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POLICY CHANGE IN TEACHER TRAINING: CHALLENGES TO ENHANCE ENGLISH EDUCATION IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

English language education and the lack of quality in its practical application in Japan has been a very common topic of discussion over the years. The main reason is that very little improvement has been noted in overall English ability among Japanese students despite a series of policy changes by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan. This paper examines the motivations for these policy initiatives and the problems associated with their implementation through documentation review and analysis. The findings of this research indicate that the lack of qualified teachers is likely responsible for the current poor English education environment and argue that improving teacher training programs will function as the key to enhancing English education in Japan. We clarify the confusing situation of teacher training and lay a foundation for future work which complements the current policies on English education.

Keywords: Policy change, Teacher Training, English Education, Japan.



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INTRODUCTION

English language education and the lack of quality in its practical application in Japan has become a very common topic for discussion over the years. The main reason is that very little improvement has been noted in overall English ability among Japanese students despite a series of policy changes by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), Japan. According to the English Proficiency Index Report released in 2013, Japan ranked 26th among 60 countries where English is not used as a native language (Crienglish.com, 2013). This is lower than the 22nd rank recorded in 2012, and shows that the average level of Japanese learners' English proficiency has declined despite a continuing increase in Japanese government investment in English language education.

One factor contributing to the problems in Japan's English education is the lack of qualified teachers for effective English teaching. Many Japanese teachers are unfamiliar with teaching methods for English education because they have not received sufficient training as language instructors. Standardized teacher training classes in higher education in Japan have been non-existent and teachers of "inconsistent caliber" were and continue to be employed to teach English at various educational institutions. Continuous and effective teacher training, however, is indispensable for English education (Edge & Mann, 2014). Thus, it has been proposed that teachers should get involved in self-training programs without supervision (Borg, 2014; Collier, 1985; Mathew, 2014), but Japanese teachers teaching English usually fail to do this because of their heavy workload (Keiichi, 2008).

Another factor is the failure of the Japanese government to adequately implement Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a learning paradigm that has had a positive effect on language teaching and learning throughout the world (Sasajima, Nishino, Ehara, & Nagamine, 2012). Communicative Language Teaching has not been employed as an idealized teaching method due to various situational constraints (Sakui, 2003), and the actual educational practice is far from what is being described in the policies for English language teaching of Japan (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009).

In fact, the lack of qualified teachers is also partially responsible for the failure in adopting CLT in English teaching (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). Improving teacher training serves as the key to more effective English education in Japan. The purpose of this paper is to analyze this poor quality of English language education in Japan from the perspective of teacher training. We provide a general description of the changes in policies regarding English education in Japan, offer an explanation for insufficient teacher training at the national level and highlight the key points of teacher training to enhance CLT implementation.

History of Policy Change in Japanese English Education

i. The Enhancement of Communicative Competence in English Teaching

During the Meiji period, a Japanese era extending from September 1868 through July 1912 during which Japanese society moved from being an isolated feudal society to its modern form, English teaching was adopted as part of the educational system to enable Japan to absorb as much information as possible regarding technological advances in the West. The focus of language learning, which included English as well as other European languages, was to develop reading and writing skills through the study of grammar and vocabulary (Sato, 2002).



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Communicative activities were rarely encouraged (Kitao & Kitao, 1995). Butler and Iino (2005, p. 28), for example, describe the situation beginning from the early 1900s:

“English became primarily an academic pursuit, learned mainly for the purpose of reading written texts rather than as a means of communication. Even after the nationalistic movement of this period ended, English was widely adopted as a screening process for elite education. As a result, the so-called juken eigo (English for the purpose of entrance examinations) became the main goal of learners rather than English for communication”.

Japan’s reemergence on the international scene following the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 made it clear there was a lack of English speaking ability among the general population. Twenty years later, however, the speed of change regarding English education was still slow. The Ministry of Education’s (now known as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, i.e. MEXT) Course of Study Guidelines did not yet discuss teaching English for communicative purposes. Nevertheless, there was a general consensus that the content, goals, and structure of English classes in Japanese schools required a change of policy to improve the teaching and learning of English (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009).

To address this matter, the Ministry of Education established a variety of new educational policies intended to be applied at the national level. A new Course of Study was issued in 1989 which, for the first time, clearly established that the objective of English education was to develop students’ communicative abilities (O’Donnell, 2005). Major revisions were also made to the general English curriculum and oral communication courses were required for high school students (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). The Ministry of Education initiative contained descriptions of the four essential skills needed to master a foreign language and encouraged educators to teach in that direction. In addition, teachers were to commit themselves to developing a “positive attitude towards communicating in English” in their students (Gorsuch, 2001).

Expectations for the new Course of Study proved to be higher than the ability to practically apply the new ideals. Many were dissatisfied with the implementation of the Course of Study guidelines and in 2003, MEXT issued the Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities (MEXT, 2003). This included a concrete set of objectives to improve the teaching of English. The plan suggested sending at least 10,000 high school students abroad to study English every year, besides promoting the use of English as a subject in elementary schools. It also encouraged criterion-based assessment of ability through such methods as the TOEFL or TOEIC tests. Additionally, more than 100 high schools, which were to be known as “Super English Language High Schools” (SELHi), were created for researching new methods of teaching English as a foreign language. One of the principal implications of this new initiative was the stress placed upon standardized proficiency measures, such as the TOEIC test, as a means of measuring the effectiveness of the new plan.

Since the major goal of CLT is to intensify the language learner’s communicative competence by developing the ability to express one’s intentions (Richards, 2006), MEXT fully endorsed the use of CLT in the New Course of Study (MEXT, 2008a, 2010). However, MEXT did not give precise details of what CLT entailed. This allowed schools to interpret the concept as they wished. The Course of Study, however, did establish specific objectives (Otani, 2013). MEXT (2008b) encouraged teachers “to enable students to understand the speaker’s” intention when listening to English and “to enable students to talk about their own thoughts in English” (p. 1), “to speak continuously using various techniques such as linking words” (p. 2), and “they should be able to perform language activities in which



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they have to think about how to express themselves in a way appropriate to a specific situation and condition” (p. 3). This was intended to change the roles of English language teachers and their students. Teachers were no longer encouraged to teach about English, but rather offer the opportunity for the students to state their own opinions in English (Ano, 2012). Kanatani (2012) argues that the purpose was to change English teachers’ perceptions of English teaching from teacher-oriented to learner-oriented.

ii. Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET Program)

Working together with the Ministry of Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education helped to create the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET program) in 1987. The JET program introduced native English speaking teachers into the classrooms of many Japanese middle and high schools as “Assistant Language Teachers” (ALTs). It was expected that the JET program would “provide increased opportunities for interaction in the schools between ALTs and Japanese teachers of foreign languages,” and through this merging of abilities foster the teaching of communicative English (Gorsuch, 1998; see also Wada, 2015). Interaction between Japanese English teachers and ALTs was intended to be a powerful stimulus for instructional change, eventually leading to interactive team teaching which would develop into communicative English practices.

One of the expectations of the JET program was to raise the awareness of the Japanese teachers on the need to communicate in English and to cooperate actively with the ALTs. The ALTs were considered to be a means of assistance to the Japanese teachers in teaching. Team-teaching was envisioned by Brumby and Wada (1990) as a joint effort to be made by the Japanese English teacher and the ALT where they are actively participating with the students in communicative activities. It was expected to be the optimal method of bringing a classroom situation into contact with the actual language learners (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1994). This was considered to be the ideal as the two teachers in the classroom were from different cultural backgrounds. One shared a common culture and language with the students and the other teacher would be a native speaker of the language being taught. It was expected that both the Japanese English teachers and the students would benefit from this arrangement;

“... the students would be given good reason to use English in the classroom as a means of communication, and would be provided with an opportunity to become aware of differing cultural values.” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1994).

“... the teachers would be enabled to present a variety of situations (e.g. demonstrating dialogues between two persons), to develop teaching/learning materials, and to have a better chance to develop as a teacher” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1994).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

English education in Japan needs innovation to produce more desirable outcomes. The effect of English education relies on the policies of the national administrative institutions and these policies exert a decisive influence on how educational activities are conducted. Focusing on teacher training, the objective of this study is to examine the



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motivations of policy initiatives for English education in Japan and the problems associated with implementing the policy changes. Factors which affect the progress of English education in Japan are to be discovered so that discussions can be carried out to propose proper solutions for correcting the current situation. By doing this, the authors hope that the confusing situation of English education in Japan can be clarified, which lays the foundation for future work in complementing the current policies and promoting innovations in English education.

METHOD

The mentioned problems regarding English education in Japan are investigated through a qualitative method. Qualitative research typically relies on three methods for gathering information; interviews, observations, and document review (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2015). Document review and analysis is the most important technique for studies regarding policy change (Owen, 2013). Over time, “there has been an increase in the number of research reports and journal articles that mention document analysis as part of the methodology” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Bowen describes document analysis as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material”. Similar to other qualitative research methods, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meanings, achieve understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009; see also Berg, 2004; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2014; Rapley, 2007).

A variety of documents can be used for review and systematic analysis and evaluation. In this study, we adopt official documentary materials and institutional files from the Japanese central government. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology (MEXT) is the main data source for detailed review and analysis. We also examine major studies which focus on issues within the scope of English education.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Difficult Access to CLT due to Insufficient Training in Teaching

Based on the documents analyzed, the findings of this research indicate that the lack of qualified teachers is likely responsible for the current poor English education environment and argue that enhancing teacher training programs is the key to improving English education in Japan (Kurosawa, 2011). Insufficient pre-service and in-service training programs for English teachers had resulted in a lack of qualified teachers and staff to support the MEXT policy implementation (Ishihama, 2002; Wakimoto, 2013; Ishida, 2001).

While the purpose of the policy changes regarding English education in Japan was to introduce the communicative language teaching method to English teaching, structural impediments contributed to difficulties in the inclusion and implementation of CLT techniques in the English language classroom (Gorsuch, 1998; see also Tsukamoto, 2014; Sarich, 2013; Waziri, 2012; Nishino, 2011). Once again, insufficient pre-service and in-service teacher education was determined to be the main impediment (Gorsuch, 2000).



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Yakudoku

The concepts of CLT foreshadowed a shift in emphasis away from stressing primarily grammatical competence as communicative competence was recognized as a much broader concept. It emphasized “knowing what to say and how to say it appropriately based on the situation, the participants, and their roles and intentions” (Richards, 2006). However, yakudoku, a traditional method of grammar translation continues to be the main way of teaching in English classrooms and instructions on the reading-centered university entrance examinations took up most of the time for classroom teaching (see Suzuki 1999; Takeshiro & Tsuneo, 1994; Narita, 2014).

Yakudoku stresses the word-by-word translation into Japanese of English passages with a heavy reliance on grammatical explanations given almost entirely in Japanese (Bamford, 1993; Gorsuch, 1998). Because of a lack of competence and experience in English language and pedagogical methods, Japanese English teachers are unable to teach students in the target language (Uno, 2013). They tend to conduct classes in Japanese and give grammatical explanations in Japanese. The students have very few opportunities to make English sounds except when asked to repeat after the teacher during reading exercises. Because of the strongly teacher-centered method of instruction, yakudoku techniques have been described as a major road block to CLT introduction into Japanese classrooms (Henrichsen, 1989).

Furthermore, Yakudoku has also been historically used as a relatively convenient method to compensate for English language teachers’ deficiencies in English language usage. Unfortunately, these tendencies continue to this day (Nishino, 2011; Wakabayashi, 1987). However, if the intent is to have the students effectively communicate in English, then teachers need to receive more training in order to function more effectively in the classroom to help students develop their communicative skills.

Insufficiency in the Certificate System for English Teachers

Many EFL teacher education programs in Japanese universities do not have a sufficiently deep level of instruction in teaching methodology and often do not provide sufficient practical experience in teaching (Kizuka, 1997). The teaching certificate system is open. Students can acquire a teaching certificate in any national, public, or private university as long as the required number of credits for the teaching certificates is provided (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2011). Some students are able to get teaching certificates in English language instruction from universities that even do not have a full-time faculty of English education. These schools take advantage of the teaching certificate system and are more concerned with obtaining tuition fees than providing teacher preparation (Kizuka, 1997). Moreover, due to the implicit standard for evaluation of scholastic competence, students lacking a desirable level of English proficiency are admitted to teaching certificate programs (Yamasaki, 2006).

The consequences of this lack of teacher training is a system which is unable to provide the fundamental changes in instruction methodology deemed necessary to make the learning of communicative English possible. Further, because of the inadequate teacher training, teachers tend to rely on methods of teaching that they themselves experienced when they were taught in school. One could assert that the poor quality of teacher training is a contributing factor in the continuation of the yakudoku method of instruction (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009).



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While there is some government ordered in-service teacher training, this usually only takes place during first year orientation for new teachers. In-service training for veteran teachers is very limited. Although MEXT (2014) establishes the guidelines, the execution and planning of these training sessions are left to the municipal and prefectural Boards of Education. This has two negative repercussions. The first is that the content and frequency of these training programs varies from prefecture to prefecture. The second is that while there are many private high schools in Japan, in-service training and first year orientation are only available to public high schools (Gorsuch, 2000). Some prefectures may not even develop in-service teacher training because of budget restrictions. Thus, it is clear that standard in-service training for English teachers is not consistent at the national level (Gorsuch, 2000). Nevertheless, "it is essential for teachers to continue their professional development throughout their careers" if Japan wants to establish new teaching styles that are "in accordance with the current needs of learners and society" (Suzuki, Matsumoto, & Gaynor, 2002; see also Kurosawa, 2011, Uno, 2013).

Dilemma of Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) in Team Teaching

The assumption in team-teaching for English classes is that the two teachers should work together. It was expected that they would build on each other's strengths with some educational roles better performed by the Japanese English teacher and other roles better suited to the ALT (Tajino & Tajino, 2000). In order to realize these intentions, cooperation between the teachers is necessary. But in reality, high level cooperation between teachers is not always achieved. Much evidence has come forward discussing some of the difficulties encountered when teachers are encouraged to cooperate in the classroom. The Japanese English teachers have standard criticisms of the ALTs and the ALTs have their own criticisms of the Japanese English teachers. The following criticisms (Tanabe, 1990) are as relevant today as they were in the past:

"...the ALT is not properly trained to lead the class, has no experience as an educator, has little in-depth knowledge of the English language, and is not responsible for the class" (Tanabe, 1990).

"...The JTE (Japanese English Teacher) does not provide the ALT with information on how the class should operate, regards the ALT as a 'human tape recorder', and thinks that the ALT is too young to take on any responsibility" (Tanabe, 1990).

Numerous teachers (both ALTs and Japanese English teachers) appear to be puzzled about their roles and suffer some anxiety when confronted with team-teaching. Kumabe (1996) notes that because of confusion about their roles ALTs are often confined to the role of 'human tape recorders' and the Japanese English teachers are reduced in importance to the role of 'interpreters'. The main person responsible for developing the JET Program, Wada (1996) acknowledges that the Japanese English teachers are somewhat puzzled by their roles in team-teaching. Because they are uncomfortable about their roles, he even suggested that it was the Japanese English teachers who had the strongest reaction to the institutionalization of team-teaching. This seems to show that it is the teachers who also need to create a constructive attitude regarding intercultural communication.



Key Elements in Teacher Training

i. Class size

Japanese education, with regard to the students and teachers, is based on the concept of homerooms. Every year students are assigned to a homeroom. A typical Japanese junior or senior high school homeroom can have between 35 and 40 students. There is a homeroom teacher who assumes administrative duties for the students in his or her homeroom. For most subjects, teachers go to individual homerooms to instruct the students. This is the case with English classes. The common features of these classrooms are large numbers of students and teacher-centered lessons, which indicate limited communication in teaching.

Applying CLT techniques in these conditions has proved to be rather difficult. Primarily, class sizes are too large to effectively conduct CLT at Japanese high schools (Cook, 2010; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Since CLT is essentially student-oriented, classes cannot be based on an original course plan or syllabus (Savignon & Wang, 2003). With ordinary teacher-centered classes, such as those in the sciences and humanities, it is easier to put the students into a set course that will prepare them for future entrance examinations. On the other hand, if the goal is actually language acquisition (Harmer, 2007), English language teachers need to understand the problems that individual students are having with second language acquisition. All students show different problems with language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman, 2008). Some have grammar issues while others may have difficulty in remembering vocabulary. In order to effectively teach English by applying CLT techniques, teachers need the ability to respond to the needs of all the students in the classroom within the prescribed class time allotment without extra class hours. But with the tradition of non-native teacher-oriented classes, inadequate communication among students, and with almost no contact with English outside the classroom, applying CLT techniques in Japan appears to be very difficult (Nishino, 2008).

Teacher training is of special significance when taking the large class size into account. The large class size is possibly the result of a lack of qualified English teachers. This problem may be solved or improved through enhanced teacher training. Teachers should learn how to organize their classes when establishing new curriculum in order to facilitate themselves in promoting CLT.

ii. Textbooks

When discussing the inefficiency of English education in Japan, the textbook issue must be addressed. Browne and Wada's (1998) study suggests that the contents of English textbooks have one of the strongest influences on teacher performance. The books are selected and approved by MEXT and their use is mandatory. The books are intended to help the students prepare for university entrance exams. Further, all the textbooks arrive with highly detailed teacher's manuals that promote teacher oriented grammar translation exercises. This type of teaching continues to be the most popular form of instruction (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Saito, 2011).

Another issue regarding the Ministry mandated textbooks is the excessively difficult nature of the reading passages. Brown and Yamashita's (1995a, 1995b) study showed that the reading passages on university entrance exams were exceptionally difficult. Kikuchi (2006) duplicated the study of a decade before to examine whether the difficulty of the reading passages had been eased due to alterations in educational policy. He found little change in



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the readability of the exam passages. The difficulty of the textbooks was intended to prepare students for university entrance exams. Browne (1996, 1998) has shown that the exceptionally difficult nature of these exams may be a major factor in the disappointing condition of English education in Japanese high schools. Actually, the readability of these Ministry-endorsed textbooks is “often rated as far harder even than un-simplified texts for native speakers in terms of vocabulary difficulty” (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009).

To address this situation, teachers should learn how to create or edit textbooks that are more effective for CLT. Japanese teachers rely heavily on the materials created for Japanese English teachers and circulated within their own small group. They should try to make use of educational sources that focus more on current events. Some online sources contain information about cultures in other countries, which are very useful for improving students’ intercultural communication awareness. Students can get opportunities to learn about the cultural background in other countries and hopefully become more confident in communicating once they have topics to talk about with foreigners.

iii. Intercultural Communication Awareness

Japan has long been criticized as a closed country (Zhang & McCornac, 2013; Zhang & Steele, 2012). It has made efforts to preserve the originality of its own culture and reject the acceptance of many cultural factors from abroad (Zhang, 2006). This negative attitude toward other cultures may be one of the factors causing the unsatisfactory outcome in English education.

Table 1
Number of Students Registered in US Universities

Countries	2002	2007	2012	2014
China	63,211	67,723	194,029	274,439
India	66,836	83,833	100,270	102,763
South Korea	49,046	62,392	72,295	68,047
Japan	46,810	35,282	19,966	19334

(Source: Institute of International Education)

According to the survey held by Institute of International Education (Table 1), the number of Japanese students registered at US universities has been decreasing rapidly over the last ten years in stark contrast to the rising number from countries such as China, India and South Korea. Although demographic factors have had an effect, the reluctance of the Japanese students to study in US universities is possibly the result either of their lack of confidence in communicating using English or their fear of becoming involved with a new culture. Teachers should equip themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to communicate ideas not only about language, but also about other cultures in English. In this way, they can help students develop better communicative competence in English through the education process.



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CONCLUSION

English language instruction using CLT techniques in Japan cannot be improved without enhancing training activities for English teachers. These teachers need not only to improve their competence in the English language but also must develop knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of English-speaking countries and communities. Developing these skills will enhance their teaching methods at the same time. At the current stage, there is a clear gap between the goals outlined in the Ministry's course of study guidelines and the reality of teaching practices. The specified goals of the guidelines call for developing student communicative competence. It has also been seen that, for whatever reason, Japanese English teachers "are either unwilling or unable to teach English in a communicative manner" (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). Their reluctance to teach the class in a communicative way indicates a tendency to escape from the designated objective. Their low level of English proficiency prevents them from managing communication in English with their students, and the ALTs as well. The problems regarding English teaching in Japan mainly arise from the unacceptable level of knowledge, skills and techniques possessed by the English teachers themselves. Overall, the insufficient amount of teacher training for English teachers has had a negative effect on CLT implementation in English teaching in Japan.

On a positive note, in November 2015, the Education Ministry decided to start a standard curriculum for teacher-training courses in universities because of the surprisingly low proficiency in English of many educators (Murai, 2015; see also National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2010). Nevertheless, raising the level of English education is not the sole task of English teachers or policymakers. English learning activities are closely related to the attitude and sense of value of the whole society (Mori, 2008). If English is a foreign language that is being taught and used only within the classroom, then one can expect that the outcome of the learning activities will not bear fruit. Perhaps the time has come for Japan to consider how to make a connection between the English language and its practical use in daily life. If foreign cultures can be seen in a more positive light, evaluated and accepted for what they are without making a comparison to Japanese culture, then Japanese students may be more able to develop a positive attitude to other parts of the world. This change in perspective could have the effect of motivating students to seriously pursue the study of another language with the goal being development of the ability and interest to communicate with people from different cultures. While the use of CLT in the classroom is a useful strategy for instruction, perhaps this practical shift in societal perception would be equally effective as an approach to learning.

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