

Fundamental Problems with English Education in Japan

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Introduction

When I first came to Japan as an assistant language teacher (ALT) in 1994, there was a great deal of discussion about the need for reform in English education. The prevailing school of thought was that raising national standards of English proficiency was crucial to Japan's future economic success. In order to achieve this goal, there seemed to be general agreement that major changes needed to be made to the way English was taught, learned, and tested within the Japanese education system.

Twenty-four years later, I regularly visit schools and work with English teachers as part of my job in the department of English in the faculty of education at a national university. Based on my experiences in this role, it is difficult to see what changes, if any, have occurred since I first arrived in the country. Now as then, there is still a great deal of talk about the need for change, and several headline initiatives have been launched since that time, including the recent push for "all-English" classes (Barker & Kawasaki, 2017) and the addition of English to the elementary curriculum (Miyazato, 2014), but changes in actual outcomes are much more difficult to identify. According to the 2017 EF English Proficiency Index (English First) Japan currently ranks 37th out of 80 countries in terms of English proficiency, and 9th in Asia, behind both of its major economic rivals, China and Korea.

The frustrating thing for many educators in Japan is that the constant flow of initiatives and directives seems to be accompanied by a staunch refusal by policy makers to acknowledge the fundamental problems that seem so obvious to everyone else involved in the system. In this paper, I will outline what I consider these "elephants in the room" to be, and I will argue that unless and until these are addressed, meaningful change will remain impossible.

Environmental factors

In contrast to the message drilled into young Japanese people, it remains the case that the vast majority of them have no practical need for English. Children see from a very young age that neither their parents nor their teachers speak English even though everyone has studied it for years. It is surely only natural that they expect the same outcome for themselves. Furthermore, young people in Japan do not perceive any real need for English in their own lives or future careers. Although many companies and organizations now pay lip service to the importance of English, and some, including major corporations such as Toyota, have even started requiring their workers to achieve minimum scores on standardized English tests to qualify for promotions (Shimizu, 2006), the truth is that very few workers at these companies actually use English in their jobs, and a lack of English ability remains in no way an obstacle for college graduates seeking employment, even at the largest and most prestigious corporations. In some

cases, such as for returnee students or children of mixed heritage, fluency in English can even be a problem as it leads some to question their fundamental “Japaneseness” (Rose & Fujishima, 1994).

In addition to having no need to communicate in English, Japanese students also lack opportunities to practice it. Few Japanese children will have any contact with proficient speakers of English outside of the school environment, and even within it, real communication between teachers and students is almost exclusively carried out in Japanese. The justification for this seems to be that anything of any importance must be explained in Japanese “in case the students don’t understand.” This means that the only option for Japanese students who wish to become proficient in English is to practice with each other (Barker, 2004), something most are unlikely to want to do. Of course, most students will meet proficient English speakers in the form of ALTs during the years of their compulsory education, but that contact is likely to be limited to classroom interactions based on scripted dialogs and grammar-focused activities.

Most researchers would agree that motivation is the key to language learning (Dornyei & Skehan, 2003), and two of the most important components, at least of instrumental motivation (Gardner, 2001), are need and opportunity. With both these elements absent in the Japanese context, it is difficult to see how children could be expected to find the level of motivation required for success.

Another key element in determining outcomes in language learning is class size. Murphey and Yonesaka (2007) identify 25 as the “tipping point” beyond which effective language education becomes impossible. In Japanese schools, class sizes are almost always more than 30, and classes of 35-40 students are commonplace. Even if every other piece of the puzzle were to magically fall into place, this problem alone would make it impossible to significantly improve the outcomes of English education in Japan.

In addition to the size of classes, it is important to consider the total number of hours spent on the study of a language. Estimates for the amount of study required for success in language learning are notoriously difficult to give because of individual differences in aptitude, input, and learning environments. One frequently quoted set of figures comes from the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in the U.S., an organization that deals with the foreign language training of diplomats and public officials. According to the FSI, the number of hours of study required to achieve “limited working proficiency” in a foreign language depends, among other things, on the “linguistic distance” (Chiswick & Miller, 2005) between the student’s first language and the target language. On this basis, the FSI groups languages into “classes” according to their difficulty for native speakers of English, and Japanese is designated class four, the most difficult to learn.

If Japanese is a class four language for speakers of English based on an assessment of linguistic distance, it stands to reason that English must also be a class four language for native speakers of Japanese. The FSI suggests that a minimum of 2,400 hours of study is required to achieve

limited working proficiency in a class four language, yet according to one estimate (Tsuboya-Newell, 2017), the total number of hours spent on the study of English by Japanese students over the course of their compulsory education is around 780, less than a third of that amount. Furthermore, the FSI figures are based on very small classes of highly motivated adult learners who have been preselected for their aptitude and motivation. Under such conditions as exist in Japan, it would therefore not be unreasonable to double or even triple the FSI figures to get an accurate estimate of the time required for Japanese learners to achieve even a basic level of proficiency in English.

The difficulties facing Japanese students in the classroom pose a serious challenge, but the problem extends far beyond the confines of the school. Possibly because of their experiences in the education system, most Japanese people have a strong aversion to English and a tacit acceptance of its “unlearnability” for them. This attitude is conveyed to children from a very young age, both by the adults around them and by the national broadcast media. In this way, the idea that Japanese people cannot learn English becomes deeply embedded in most Japanese children’s psyche long before they ever even attempt to learn it for themselves.

To summarize, then, Japanese children have nowhere near a sufficient number of hours of study of a language that is nothing like their own in a context where they neither have any need for it nor any opportunity to use it. Furthermore, they study it in an environment in which success is not expected or required by their parents, their teachers, or the society in which they live. Given the enormity of the challenges posed simply by these environmental factors, the mystery should not be that so many students fail, but rather that some of them actually succeed.

Materials

Language learning materials are defined by Tomlinson (2003) as “anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language.” In the context of the Japanese education system, however, the term is normally used to refer to the ministry-approved textbooks that teachers in public schools are required to use. In most EFL contexts, the textbook is seen as a resource that will inevitably need to be adapted and supplemented by the teacher in order to make it work with any given class (Islam & Mares, 2003). In Japan, however, an approved textbook is treated as a manual to be followed religiously, page by page and activity by activity. The philosophy behind this system is to ensure that children nationwide receive standardized teaching regardless of where they live, what school they go to, or who their teacher is. Unfortunately, this practice also discourages teachers from using their initiative to make the material in the textbook more interesting or appropriate for their students.

Another problem is the method by which ministry-approved textbooks are produced. Publishers go through a long, drawn-out process of submitting drafts and re-writing the material based on feedback and input from the approval committee. The result is that the books themselves end up being produced by a committee, something that can be seen from the lists of authors. For example, the book most commonly used in junior high schools in Gifu

Prefecture, New Crown (Negishi, 2016), lists 38 people as authors of the series. Books produced in this way inevitably lack cohesion, consistency, and a central vision.

Although the vast majority of authors of ministry-approved text books are Japanese, there are always one or two foreign names on the lists. This is generally sufficient to convince most Japanese people that the books have undergone a “native speaker check,” and that they can therefore have confidence in both the correctness and naturalness of the language presented. Although these advisers / authors are undoubtedly native speakers of English, a quick check of their backgrounds reveals that very few of them have any real expertise in either EFL or materials development. (One of the people I checked is a professor of music history!) One can only assume, therefore, that their involvement in the project stems from a personal or professional connection with one or more of the Japanese authors.

Furthermore, none of the books identify the extent of involvement of these people, or, more importantly, the question of how much weight has been given to their feedback. It is quite conceivable, and based on the language presented in these books, highly probable, that much of the input from native speakers has been overruled by Japanese contributors who feel that a particular structure or way of presenting or practicing a language item might be “more suitable” or “easier to understand” for Japanese students.

Evidence for this position can be found by opening almost any page of any ministry-approved English textbook. For example, in New Crown 1, you will find conversations like the following one:

Kumi: Look at this flower.
Paul: Oh, let's take it home.
Kumi: Stop.
Paul: What?
Kumi: Don't pick it. Be kind to nature.
Paul: I see. Let's take a picture.

As well as the inappropriate language use (“Stop” would not be polite here), the whole conversation is extremely awkward. Although it does not contain any grammatical mistakes, it is difficult to believe that any native speaker of English would have signed off on this as a natural exchange.

It is often said that one of the problems with English education in Japan is an emphasis on learning grammar over developing the ability to communicate. While this is true, there is another problem that relates not to the amount of grammar taught, but rather to the type (Breen, Candlin, & Waters, 1979). In Japanese universities, English experts have traditionally belonged to either the field of linguistics or the field of literature. The involvement of literature specialists in the education system explains the obsession with translation seen in the tradition of *yakudoku* (Rubrecht, 2003). Teachers with a background in linguistics, on the other hand, focus primarily on the use of grammar as a tool for analyzing English and comparing it with

other languages. The type of grammar they use to do this is far more complex and difficult to understand than the pedagogical grammar that normally forms the basis for EFL syllabuses. It is also extremely limited in its applicability to learning a language for communicative purposes. Because most of the people involved in the creation of the national English syllabus come from this background, textbooks end up dividing the language into chunks that make sense from a structural point of view, but not in terms of their relation to meaning.

One example of this is *meishitekiyouhou*. Japanese children are taught the following key sentences as a set because they all involve the nominalization of verbs. In other words, the central pillar of the lessons is how the sentences are constructed rather than what they mean.

- To play tennis is fun.
- My hobby is to ski.
- I like to watch movies.

The explanation of this grammar is extremely complicated and involves specialist language that is highly inappropriate (and very off-putting) for young children. Unfortunately, this approach runs through all the ministry-approved textbooks, which is one of the main reasons why so many Japanese children leave school hating English. This prioritizing of form over meaning also makes it very difficult for students to apply what they have learned when they want to express their own thoughts and ideas in English.

A final problem with English textbooks in Japan is the inevitable political slant that creeps in as publishers attempt to ensure that their books receive the necessary ministry approval. This bias manifests itself in two ways. The first is a very strong preference for using the explanation of Japanese culture as a vehicle for teaching English. This gives students the impression that the main purpose of learning English is explaining Japan to foreigners. As well as being patently false, this notion is hardly one that could be expected to motivate children to study the language. The second problem is the topics, which are clearly chosen not to reflect the interests of students, but rather the tastes of administrators and bureaucrats. This is particularly evident in high school texts, which focus on themes like charities, the geography of places the children have never heard of, and discussions of environmental and political problems about which they have no knowledge or interest.

Overall, it is immediately clear to anyone with any expertise in materials development that the textbooks used for teaching English in Japan are generally not fit for purpose. The junior high school books are based on stilted and unnatural conversations that do little to show the core meaning of the language point and nothing to convey a sense of the pragmatic use of English, while the high school materials focus on the presentation of reading texts that are of no interest to most of the students combined with explanations of grammar that are inappropriate, overly complicated, and generally of no value to anyone trying to learn the language for communicative purposes.

Teachers

One of the most limiting factors in any attempt to change or improve English education in Japan is the teachers. The problems with teachers stem from four sources: their proficiency, their training, their selection, and the nature of their job.

The first problem is the proficiency levels of English teachers in Japan. An art teacher would raise eyebrows if she admitted that she could not draw very well, as would a music teacher who confessed to being unable to play the piano, but for some reason, no one is surprised to meet an English teacher who cannot speak English. The main reason for this appears to be the emphasis on tests (Kikuchi, 2006; Yoshida, 2003). The consensus among parents and school principals seems to be that as long as the teachers can coach their children well enough to help them pass the tests, it does not really matter whether they can speak the language.

Many people would find it surprising that there is no actual proficiency requirement for English teachers in Japan. Although MEXT says that it is desirable for English teachers to achieve a TOEIC score of 730 or pass the pre-first level of the STEP test, neither of these reflects anything more than an intermediate level of English, and neither is a requirement for employment. Even given these woefully low aspirations, however, a 2016 survey of teachers found that only 30 percent of middle school teachers and 57 percent of high school teachers had achieved the levels recommended by the government (Nikkei Asian Review, 2016). It seems clear that proficiency in English is not a job requirement for English teachers in Japan.

The second problem is the training of teachers in general, and of English teachers in particular. In order to receive a teaching license, university students are required to complete a period of three or four weeks of teaching practice at a school. During this period, they learn by watching a more experienced teacher and teaching a limited number of classes by themselves. The problem is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to affect real change in a system when the new teachers are being taught by the old ones. Teachers who have always taught English in Japanese using grammar-translation techniques pass on their methods to new recruits, most of whom were taught that way themselves and have no experience of any other approach. In this way, the cycle continues.

Another problem with the system of teaching practice is that in addition to being extremely short, it is generally just a matter for the student teachers of jumping through hoops and displaying what the school considers to be an appropriate attitude. No matter how poorly a student teacher performs, and no matter how ill-suited they might appear to be to the profession, it has been my experience that everyone passes provided they show up on time, submit the appropriate reports and papers, and do not overly upset their host institution. Students therefore graduate from university with teaching licenses based on a level of practical training that would barely be considered an introduction to the profession in other parts of the world.

Before they graduate from university, students who want to become teachers in the public school system take an employment exam known as the *kyosai*. This involves a multiple-choice test followed several weeks later by one or two interviews for candidates who pass the written exam. The interviews typically last around 20 minutes, and the interviewers are generally principals and vice-principals of public schools, or representatives of the board of education.

On the basis of this limited selection procedure, successful candidates are guaranteed lifetime employment in the public school system. No matter how incompetent or bad at their job they may turn out to be, they cannot be dismissed unless they commit a crime or become physically unable or unwilling to perform the job. Students in Japan generally graduate university at the age of 22, and the age of retirement for public school teachers is 60, which means that every time a mistake is made in the selection process (and no selection process can claim to be perfect), literally thousands of students will suffer the consequences over the following 40 years. This is not the case in many other countries where teachers are continually monitored and underperforming members of staff can be removed.

Another issue is the lack of a requirement for prospective English teachers to study in an English-speaking country. In the U.K., anyone wishing to qualify as a teacher of a foreign language must live for at least six months in a country in which that language is spoken. In Japan, there is no requirement for prospective teachers of English to even have visited an English-speaking country, let alone lived in one. Of course, many people who want to become English teachers do take the opportunity to study abroad, but many do not. The result is large numbers of English teachers who have no experience of using the language as part of their daily lives, something that inevitably limits their ability to teach it.

There are also cultural factors that diminish the effectiveness of Japanese English teachers and their ability to serve as role models for the students. In Japan, English was traditionally seen as “the language of the enemy,” and there is still a strong prejudice against the idea of Japanese people using English with each other. As a result, even teachers who have a very high level of English are extremely reluctant to use it either with colleagues or with students outside the classroom. This conveys the very strong message to students that English is something to be studied, not something to be used. With these signals coming from their teachers, it is hardly surprising that the students make no attempt to use the language themselves.

The final problem for teachers of English in Japan is one that concerns teachers of every subject, which is the excessive workload they face in their jobs. Most of my former students who have gone on to become teachers report that they have almost no time to plan or prepare lessons, and that they are constantly exhausted from tasks that have nothing to do with their role as a teacher of English. I recently met a young teacher who left his job at a junior high school after two years because of the pressures of work. He told me that when he started, he worked for 74 days consecutively without a day off. It is difficult to see how teachers under this kind of pressure could be expected to provide high quality lessons in the subjects they are employed to teach.

Expectations

Possibly the most fundamental problem with English education in Japan is the unrealistic level of expectations. Brown and Yamashita (1995a; 1995b) found in their review of Japanese university English exams that texts were used that were way beyond the difficulty of anything students were likely to have met in their high school studies. In many cases, students were being asked to read texts that would be challenging for an educated native speaker of the language.

Although improvements have been made in recent years to the “Center Test” that all students who wish to enter a national university have to take, far less progress has been made in the development of the tests created by individual universities. It is often the case that many of the teachers involved in the creation of these exams are not even language specialists, and even among the few who are, it is extremely rare to find anyone with any expertise in testing. The result is almost always the selection of inappropriate and excessively difficult texts that go far beyond anything students could realistically hope to be able to understand. Expecting students to meet impossible goals like this is demotivating, and it sets the system up for failure.

Unfortunately, the unrealistic expectations do not end with university entrance exams. Within the university environment, it is amazing how many teachers expect students who can barely introduce themselves in English to be able to read technical texts and give academic presentations in the language.

The same problem can be seen even at the education policy-making level. In the lead-up to the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, the Minister for Education has stated that he wants young Japanese people to be able to “discuss and debate topical issues with people from other countries in English” by the time they graduate from high school. Given that very few Japanese high school graduates would be able to do that in their own language, the fact that a senior government representative sees this as a realistic goal for English learners gives serious cause for concern.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is not to suggest either that the situation of English education in Japan is hopeless or that change is impossible. Many teachers of English in this country do an excellent job, and a surprising number of students emerge from their six years of compulsory English education with at least some ability to communicate in the language.

Nevertheless, the problems I have outlined here are ones that I see as being so fundamental that it is difficult to see how the overall situation can be improved without addressing them. Unless major changes are made to the learning environment (e.g., reduced class sizes, increased number of hours), to the development and use of English teaching materials, and to the training and selection of teachers, the effects of new policy initiatives such as adding English classes to the elementary school curriculum are likely to be minimal. Indeed, if a similar

approach to teaching English is taken in elementary schools to the one used in junior high and high schools, a far more likely result is that Japanese children will simply learn to hate English sooner.

Many of the issues I have addressed here are ones that cannot easily or quickly be changed. Given this reality, the only sensible way forward for English education policy in Japan is a drastic rethinking of goals and expectations. If policy makers had a better appreciation of the scale and nature of the task facing Japanese students of English and their teachers, they would be better placed to develop appropriate aims and goals. It is therefore the role of educators and practitioners to do everything we can to raise their awareness of these fundamental problems.

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