

日本における英語教育改善の障害

Obstacles to English Education Reform in Japan

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日本における英語教育のシステムを改善しようと多くの試みがなされてきたが、ある程度成功したといえるものささほとんどない。カリキュラムの開発に影響を与えるさまざまな団体を調査したところ、開発担当者によるあらたな取り組みは教室レベルの生徒や先生のニーズを十分に考慮していないことがわかった。もっと英語を母国語とする住人を増やすように試みたり、日本人の英語教師の CLT 研修をもっとサポートしたり、望ましい学習成果に報いるような信頼できる評価方法を開発すれば、より大きな成功が期待できるだろう。

Many attempts have been made to reform the English education system in Japan but few have been even moderately successful. An investigation of the various forces that exert an influence on curriculum development reveals that the initiatives sent down by policy planners have not adequately considered the needs of students and teachers at the classroom level. Greater success could be achieved through incentives to increase the number of native English residents, more support for the training of Japanese teachers of English in communicative language teaching, and the development of reliable assessment measures that reward desired learning outcomes.

Introduction

Despite an almost national obsession with English education, Japan test scores of English proficiency remain among the lowest in Asia (ETS, 2012). Over the last century, policy makers in Japan have made several attempts to introduce changes to English pedagogy, but none of them have thus far been successful. To date, much of the criticism for the slow pace of reform has been allowed to rest on the shoulders of an antiquated English education system, but the truth is more complicated. Attitudes toward language instruction are affected by a highly interrelated array of factors that can influence each other as much as they exert an impact on language education as a whole. The perceptions and expectations of society, for example, influence the top-down directives offered by the Ministry of Education. Similarly, the cultural biases and expectations of students and Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), or bottom-up implementation at the classroom level, are also affected by the practical realities of resources and evaluation. Toward a clearer understanding for why significant reform has not been able to firmly take root, therefore, this paper will examine the forces that have influenced English education and how their often conflicting aims have acted as barriers to reform.

Kokusaika and expectations of society

Kokusaika refers to the association between learning English and becoming more international (Reesor, 2002). For many Japanese, English has become the "catch-all solution to engagement with the rest of the world" (Gottlieb, 2005). The perception of *kokusaika*

has dramatically influenced the way English is learned in Japan. It has led to English education being mandatory for all students in every year of junior and senior high school and for the first two years of many universities, regardless of the area of specialization, and it is the primary motivation for many Japanese citizens studying at private language schools (Kobayashi, 2000). It is also likely that *kokusaika* has led to many misperceptions both about English and about the study of language in general. Television dramas often portray those who speak English as either highly intelligent or cosmopolitan. This idea has in turn been exploited by language schools in their advertising, depicting those who cannot speak English as helpless and reinforcing the notion that, if studied in the right way, fluency can be achieved with little effort. However, perhaps the greatest impact that *kokusaika* has had on English education in Japan is that it has led to the expectation that Japanese people need to communicate in English in order to interact with the world around them.

The Ministry of Science, Education, and Technology (MEXT)

For over a century, policy makers in government have responded to the cultural *kokusaika* meme by enacting several initiatives based on the perceived needs of students in the education system. Koike and Tanaka (1995) discuss in detail the failure of 2 major early policy initiatives to encourage more communicative activities in the classroom. The recommendations of Harold Palmer in 1922 and those of the English Language Exploration Committee (ELEC) in 1956, were unsuccessful because they were not well received by teachers and students.

What will follow is a review of the later policy initiatives and an examination of their impact on English education in Japan.

In 1984, the Ministry of Education assembled the Ad Hoc Committee on Education Reform, which carried out research on the state of English teaching in Japan in junior and senior high schools (Reesor, 2002). They came to the conclusion that crowded classrooms, a lack of adequate teacher training, and not enough contact with native speakers negatively impacted English education. Yet again, the committee recommended that a communicative approach to English was necessary, and that more native English teachers should be hired.

The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (hereafter referred to as The JET Programme) began in 1987 as a bold plan to bring native English speakers to Japan to act as assistant language teachers (ALT) in Japanese public junior and senior high schools. The Programme began with roughly 900 foreign teachers in its first year, but its overwhelming acceptance led to steep yearly increases in teacher recruitment. At present, most junior and public high schools across the country either have a foreign teacher on staff or scheduled foreign teacher visits, and this is largely thanks to the JET Programme. Although the current number of JET participants is around 4300, the LDP party of Japan, as part of its overall aim to create a global competitive workforce, has recently revealed plans to expand that number to 10,000 teachers, ensuring that all public elementary, junior, and senior high schools will have a foreign teacher on staff (Mie, 2013).

Although the main objective of the JET Programme has been to increase the number of native-speaking English teachers, it was also hoped that those who came to Japan would become acquainted with Japanese culture and then return to their home countries with many positive experiences. It is for this reason that many of the ALTs who have been hired (on one-year renewable contracts) are young, usually fresh out of college, and most with little teaching experience and rudimentary Japanese. Younger native speakers were thought to be more adaptable to living in a foreign country and more likely to act as assistants to their Japanese counterparts, rather than assert their independence in the classroom as experienced teachers might (McConnell, 2000). However, despite its widespread acceptance, there have been several criticisms of the Programme. Youthful exuberance might have at one time been an essential quality to introducing foreign teachers into classrooms, but after more than 25 years, some of the grassroots elements have clearly become a hindrance. Limits to contract extensions and candidate selection being based more on cultural exchange than on work history almost guarantees that most JETs have

little teaching experience when they arrive. Moreover, not enough has been done to encourage good foreign teachers to stay beyond their tenure as JETs. Legally, foreign teachers without a Japanese teaching license are not allowed to teach classes by themselves, nor are they able to submit student marks. There is also no realistic program available to allow already university-educated and experienced foreign teachers a way of obtaining their Japanese teaching licenses. This inflexibility has resulted in schools being unable to keep valuable resources that often times they had a hand in developing. As it now stands, most native English teachers have little to look forward to in terms of career advancement. If policy makers are indeed serious about increasing the communicative language proficiency of Japanese citizens, more needs to be done to encourage quality and experienced native English teachers to stay.

Despite the popularity of the JET Programme, Japanese students have shown no marked increases in English proficiency since the programme began. One explanation for this is that very little was done to help integrate the programme into the existing English curriculum. "At no time were discussions held with textbook oversight committees or other groups that shaped the larger structure of English in Japan" (McConnell, 2000). In addition, Japanese teachers trained in traditional approaches were suddenly asked to incorporate new team-teaching methods into the classroom, but without any new training. Although training for Japanese teachers on how to effectively utilize team-teaching methods is now offered, the degree to which foreign teachers participate in the classroom still varies widely from school to school. One negative consequence of the Programme has been that it created a rift in some classrooms, with JETs focusing on the traditional aspects of English education, and leaving communicative language activities entirely up to the ALT (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004).

In 2003, MEXT announced another major initiative to improve English education in Japan. The "Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities," (hereafter referred to as the Plan) stated that, in a globalized world with English as the language of international communication, it was important to foster students with "communicative competence" in both English and Japanese (MEXT homepage). Although the Plan outlined a wide range of support for English education, three areas were thought to be of particular concern. The first area was the introduction of English classes in the last two years of elementary school, one-third of which were to be held in the presence of a native speaker. However, the curriculum for teaching at the elementary school level was left up to each school and the level of instruction varied widely, dependent upon

factors such as the English level of homeroom teachers, and the degree to which each school emphasized English education. This lack of a standardized curriculum was thought to contribute to a wide gap in English language skills among students going into junior high schools, and hindered the streamlining of programs from elementary into junior high school (Takahashi, 2006).

The second criticism of the Plan concerned advocating standardized testing as a measure of English proficiency. Students were advised to use tests such as EIKEN as measures of individual progress, and EIKEN and TOEIC scores were recommended to be taken into consideration when hiring new language teachers. It is highly improbable that scores of standardized language tests were ever intended to be used in this way, and it is very likely that having done so has resulted in many of the negative consequences associated with high stakes testing, particularly washback (Linn, 2000; Sarich, 2012). Moreover, the assumption that teachers who score higher on standardized language tests will be more effective at teaching communicative English is tenuous. If anything, teachers who score highly on these tests would be more likely engage in the common practice of standardized test preparation that has always been the main competitor to communicative language teaching in the classroom.

One other major criticism of the Plan concerns the introduction of listening tests at entrance examinations to high schools and universities. In response to the criticism that communicative English has not been adequately assessed, in 2006 a listening component was added to the English section of the Center Shiken, the entrance examination used to determine entrance into public universities. Although incorporating listening does encourage greater focus on a communicative aspect of English, other communicative areas, speaking and writing, are assessed only indirectly. As it now stands, the Center Shiken is still primarily a test of reading comprehension, and even proponents of it admit that it is not a test designed to measure communicative English (Guest, 2006). No matter how well intentioned reforms of the English curriculum may be, they will not be effective until high stakes language tests such as the Center Shiken are adequately modified to reward the communicative gains of students.

The 2011 Course of Study

MEXT's latest guidelines expanded on those proposed in the Action plan, continuing their commitment to fostering communicative English. The Course of Study more firmly established homeroom teachers as those responsible for English education in the final two years of elementary school. It also increased the size of

expected vocabulary acquisition in junior and senior high school and promoted the use of English as the sole mode of communication in English classes (Tahira, 2012). Criticisms of the Course of Study are similar to those of the Action plan. Not enough teacher training, ambiguous directives, and varied opinions on the definition of communicative language teaching are all thought to have contributed to the slow implementation of reform (Tahira, 2012). However, as the Course of Study has only been relatively recently undertaken, it is still too early to know fully how English education will be impacted.

A common criticism of the abovementioned policy initiatives to encourage more communicative activity in the classroom is that they were not accepted by teachers and students at the classroom level. What will follow is a more detailed explanation for why this has been the case.

Teacher perceptions of CLT

At the level of implementation, the perceptions and the practical necessities of teachers are paramount in determining whether teachers will embrace CLT activities in the classroom (Lamie & Lambert, 2004). One commonly held belief among JTEs is that conducting CLT in large classes, especially where student motivation is low, creates classroom management problems (Littlewood, 2007). Non-native teachers are also more likely to blame their own linguistic deficiencies (rather than other factors such as planning or execution) when CLT activities are not successful. Moreover, many teachers still do not have a clear understanding of what communicative activities are and how they might be effectively implemented (Tahira, 2012), an indication that teacher training in university has not evolved in coordination with the prioritization of CLT in the classroom.

Understandably, many JTEs feel that it is their main responsibility to help students succeed in the system such as it is, rather than spend class time on CLT activities that they as educators might be less familiar with and which are linguistically demanding (Hedge, 2000). Teachers feel obligated to conduct classroom activities that help students prepare to take institutionalized high stakes language tests because in reality, performing well on these tests will more likely reward students with entrance to better schools or getting higher paying jobs than will demonstrations of communicative competence (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004).

The lack of a clear understanding of what constitutes CLT, as well as a teachers' own linguistic insecurity, can heighten their sense of anxiety when using CLT in the classroom (Gorusch, 2000). It is likely, therefore, that

these views have contributed to an environment that does not foster CLT and constitute a major impediment against instituting reforms.

Student Perceptions of CLT:

Surveys of native language teaching in classrooms have reported that CLT activities are often not well received by students. The perception that the linguistic ability of Japanese students is too low, that CLT is not academically relevant to them, and the general expectation that students be knowledge-receivers rather than knowledge-sharers have been cited as reasons (Lamie & Lambert 2004). Culture may also affect student motivation in undertaking CLT activities in the classroom. Hofstede has hypothesized that students from countries like Japan with a high inclination toward uncertainty avoidance prefer to see the teacher as expert and feel uncomfortable in many of the open-ended and learner-centered situations that CLT activities often employ (1991). Similarly, Japanese students are thought to be more collectivist than individual, and can be reluctant to participate in communicative activities that single out individuals, preferring activities that are conducted as one large group (Hofstede, 1986).

Pragmatically, students are more likely to be motivated if they feel that classroom activities are relevant to their learning context and if they feel that progress will be rewarded with higher test scores. One criticism of English education in Japan is that assessment measures have not been sufficiently altered to take into consideration the increased emphasis on CLT activities. As long as students feel pressure to pass the university entrance examination, they will expect to be taught "juken-eigo" or English that prepares them to excel on these exams (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). Similarly, if students know that classroom tests will likely be more heavily weighted toward an assessment of their linguistic rather than communicative ability, they will be apt to regard communicative tasks less seriously.

The unique circumstances of Japanese students point to a gentle integration of communicative activities into their English education rather than a complete overhaul of the system. If students are to embrace CLT in the classroom, they need to be given activities that are relevant to their learning context and that reinforce the teacher-centered instruction that they are accustomed to. Moreover, students will be more highly motivated to participate if their gains in communicative proficiency are rewarded with higher test scores.

Geography and demographics

Opportunities to communicate in English can not only reinforce what is learned in the classroom, they can

also act as a powerful motivating force (Samimy and Kobayashi, 2004,). In Japan, however, the classroom is often the sole source of exposure to English, and student motivation is thought to be highly dependent on extraneous factors such as teacher resources, national curriculum goals, and expectations of the community (Ellis, 1996). The country has historically been relatively closed to the outside world and contact with English has been limited. 98.5 percent of the population are ethnically Japanese, and the number of native English speaking residents stands at well below 1 percent (World Factbook, 2012). In addition, the lack of minority communities in countries like Japan can have "a dramatic (negative) effect on second language acquisition" (Tollefson, 1989). Japan also does not have a high rate of international tourism, which often brings with it an infrastructure that increases exposure to English and creates jobs that require practical skills.

These natural barriers to English have contributed to an environment that deters the use of communicative language teaching. However, the situation is changing rapidly. New technology has made exposure to English and foreign cultures readily available. Moreover, the government of Japan has bold plans to greatly increase the number of foreign tourists and residents to Japan (MITI Report, 2009). All of these changes offer greater opportunities for authentic English use that highlight the need for communicative skills. It is likely, therefore, that new technology and changing demographics have already removed some of the historic barriers to English education reform. All that remains is for teachers and policy makers to take advantage of the opportunity.

Testing

The way that high stakes assessment measures have been constructed, used, and interpreted, exerts an enormous impact on English education and its reform. The perception that CLT activities do not adequately prepare students to succeed on institutionalized high stakes language tests has negatively affected the motivation of both students and teachers to undertake CLT activities in the classroom (Littlewood, 2007). However, this issue also highlights the need for the development of better assessment tools. CLT activities often require innovative testing procedures that may not be compatible with the educational infrastructure of secondary education due to large class sizes and linguistic burdens placed on JTEs.

The instruments to evaluate students' communicative competence holistically, such as oral interviews, compositions, and portfolios are more time-consuming and less reliable than paper-and-pencil, discrete-point examinations. Moreover, holistic assessments cannot be easily operationalized with the existing school cultures, which stress values such as objectivity and efficiency (Samimy and Kobayashii, 2004, p.248).

It is entirely possible, therefore, that many teachers do not incorporate CLT activities in the classroom simply because they do not know how to integrate a system of CLT evaluation within their current framework of assessment (Celce-Murcia et al., 1997).

With regards to high stakes testing, most of the criticism to date has focused on the harmful washback effect that the Center Shiken has had on English education in Japan. It exerts a strong influence on curriculum development (Gorsuch, 2000) and as long as students are required to prepare for this high stakes test of reading comprehension, communicative language teaching in the classroom will be compromised. However, recent criticism points to the Center Shiken not as the sole culprit, but only one example of a standardized-test heavy system of assessment that pervades English education. In every grade from junior high school through to university, students are either encouraged or required by their teachers to prepare for a litany of standardized language tests, the cumulative effect of which has exerted the strongest deterrent against the introduction of communicative language teaching (Sarich, 2012).

Conclusion

Failure to have introduced comprehensive reforms to English education in Japan cannot be attributed to one factor alone. The forces that exert an influence on curriculum development tend to act in their own best interests and can unintentionally act contrary to one another. It could be that *kokusaika*, for example, has created the unrealistic expectation that all Japanese, rather than some of them, need to learn to communicate in English. In response, the often short term and rapidly shifting priorities of policy planners have resulted in initiatives that focus on certain areas of English education but ignore others. Teachers have been directed to be more communicative but have not adequately been shown how to do so. Students are warned that communicative English skills will be essential to success in their future careers and yet they are assessed with high stakes tests that prioritize reading comprehension. Some of the forces involved in language education may even have a stake in actively working against reform. It is difficult to imagine cram schools and test makers, organizations that profit heavily from the system as it now exists, to act against their own financial interest and embrace communicative language teaching.

Other countries in Asia have been better equipped to educate in English because of the necessity that comes with an international tourist infrastructure or the need to communicate with minority groups. Until recently, Japan has been a closed society, one with

few international tourists and even fewer English native speaking residents. There is some indication, however, that things are changing. Rapid advances in technology have not only allowed easier access for Japanese to practically develop their English, new software could be instrumental in developing accurate and reliable tests of communicative proficiency. As Japan becomes a more open and multicultural society, improvements to the English education system come closer to becoming a reality. It seems as if necessity, not policy, may have finally spurred the greatest incentive to reform. In terms of the overall education system, Japan has a lot to be proud of. It ranks among the top of OECD countries in proficiency in math, science and literacy while expending one of the lowest percentages of its GDP on education (OECD education ranking, 2009). With only a few modest changes, there is no reason why Japan cannot be a top performer in English as well.

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