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ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN JAPAN: A PARTICULAR TYPE OF POLICY-MAKING PROCESS

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The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, responding to a sense of crises in language education, has announced a drastic revision of education policy to strengthen the Japanese people's communicative abilities.

Taking into account Japan's unique geo-historical influences and the current international competition in a world rapidly changing through globalization, will the new policy be successful?

Traditionally, the Japanese people have been isolated, both through the geographic effects of being an island and the social effects of three centuries of government-enforced isolation from foreign countries. Although Japan was the first Asian country to modernize by adopting Western science and technology, the partnership Japan entered into in order to gain this knowledge did not encourage a two-way exchange of technological achievements and cultural values. Instead, Japan translated Western texts and became a passive importer of ideas rather than an active partner in cultural exchange, a process that continues to exert a profound influence on Japan.

Even after the Second World War, the Japanese continued to mentally segregate themselves. Foreign language education had minor and somewhat negative place in the educational world. Japanese was used and teaching policy was ineffective despite long-term efforts of the populace to master a foreign language, usually English, and business complained of governmental indifference to foreign language education. The current new policy is welcomed as an ambitious attempt to redress the faults of previous policies, which had been late in recognizing educational shortcomings.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Current facts

In this paper, I would like to present a general overview of the development of current Japanese TEFL, with emphasis on its historical foundations as well as current conditions.

Some demographic background may be helpful, for the scale is impressive. Japan has a population of some 120 million. With parents having an average of 1.4 children, it is an aging nation, which will see 40% of the population above 60 years old within the next 20 years. Currently 30% of the universities have vacant places. Still, it can be said that Japan is overpopulated, since food importation is a vital necessity.

Of the economy, it can be said that it is gigantic, though current conditions are severe, which, of course, affect our educational system.

It is still, even in this modern era, relatively isolated. By plane, it takes four to five hours to the Philippines, 10 to 12 hours to Europe, and eight to 14 hours to the United States.

We can, however, be proud of the school system. In round numbers, there are a total of 65,000 schools, of which nearly 600 are public, with 21.5 million students. There are nearly 500 universities, with 2.7 million students; 600 junior colleges, with .3 million students, 5,500 high schools, with four million students, 11,000 junior high schools, with four million students, and 24,000 elementary schools with seven million students.

TEFL is obligatory in junior- and senior-high school, but optional in elementary school as of 2002. It is obligatory at 60% of the universities, with two to six credits required by the majority of universities, and more than five at others. Previously there had been eight obligatory credits until a revision in 1980 by the University Council, an influential organization for making curricula.

The school system, though it certainly follows a top-down policy making process, is becoming increasingly responsive to suggestions (or criticism) from both educators and the public. One example of responsiveness to teachers is the number of hours of English education in junior and senior high schools. In junior high school, English is taught in three, 45-minute classes per week, 35 weeks per year, with hopes for an additional hour. In senior high school, there are five, 50-minute classes per week. Previous to a 1977 Course of Study Revision, junior high schools had some leeway of either three or four hours, and senior high schools had four. The 1977 revision introduced a mandatory three-hour week for junior high schools and numerous specified courses for senior high schools, with the overall result being a decrease in class hours and required credits. These reductions were not welcomed by teachers, and accordingly, in the 1989 Course of Study, the hours were revised to their current levels.

Revisions in the course of study occur every ten years, and in the latest course of study, the number of optional courses allowed to both junior and senior high school students has been increased, in part, due to public wish.

However, before going into further detail about current TEFL conditions, I would like to mention some of the factors which have contributed to them, which include geography as well as history.

I believe it is reasonable to accept that there are clear distinctions in the Japanese national experience which have affected current TEFL conditions, and an understanding of them is relevant.

1.2 Geo-socio-historical factors shaping Japanese TEFL

Japan is a mountainous, highly elongated island nation, with a four-season climate. I believe this diversity of both terrain and season, along with their accompanying changes in daily life and diet, have provided a natural stimulus for the Japanese people.

Japan, however, lacks natural resources, and is on the rim of the Asian continent, and the isolation enforced by such geography has both helped and hurt the development of Japanese culture historically. On the one hand, it made contact with

other nations limited and difficult, but on the other hand, it preserved the native culture against linguistic and cultural invasion.

Even during times when aspects of foreign culture were being brought into Japan, the influence that was adopted was also adapted. It was usually changed to fit more easily into the existing cultural matrix. One obvious example is written Japanese. Although it is based on Chinese ideographs, or *kanji*, it also has two phonetic alphabets as well as Roman script and Arabic numbers.

Furthermore, still today, the Japanese tend to be monoracial, monolingual and monocultural, and Japan may be one of the few countries whose national and racial features are congruent.

2. HISTORICAL FACTORS AND CURRENT CONDITIONS VIS-À-VIS JAPANESE TEFL

2.1 Distant historical factors

Prehistoric period

In prehistoric times, there is archeological evidence of contact between Japanese and people living on the Korean peninsula, though such evidence is fragmentary.

6th century

However, during the 6th century, there was large-scale cultural importation of Buddhist thought from China, supported by cooperative efforts between the Japanese rulers and the Chinese dynasty. Bright young men were sent to China to absorb teachings from the mainland. In a span of several years, it seems that they mastered the four basic language skills in the Chinese language through immersing themselves in the culture and studying Buddhist readings. It may be said that this was an example of a communicative approach to language learning. However, when these young men returned to Japan to teach the writing system and the cultural knowledge they had gained, they established a different pattern of TEFL, which even today exerts its influence. Although they used original Chinese texts for instruction, they taught in Japanese. For the majority of learners, the foreign language was used to gain cultural understanding, but not for actual communication between two peoples. In practice, it resulted in a grammar-translation approach to language learning.

This method of using foreign-language textbooks for knowledge, but teaching in the Japanese mother tongue, continued through the Tokugawa era, when the government used Confucian and Buddhist moral doctrines from China to help justify its structuring of society and consolidation of power, while at the same time enforcing a policy of national isolation. Furthermore, this method was reinforced during Japan's modernization.

2.2 Recent historical factors: Three major stages

Modernization and westernization from 1868 (Feudalism to capitalism)

Popularly, Japan's modernization (and Westernization) is thought to start with the Meiji era from 1868, when the newly restored imperial government imported Western scientific and cultural knowledge. To do so, the government invited to Japan some 200 foreign experts in such fields as the political and social sciences, economics, the natural sciences (including technological fields), and the military sciences.

The specialists did not speak Japanese and taught their subjects in their own languages, usually English, French or German. The Japanese learners learned the foreign language along with the specialization. Of course, they could not understand the Western language at first, but they gradually came to be able to grasp the language at near-native levels. Thus, the equivalent of a content-based, direct method of language learning was practiced. However, when these Japanese students began to teach what they had learned, they reverted back to the earlier Chinese model and used Japanese as the medium of instruction to teach the foreign-language textbooks.

In such a way, technological knowledge was spread rapidly, but foreign languages were seen as a means of gaining knowledge, not as tools for communicating with other peoples. One result of this was that, for the common people, Western things remained exotic, and foreign languages remained the privilege of specialists. This is a pattern that has been repeated throughout Japan's history of relations with foreign countries. Essentially, the Japanese people have been limited in direct experience with international communication because the importation of knowledge has been the job of a limited number of elite specialists, people who in modern terms of intercultural communication theory would be called "gatekeepers."

Another result of the emphasis on using foreign languages almost exclusively for the import of information was that the flow of information about cultures was essentially one-sided, from the West to Japan. Very little knowledge about Japanese thought and culture was transmitted to the West.

Thus, in spite of a massive amount of internationalization and Westernization, the geographic and cultural isolation of Japan was able to reassert itself during the modern era.

Post World War II American influence (1945-1985)

The second stage of modern Japanese TEFL began with the American occupation of Japan after World War II. Obviously there was a need for direct communication with the military authorities, and one would expect that there would be a massive change to a communicative approach to TEFL. However, while it is true that those actively engaged in dealing with the occupation forces adopted an audio-lingual approach to language learning, the universities retained their traditional emphasis on a grammar-translation approach and a cultural-transmission orientation, and enforced this attitude through their entrance examinations. This traditional approach continued despite increasing need for communicative English among Japanese businesses, which were expanding internationally.

From around 1965 to 1980, the mixture of these influences could be seen, resulting in communicative efforts in junior high schools and traditional methods in senior high schools. However, it was still a period of contradictions in Japanese TEFL.

1986: Government-directed internationalization

In 1986, the Japanese Ministry of Education began to clarify matters by issuing a course of study which emphasized an individuality-centered teaching policy, discarding the previous pattern of forcing students to conform to limited national standards.

This individuality-centered policy remains to this day and continues to evolve. In a sense, it may be possible to link this evolving policy with the demands brought about by the recent revolution in information technology, a concept worthy of future investigation.

2.3 Current conditions for Japanese TEFL

I trust the preceding background of socio-historical factors in Japanese TEFL will deepen our understanding of my next topic, which is the current situation for TEFL in Japan. First I would like to describe its top-most level bureaucratic framework, and second, I would like to describe the most recent policy decisions, since they are of special importance.

Bureaucratic framework

In Japan, foreign language education is placed under the general education policies set by the national government. There are three top-level bodies charged with the formulation and implementation of educational policies for all public schools, from elementary school to university. In practice, the private schools also adhere closely to these government guidelines.

At the highest level, there is the Central Council for Education. This is a body of some twenty educators and statesmen who set a national educational ideal, almost always in the most general of terms, which serves as a long-range goal around which more detailed policies are devised by subordinate bodies. An example of such a goal would be the recent promulgation in the 2002 educational directive that the Japanese education system would strive to enhance and develop the abilities of the individual. This was in contrast to the previous goal of establishing national standards which all students were expected to attain.

The second-highest body for educational policy is the Curriculum Council. It is comprised of some twenty educators and officials, who are responsible for translating the general goals of the Central Council into more concrete directives. The Curriculum Council would, for example, set curricula for all schools, and the number of credits assigned to courses. Another example of the type of guidance provided by the Curriculum Council is the recent change from a six-day school week to a five-day school week, to allow students more free time to pursue subjects of personal interest, in accordance with the directive set forth by the Central Council.

The third-highest body for educational policies are actually numerous bodies. These are committees responsible for establishing a national syllabus for each academic subject. For example, there is a Committee for Mathematics, a Committee for English, and so on. It is these committees which set the concrete standards and recommend the budget allocations which will govern the educational process at the students' personal, day-to-day level. An example of the type of ruling coming from the committees would be the recent reduction in the amount of vocabulary words to be learned by English students.

It is, of course, sometimes difficult to know exactly where a policy originated once it comes from these committees, but an examination of my next topic, current policies for TEFL in Japan, will give an idea of the commutative effect of these bodies.

2002 new government TEFL policy

- **Reacting to a "crisis"**

In July of 2002, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, Sports and Technology presented a dynamic new strategic plan for revising English language education policy. This policy is called the National Strategy Design for Raising the Level of English Communication of the Japanese People, and it can be seen as a response to what can only be called a "crisis of consciousness" in current TEFL thought in Japan, which is based on the perception that current TEFL has been largely ineffective.

This sense of a "crisis" is supported not only by the popular perceptions of changing English needs brought by the new technologies and global economies, but also by data of international comparisons. The average Japanese TOEFL score in 2001 was 504 on the paper test, which though higher than previous years, was second to last when compared with all 18 Asian countries. The top country was Singapore. A general survey of English examinations among Chinese, Korean, and Japanese universities showed that the top average score was gained by Chinese universities, the second by Korean, and the lowest by Japanese universities. Student motivation was in the same order. Chinese students showed the strongest motivation in mastering English, Korean students the second, and Japanese the lowest. These then, form a statistical basis for the perceived shortcomings of traditional Japanese TEFL practices, to which the new policy must be seen as a reaction.

The National Strategy is an epoch-making policy, both in terms of scale and content. Its funding request amounted to over 28 billion yen, nearly eight times larger than the three billion yen set up for TEFL projects in the current fiscal year. It calls for a multi-layered, but consistent and integrated, program from elementary school to university. Let us look at this program in more detail, examining a few of the more important points.

- **The National Strategy Design**

The National Strategy, as conceived by the previously mentioned top-level educational bodies and received from the Ministry of Education, is comprised of five major fields or pillars, which define areas to be addressed by some 30 action plans. The pillars of the Strategy are (1) educational standards, (2) teacher education, (3) study motivation, (4) elementary school English revision, and (5) along the lines of furthering communicative competence, developing students' ability in their mother tongue.

a. Educational standards

Regarding the first pillar, the Ministry of Education has departed from a long tradition of not specifying exact numerical goals in English education by stating clear-cut criteria for attaining standardized proficiency levels. It is hoped that junior high school graduates will attain a level 3 in the STEP test, and senior high school graduates, a level 2. University graduates are expected to attain a level necessary for their intended professions. Such specified numerical criteria are not limited only to students; high school English teachers will need to have a Standard Test of English Proficiency (STEP) pre-1st level, a TOEFL 550, or a TOEIC 730.

b. Teacher education

There are a number of action plans which address the concern of teacher education, especially that of raising the English proficiency of high school English teachers. One such plan is that all the 60,000 English teachers will be requested to attend an intensive TEFL seminar for either two or three weeks. Another program will provide grants to 100 English teachers to allow them to take graduate courses at overseas universities for more than one year. Yet another plan stipulates that each high school will have at least one of 11,500 native assistant language teachers assigned it more than once a week for the teaching of English. And, along the lines of native assistant English language teachers, the government plans to expand the number of assistants from 5,400 to more than 11,500. In addition, regular positions for native teachers will be encouraged at high schools, and high level, non-native English users will be encouraged to assist students to learn English as part-time instructors.

c. Study motivation

To motivate English study among students, a number of programs are to be implemented. For example, 115,000 high school students will be encouraged to study overseas for a year, receiving government support, an increase from the present 4,400. Also, English conversation classes and speech contests are to be encouraged, through both government and privately sponsored activities.

To further motivate on a more practical level, a listening comprehension test for university entrance examination is scheduled for 2006. This seemingly easy reform is, in actuality, an administrative nightmare, as it will require the entrance examination to be moved from the universities to which the students are applying to high school venues, where test conditions can be standardized. That the Ministry of Education is willing to undertake such a task can be seen as an indicator of how serious the commitment to communicative English has become.

Another plan to help motivate the study of English is to expand the number of super-English high schools, which offer a type of immersion curriculum, from 18 to 100, and also to establish about 100 undergraduate English-immersion schools.

d. Elementary school English education

The fourth pillar of the National Strategy concerns the intent to set up an elementary school English curriculum as a regular subject, and whether, or not, to adopt this policy this has been a controversial subject in Japanese education for the last fifty years. Several justifications for not offering elementary school English are common. One is simply that the educational burden of children is already quite heavy, and additional work could be seen as oppressive. Another is that the decrease in the school week to five days has put a great deal of pressure on educators merely to teach the contents of the traditional curriculum. A third reason, with which I must take objection, is that the national mother tongue must take priority over other languages, and instruction in English at the elementary-school level might interfere with the process of Japanese-language acquisition.

The current policy can be seen as an attempt to balance these conflicting pressures. It offers elementary school English as part of a new, compulsory subject called "period for integrated study," which will comprise three, 45-minute classes per week.

This subject is different from other courses; although each school is obliged to include in the course one or some of the following listed subjects - international understanding, information processing, environment, social welfare or health - any of

the topics may be chosen and the proportion of time allocated is left to the classroom teacher. Thus, English as a school subject is not a regular subject, but will be restricted to a part of the period for integrated study.

e. Developing communicative competence in the mother tongue

Regarding the fifth pillar of the National Strategy, that of developing competence in the Japanese language, it is felt that Japanese youth are becoming less skilled in their mother tongue, and that proficiency in the mother tongue should be a key factor in promoting language education policy. I feel that proficiency in both the mother tongue and in a foreign language can be seen as complementary to each other, and it is proper for us to encourage competence in the mother tongue.

3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to reiterate that unique geographical and socio-historical factors have helped shape Japanese English-language teaching traditions and policies. And, those policies have resulted in a sense of crisis that the new National Strategy, promulgated by the three highest-level educational development bodies, is now addressing.

The Japanese nation has awakened late to the need for early education in languages and lags behind the other Asian countries in a number of important measurements. However, Japan now fully understands the need for linguistic internationalization, both for the global economies and for the wealth of understanding and trust which cultural exchanges bring, and I am confident that Japan will make its fair contributions.