needs competence in many languages-not just French-but the education system is not geared up to achieve this.
- 5) Government has no coherent approach to languages.
- 6) In spite of parental demand, there is still no UK-wide agenda for children to start languages early.
- 7) Secondary school pupils lack motivation or direction.
- 8) Nine out of ten children stop learning languages at 16.
- 9) University language departments are closing, leaving the sector in deep crisis.
- 10) Adults are keen to learn languages but are badly served by an impoverished system.

11) The UK desperately needs more language teachers.

These findings can count as the common problems in Japan in one sense. There might be some universal issues when teaching and learning languages that are related to language policy, teaching and learning system, motivation, teachers, etc.

In order to reform the above-mentioned situations, the Nuffield Foundation has also made the following proposals for improvement:

- 1) Designate languages a key skill.
- 2) Drive forward a national strategy.
- 3) Appoint a languages supremo.
- 4) Raise the profile of languages.
- 5) Give young children a flying start.
- 6) Improve arrangements in secondary schools.
- 7) Make languages a specified component of the 16-19 curriculum.
- 8) Reform the organization and funding of languages in higher education.
- 9) Develop the huge potential of language learning in adult life.
- 10) Break out of the vicious circle of inadequate teacher supply.
- 11) Establish a national standards framework for describing and accrediting.
- 12) Co-ordinate initiatives linking technology and languages.

This report argues that languages including mother tongue and foreign languages are a very important key skill for their children's future. Although English is a very powerful working language or the world language, they believe that English is not enough and suggest that the government should raise the profile of languages. Whether or not their ideas are feasible or can be implemented, there is no doubt that these suggestions are very significant for England.

4. Problems in modern foreign languages at school

Teaching and learning MFLs in school education have not always been carried out very smoothly in England. As in Japan, which has been tackling teaching and learning communicative English for the past 10 years or more in secondary education, England has also had its own inherent language teaching and learning problems and made efforts to solve them. As I have mentioned so far, however, it still has not been clear whether or not pupils are motivated to learn MFLs in the classroom, how or for what purposes they are learning, and to what extent they can evaluate themselves. Therefore I carried out a small survey to identify those realities in the classroom.

4.1. Subjects and method of the survey

I visited a primary school and a secondary school in West Midland of England, and gave a questionnaire to 82 pupils (male=24; female=58). I asked the following questions, which are related to language skills, pleasure, language use experience, and purpose:

- 1-4 How is your listening (speaking, reading, writing) proficiency level of the target language? (pupils answer on a 1-5 scale basis: 1=very good; 5=very poor) (Figure 1)
- 5 Do you enjoy learning the target modern foreign language? (pupils answer on a 1-5 scale basis: 1=very much; 5=not at all) (Figure 2)
- 6 Have you ever communicated using the target language? (yes or no) (Figure 3)

- 7 Have you visited the target language speaking countries before? (yes or no) (Figure 4)
- 8 What are you learning the target language for? (GCSE, academic purposes, communication, business, future career, pleasure, no reason, others) (Figure 5)

4.2. Results of the survey

The results of the survey are shown in the following graphs. I did not use percentages here. The numbers show the raw data because it is rather easy to interpret.

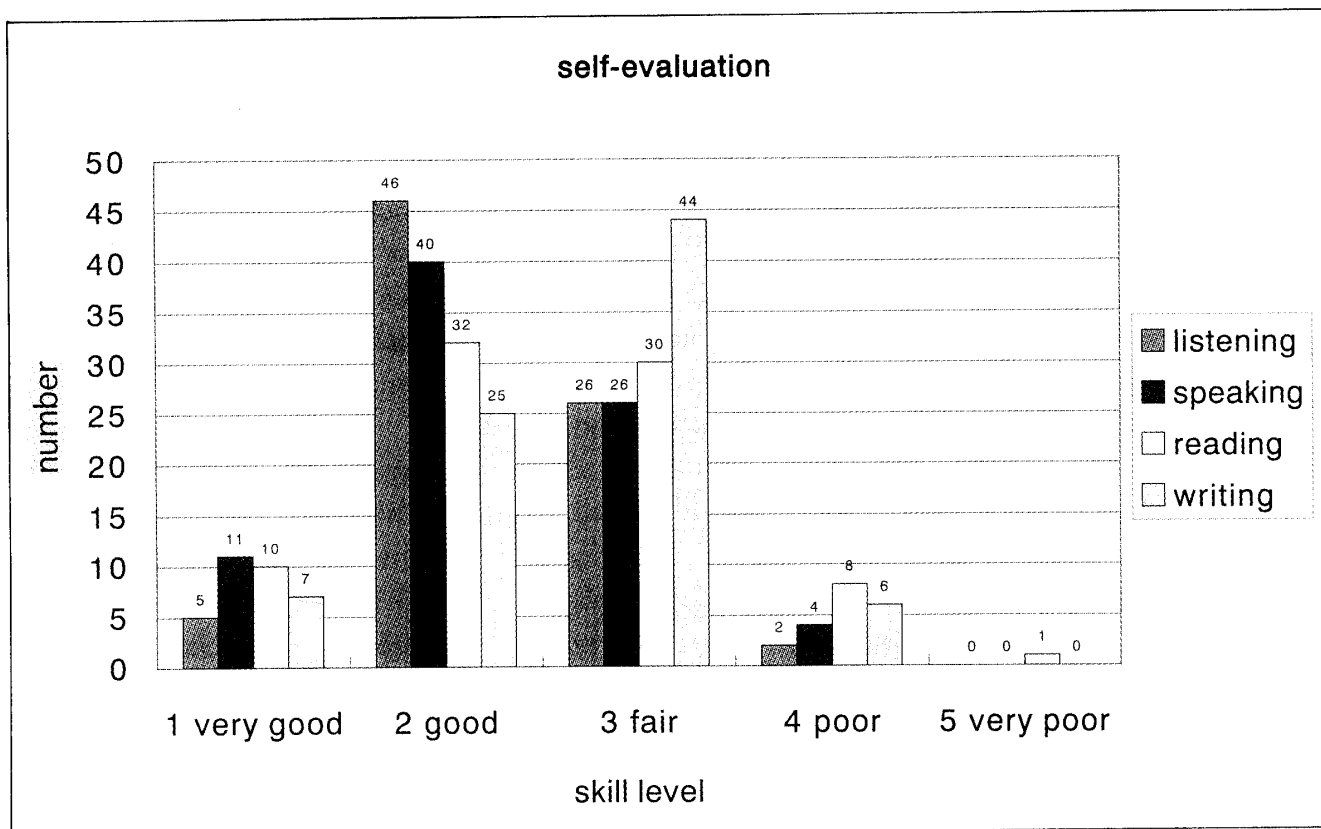


Figure.1.1-4 pupils' self-evaluation as to four skills

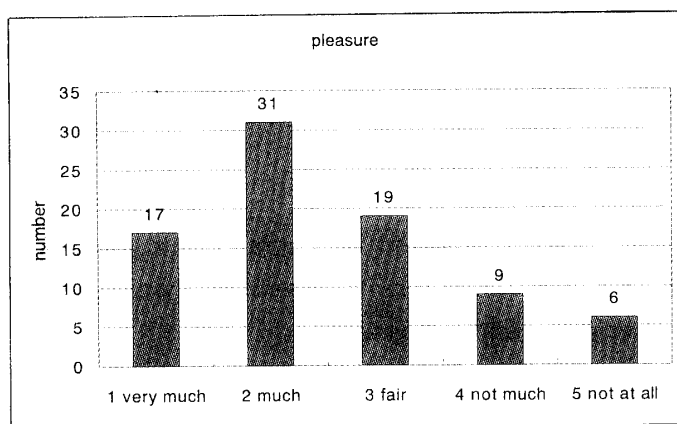


Figure.2.5 pleasure to learn in a MFL Classroom

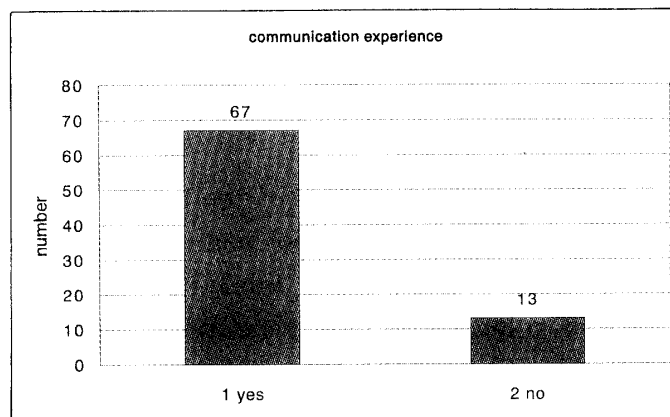


Figure.3.6 communication experience

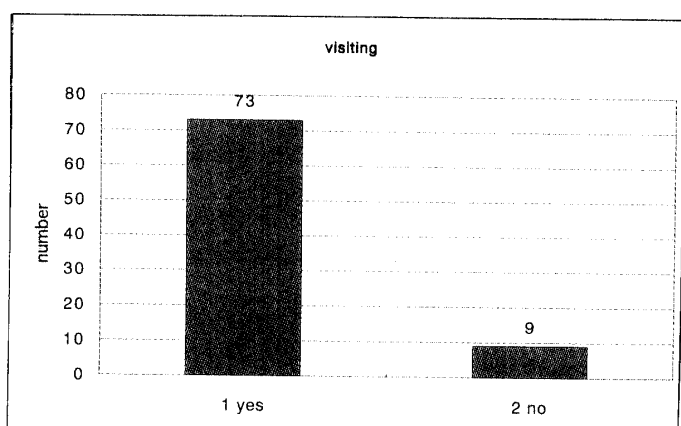


Figure.4.7 visiting

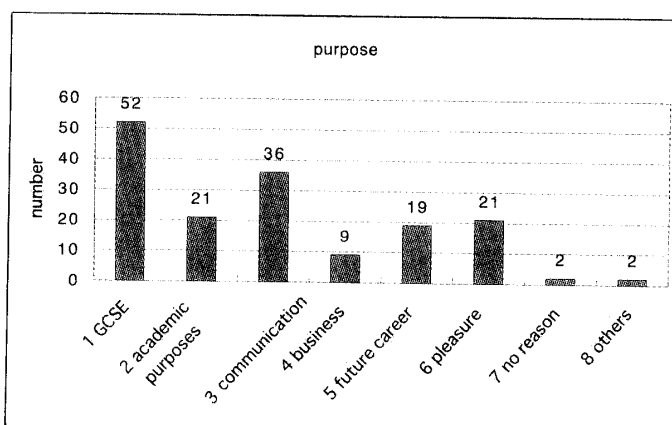


Figure.5.8 purpose

4.3. Discussion of the survey

The results showed as a whole that pupils' attitudes are very positive toward learning MFLs. Their abilities of four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are rather highly evaluated by themselves (Table 1). Their standards are not clear but they are rather motivated to learn the target language(s). There are some reasons for it: 1) the languages they are learning are French, German, and Spanish in this survey; 2) most of them have visited the target countries; and 3) they have actually used the target languages. Compared with the case of Japanese-speaking pupils learning English (Table 2), their conditions are much distinctive in their language environment.

Table 1. average values of each ability (England)

listening	speaking	reading	writing
2.32	2.28	2.48	2.60

Table 2. average values of each ability (Japan)

listening	speaking	reading	writing
3.42	3.67	3.32	3.49

According to the results, however in England, pupils' objectives to learn foreign languages are mainly for GCSE or academic purposes. It clearly shows that they mainly study MFLs for academic tests. This situation seems to be very similar in Japan. Many Japanese learners' motivations to learn English are mainly to pass the tests for colleges and upper secondary schools. The fact has been criticized so often by many people, who say that learners cannot be good speakers of English due to such a testing system. Nonetheless, the results show that many pupils in England are enjoying learning MFLs in their classrooms. This has a very significant meaning because, regardless of their purposes, pupils are considered to be motivated and have a clear plan for their future. Accordingly, the survey clearly shows that MFL learning is rather successful for the subject pupils.

This survey was carried out on a small scale. Thus, the results cannot be generalized across the entire population in England, but they illustrate some of the realities of present MFL learning in England. In summary, the most important findings in this survey was that many pupils make

somewhat affirmative responses for learning MFLs, set clear purposes for learning foreign languages, have positive attitudes, enjoy learning, and have practical opportunities to use their target languages.

5. Summary

Some Japanese pupils tend to think that native speakers of English do not need to learn any other languages and even envy English-speaking people. In England, however, it is clear that speaking only English is not sufficient as the society has become multi-lingual as well as multi-cultural. Further, to develop a linguistically strong network with other EU countries, it is vital to have proficiency in EU languages other than just English. Moreover, since English is the world language, it is possible that many people throughout the world will be able to speak at least three languages: their mother tongue, community languages, and English. Bilingualism or trilingualism will be normal for non-native speakers of English. It will be very unfavorable for only native-speakers of English not to be able to speak any other languages.

Some Japanese people still have a stereotype that English is the most important language to learn, so that, if they speak English, they could communicate with people all over the world. This is a simple and careless idea to some extent. You will easily realize it if you understand the situations of MFL teaching and learning in England and other EU countries. English is not the only language that Japanese pupils should learn; other languages should be introduced into school curriculum.

As stated in the Nuffield Languages Inquiry, there are many problems with MFLs to solve in England. It even criticizes the government language policy for no coherent approach they have. However, the National Curriculum has worked well to standardize the teaching and learning of MFLs by indicating a framework of language teaching and learning in primary and secondary education. 'The very existence of the National Curriculum provides a powerful institutional context for normalization in language learning.' (King, 1999)

Plurilingualism should be the aim of European language policy (Trim, 1999). I wonder whether this remark will be attained or not, but such policy should be very meaningful. In Wales, the official languages are English and Welsh, but Welsh is not normally spoken, being noticed as the written Welsh text in many places. Such a language policy should be more widely respected because people are constantly moving around globally or interacting globally with one another via the Internet, even if English is the primary working language. Regarding such interrelated technological and social changes, Trim (1999) implies some rethinking of language policy: 1) the development of communicative abilities, 2) the development of a young person's communicative abilities; 3) education for communication; 4) disciplines; 5) applied linguistic theory and empirical research; and 6) a common resource center for language in education.

By researching into modern foreign languages in England, I found that the language policy in Japan could be insufficient and poor because of English being offered as the only major foreign language to learn at school. Foreign language learning may be difficult to many pupils but opportunities to learn other foreign languages should be implemented for all learners.

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Notes

PDF files:

- 1 White Paper on Education and Training Teaching and Learning towards the Learning Society
- 2 Eurobarometer Report 54 Europeans and Languages Executive Summary
- 3 National Description of UK (E/W/Ni). Supplement to the Eurydice Study on "Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe," 2001.

Web sites:

- 1 CILT <http://www.cilt.org.uk/>
- 2 Department for Education and Skills <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/index.htm>
- 3 European Union On-line <http://europa.eu.int/index-en.htm>