

The Role of English Education in Japan

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Abstract

This paper is intended as an overview of the education system in Japan, with emphasis on how the English language is approached at each level of schooling. The purpose is to contextualize English as a foreign language (EFL) education in Japan while highlighting structural as well as procedural shortcomings. It is argued that these shortcomings negatively influence student attitudes, beliefs and motivations as related to learning the English language. Government initiatives aimed at improving communicative ability in English are introduced together with overviews of the key concepts of JUKEN EIGO (English for test taking), YAKUDOKU (grammar-translation method) and HENSACHI (deviation value/school ranking system). It is hoped that the information here provides a basis for viewing the experiences of Japanese EFL learners and developing a list of best practices for teachers and learners in this context.

Keywords: EFL, Learner Attitudes, Learner Beliefs, Motivation, Engagement

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we attempt to contextualize the study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for readers by providing some key background information, including a general overview of education in Japan, the role of English at each stage of education, related government initiatives and the topics of English for test taking (JUKEN EIGO), the grammar-translation approach (YAKUDOKU), and deviation value/school ranking system (HENSACHI). The main points we hope to convey are that:

- education is a high priority in Japan,
- academic achievement is heavily emphasized,
- this emphasis has resulted in a test-oriented society,
- English is a part of most children's school experience,
- the unique position of English as a key test subject has resulted in overemphasis on grammar translation approaches in schools,

- the government recognizes the importance of nurturing communicative competence in schools, has geared policy at improving the situation, and mostly failed,
- the educational climate and exam-focused English are major sources of this failure, and
- collective consciousness and individual past experiences in this context greatly influence the motivation, attitudes and beliefs about language learning students have when they get to university.

The information here provides a basis for viewing the experiences of Japanese EFL learners and developing a list of best practices for teachers and learners in this context. One key concern in this discussion is that despite a general awareness of the importance of English language skills in Japan and the time and other resources devoted to English language education, Japanese continue to underperform on various measures of English proficiency when compared with test takers in other Asian countries and beyond. According to the most recent Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index Report (EF EPI, 2017), Japan ranked 35th among 72 countries. There is also evidence that the average level of English proficiency in Japan—as measured by internationally recognized tests—has actually decreased despite efforts by the Japanese government (Steele & Zhang, 2016), and the general poor performance on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (ETS, 2017) by Japanese—fifth from the bottom among 30 Asian countries—is noted as evidence of the inefficiency of English language education (Aoki, 2016). It is argued that the historical context in Japan, especially the role that English has played in schools and society at large, negatively influence learner motivation and attitudes toward the language (Ryan, 2008). We will conclude this article with a short review of this last argument.

2 THE JAPANESE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The modern Japanese education system—deriving from the Basic Education Law of 1947—has adopted elements from several European models, but has been patterned mainly on the American system. Most children begin their school careers at the age of three to five, attending one of the roughly 14,000 public or private (mostly private) pre-school or kindergarten (YOCHIEN). Formal education that is compulsory consists of six years of primary or elementary (SHOGAKKO) and three years of lower secondary or junior high school (CHUGAKKO). The attendance rate for both SHOGAKKO (roughly 20,000 schools) and CHUGAKKO (roughly 10,000 schools) is nearly one hundred percent (MEXT, 2017a). The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) reported that 96.6% of fifteen-year olds entered upper secondary or high school (KOTOGAKKO) in 2016, and that 54.8% of eighteen-year olds went on to university (DAIGAKU) or junior college (TANKI DAIGAKU) in the same year (MEXT, 2017b). In general, high school lasts three years and university lasts four years, resulting in the so-called 6-3-3-4 system.

In addition to JUKEN EIGO, YAKUDOKU and the HENSACHI system discussed below, another characteristic of the Japanese school system relevant to this thesis is that all students get promoted from grade to grade regardless of academic achievement. In other words, students are

almost never held back a grade even if they perform poorly or have not mastered the grade-appropriate knowledge and skills required for the next stage of education. Together, these structural features of the education system in Japan influence learner attitudes, beliefs and motivations as related to learning English, and thus need to be considered when investigating how engagement is experienced by learners when they get to university. As one example, learners who see English merely as a subject to be tested will experience and engage in their EFL classes quite differently than counterparts who value English language proficiency as a tool for international or intercultural communication.

3 ENGLISH EDUCATION IN JAPAN

In all parts of the Japanese archipelago, children begin experiencing English as part of their primary-school education at the age of ten or eleven (from the fifth grade), and as young as six or seven. The younger starting ages are due to local municipalities that introduce English in the first or second year of primary school and families that enroll their children in private English schools, JUKU (cram schools). Until recently, English was not part of the curriculum until junior high school. However, in 2011, foreign language communication activities aimed at “fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages” (p. 1) were made compulsory for fifth and sixth grade students with the updated Course of Study (discussed further in the next section) (MEXT, 2008). These weekly lessons were intended to include singing songs, playing games, or other enjoyable activities (MEXT, 2008). One key characteristic of this policy is that responsibility for these lessons rests with the homeroom teacher. The argument for this decision was that students would likely experience less anxiety and be more willing to communicate with these teachers (Tahira, 2012, p. 4).

Children begin their formal study of English as a school subject at junior high school, with three fifty-minute classes per week using MEXT approved textbooks. One calculation is that students in Japan currently receive 262.5 hours (315 classes x 50 minutes) during their junior high school years (Hosoki, 2011). Despite government initiatives aimed at fostering communication skills in foreign languages (discussed below), the contents of the textbooks, exam pressures and teaching styles continue to steer these lessons toward teacher-fronted grammar-translation formats (Goto Butler, 2015). Most students planning to advance to high school (again, almost 97%) will need to prepare for an English entrance exam. There are, however, schools which combine junior and senior high. Students at these schools will not have the pressures of preparing for an exam to get into high school, but are never free from the ever-present testing culture that pervades schools in Japan. English tuition continues at high school, and for students in public high schools this means 612.5 hours (735 classes x 50 minutes) in the English classroom over three years, again using MEXT approved textbooks and a continued focus on grammar-translation and test preparation. For most high school students there is another English entrance exam to get into university. Finally, the roughly fifty percent of 18-year olds that go on to university will more than likely be required to study a minimum of one

or more years of English regardless of their course of study. And this is just the core curriculum and does not include extra tuition at cram schools, preparatory schools or language schools.

According to *The Economist* (2011), nearly 20% of Japanese children in their first year of primary school attend some type of cram school or preparatory school, and this percentage rises for each stage of primary, junior high and high school education in Japan. Nearly all high school students planning on entering university will have extra tuition at cram schools, with English as one of the core subjects. Additionally, many students will study English at university or private language schools in preparation for job hunting which begins at the end of the third year of university. All told, Japanese youth can expect eight to ten years of English classes, or somewhere between 1,800 and 2,500 hours.

As mentioned in Hu (2009), “English proficiency has become a very expensive commodity” (cited in Goto Butler, 2015, p. 305) and the amount of money spent on English-learning services provided by private entities is “tremendous” (Goto Butler, 2015, p. 306). A recent report by Yano (2016) on the language business market found that 827.2 billion yen (up 1.7%) was spent on the various goods and services in 2015 (foreign language classes for adults, foreign language classes for children/infants, pre-schools, deployment of teachers to kindergarten/day-care centers for children, textbooks, self-learning language hardware/software, electronic dictionaries, textbooks of English conversation classes for children/infants, correspondence education, e-learning, software, language exams, overseas-education arrangement and interpretation/translation). This same report predicted continued growth in 2016.

The entire language business market (total of 14 categories) for FY2016 was projected to achieve 840.6 billion yen, 101.6% of the size of the preceding year. As English is becoming the required subject at elementary schools, the future of the language business market is likely to remain robust, with continuous favorable sales expected for the services for children including foreign language classes for children/infants, pre-schools, deployment of teachers to kindergarten/day-care centers for children, and textbooks of English conversation classes for children/infants. (Yano, 2016, p. 2)

We mention this financial information to illustrate the point that a great deal of attention and resources are devoted to English language education. Individuals, families, companies and the government clearly recognize the need for English language skills.

4 University EFL in Japan

According to government reports, there were 777 universities in Japan as of 2016 (MEXT, 2017b), with 600 (77.2%) being private. One major distinction that is normally recognized in discussions of university EFL in Japan is between English and non-English majors. Students pursuing English as a major at either public (national, prefectural, municipal) or private universities are normally matriculated in a literature (BUNGAKU) or foreign language

(GAIKOKUGO) department in a humanities faculty. However, of the roughly 2.5 million students enrolled at university in 2014, less than one hundred and forty thousand were literature majors (MEXT, 2014), with English majors accounting for roughly half of these. So, while nearly all students at university in Japan will need to study English, very few in fact are English majors. We mention this mainly to show that most students are not planning on being English language specialists but (are forced to) study the language to support their other studies. In general, EFL courses for non-English majors are handled in one of three ways: courses taught by adjunct faculty hired directly by the department, courses taught by teachers from the literature department, or courses taught by teachers from a university-wide foreign language center. Traditionally, English classes at university have been taught by professors specializing in American or British literature, and this legacy continues to some extent with many university EFL classes centered around reading passages from the writings of the author or authors who the professor has focused their research on. Teachers whose mother tongue is English are sometimes hired to teach speaking and listening courses for freshmen or sophomores under titles such as Oral English or English Communication. The contents of these classes are normally not coordinated program-wide beyond guidance in selecting textbooks, and there is very little accountability (McVeigh, 2002). In response to criticisms aimed at university EFL courses and market pressures on universities due to declining birth rates, some universities are experimenting with new models of EFL curriculum and oversight. These, however, are still the exception.

5 GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

As mentioned above, studying English is a major part of almost every Japanese young person's world life history. Reports from MEXT say that English will become a compulsory subject throughout the first nine years of school from 2020, with a two-year transition period from 2018 (Aoki, 2016; MEXT, 2017a). The road to this juncture has been long and winding, and government policy regarding English language education at schools has nearly always been politically and/or economically motivated, heatedly debated and mostly ineffective (Goto Butler, 2015; Goto Butler & Iino, 2005; Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Tahira, 2012). Goto Butler and Iino (2004) noted the historical tendency in Japan for English education to alternate "between a focus on English for practical purposes and English for entrance examination for higher education" (p. 27). Much of the decision-making power regarding all aspects of education rests with MEXT. Since 1958, this ministry (previously the Ministry of Education) has issued National Standards for School Curricula (commonly referred to as the Course of Study), which are updated roughly every ten years (Hosoki, 2011; Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Tahira, 2012). Local school boards are responsible for hiring and dispatching teachers, but have their hands tied in terms of content and delivery. As Ryan (2008) puts it, "the ministry is responsible not only for macro-level policy decisions, but it also decides curriculum, teaching methods and materials" (p. 29).

While the full story of government policy and guidelines in English language education is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note government initiatives contained in the three most recent updates to the Course of Study. In the 2003 revisions, the importance of

communication skills was emphasized in the overall objectives for both junior and senior high school (Hosoki, 2011; MEXT, 2002; Tahira, 2012). In response to calls by industry and government officials for equipping Japanese with communication skills in English and moving away from JUKEN EIGO, MEXT issued an Action Plan to “Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” as part of their Exhortation Toward Learning (Goto Butler & Iino, 2005). At this time, English classes were introduced in elementary schools as an option (Aoki, 2016). Key to our discussion is the government’s clear emphasis on both English and communication skills in their strategic plan:

With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation. (MEXT, 2002)

Previous policy statements and curricular guidelines had often referred to “foreign languages,” but the *de facto* foreign language taught at most schools has always been English since this language was part of high school entrance exams and the all-important Center Test for university (Goto Butler, 2015; Ryan, 2008, Tahira, 2012). The explicit focus on communication skills also highlights the government’s sense of urgency and dissatisfaction with past results.

A general failure to reach the language goals set out in the 2002 Action Plan resulted in the next big policy initiative, the inclusion of compulsory foreign language activities for fifth and sixth graders as part of the 2008 Course of Study (implemented from 2011). Tahira (2012) noted that these shifts were an indication of the government’s intention of fostering communicative ability in English, placing language activities at the center of language teaching, and for the first time stating that “classes, in principle, should be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English” (MEXT, 2009, p. 7).

The general shortcomings of these initiatives have been reported on in Goto Butler (2015), Tahira (2012) and Steele and Zhang (2016), with analysis always coming back to the fact that guidelines and initiatives set out by the government are not being effectively followed in the classroom. Reasons put forward for this tendency are the ambiguity of communicative language teaching approaches (CLT) and insufficiency of government explanations (Tahira, 2012), conflicting ideologies (Goto Butler, 2015), lack of sufficient teacher training (Tahira, 2012; Steele & Zhang, 2016), and above all the pressures of entrance exams.

The most recent policy shift (MEXT, 2017a) includes, among other directives, moving the foreign language activities to third and fourth grade in elementary school, and introducing English as a school subject from fifth and sixth grade (Aoki, 2016). If past results are any indication, however, there is little hope that these initiatives will achieve their objectives. The source of the pessimism is the persistent presence of JUKEN EIGO and the resulting overreliance on YAKUDOKU.

6 JUKEN EIGO (ENGLISH FOR TEST TAKING) AND YAKUDOKU (TRANSLATION READING)

As hinted at above, testing is a big part of the educational experience for most students in Japan. A situation has developed where academic achievement at each stage of education, as measured by test scores, is the center of the school experience. The term used to describe this situation is GAKUREKI SHAKAI (translated as educational credential based society). Some authors derisively refer to the education system in Japan as “an enormously elaborated, very expensive testing system with some educational spin-offs” (Goodman, 2003). This perspective laments the situation where learning takes a back seat to testing. This testing covers most of the subjects taught at school, but has become particularly acute for the English language. The testing of English in Japan is characterized by the memorization of vocabulary, expressions and grammar rules with little or no connection to practical communication in the language. Ryan (2008) interprets the resulting JUKEN EIGO version of English as follows:

. . . it could be argued that English as taught in Japanese secondary schools, detached from its basic reality as a tool for communication and expression, represents a ‘pure’ form of testing knowledge. If the purpose of education is to test and stratify, then subjects such as Japanese or mathematics are tainted by their attachments to a basic reality; a subject like Japanese examination English is devoid of such complications and provides the means to test the ability of students to learn purely as they have been taught in the classroom. (p. 34)

In a similar vein, Goto Butler & Iino (2004) cite Takahashi (2000) in describing English scores as “highly correlated with students’ analytical and logical thinking skills just as Latin used to be viewed as a means of mental training” (Goto-Butler & Iino, 2004. p. 30).

Again, government policy and public sentiment has historically swung back and forth between a focus on English for practical purposes and English for entrance examination (Goto Butler & Iino, 2005). The heavy emphasis on academic achievement, resulting entrance exam competitiveness, and English exam contents have strongly influenced how English is taught in school (Ryan, 2008). In her historical review of English education in Japan, Løfsgaard (2015) notes that this tendency toward JUKEN EIGO resulted in publications focused on test taking strategies. These strategies were centered on decoding the English in the form of grammar translation. With the inherent pressures of the examinations and particular style and contents of these tests, these grammar translation (YAKUDOKU) strategies became popular both in and out of schools. At the same time, government approved textbooks also tended to focus on preparing students for entrance exams and the accompanying teachers manuals heavily favored teacher-fronted YAKUDOKU lessons and activities (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). Another interpretation of this dominance of YAKUDOKU over more communicative approaches to language teaching is that the former is much easier for the teacher.

This discussion of JUKEN EIGO and YAKUDOKU is important in that students who make it

to university will have likely developed attitudes and beliefs about language learning that will influence how they interpret English lessons at university. Some of these attitudes and beliefs will be associated with the goals of target-language learning (outcomes) while others will be related to how the language is best taught and learned (strategies).

7 HENSACHI (DEVIATION VALUE/SCHOOL RANKING) SYSTEM

The final concept that we will introduce here is HENSACHI. We have included this topic to support the notion that a great deal of attention is focused on education in Japan but that an inordinate proportion of time, energy and resources is spent in this system on testing, grading and ranking students. This again has an impact on learner attitudes, beliefs and motivations related to schooling in general and English language learning in particular. The term HENSACHI is often translated as deviation value, but a more straightforward description is the school ranking system. HENSACHI scores are assigned to individual students and schools (or departments) based on performance on standardized tests in relation to the national mean. A HENSACHI rank of 50 thus means that the student or school can be considered at the middle nationwide, while a score one standard deviation over the mean would be 60. Newfields (2006) reports that 94.5% of all university departments rank between 30 and 70.

Despite criticisms of the HENSACHI system (see, for example, ELT, 2011; Murphey, 2010), it maintains its popularity among high schools, students and universities. In general, high schools and cram schools use these scores to determine which universities individual students have a high possibility of successfully entering, while universities use these scores for screening applicants and in promotional materials.

8 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have attempted to provide readers with some background information on the educational experience of Japanese learners and the unique role that English plays in the Japanese education system. The main points which we hope can be gleaned from this chapter are outlined in the introduction, and these should be kept in mind when evaluating published research on related topics.

As mentioned earlier, we will conclude this chapter with a short review of Ryan's (2008) discussion of student attitudes, beliefs and motivation as related to English education in Japan. The gist of this discussion is that how English is conceived of and presented in Japan has an impact on learner motivation, that English at university plays a different role and is approached quite differently from that at secondary schools, and that English education at universities is the convergence of two great failures of education in Japan, higher education and the field of language education.

Public sentiment in Japan with regards to the English language has a complicated history. From the time Japan was forced open by U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry in the mid 1800s, English

has been the main foreign language studied here (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). While recognized as an important tool for gaining access to existing knowledge and developments from outside Japan, English has also been seen in an antagonistic light, especially leading up to the second world war. Since the war, English has played a key role in the externally imposed education system, with pendulum swings between a emphasis on English for communication and English for test taking, and between a warm embrace–by politicians and the general public–and outright disdain. English conceived of in this way thus exerts a heavy influence on young people’s feelings toward the language.

Ryan (2008) also highlights some clear differences in how English language study is conceived of and pursued at secondary and tertiary levels in Japan. Whereas the contents and delivery of EFL instruction at secondary schools are mainly focused on preparing students for entrance exams (first to high school and then to university), approaches to instruction at university range from more of the same to a complete de-emphasis on grammar and test-preparation in favor of conversation/communication focused lessons. These differences will also have an impact–either positive or negative–on student’s expectations and motivations regarding English, which in turn will influence how these learners experience and engage in university EFL classes.

Finally, the generally poor assessment of universities in Japan (see, for example, McVeigh, 2002) and the dismal results of language education here (discussed above in section 2.1) are seen by Ryan (2008) as converging at the university level. In more prosperous times, economic and technological advancement could mask these widespread failures. However, the current situation in Japan necessitates more accountability and return on investment in both areas. These circumstances were one impetus for Ryan’s (2008) study and for our own investigations.

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