

English Language Education in Japan: Recent Developments

Hideo Oka

In a previous paper (Oka, 2003) I described English language education in Japan up to the year 2003 and discussed the ideals and realities. Since then there have been rapid and significant changes—especially with regard to the introduction of English in elementary schools and the announcement of the new curriculum guidelines, officially called the “Course of Study”, for junior and senior high schools to be implemented from the year 2011 onward. It is thus time that recent developments were documented with relevant background information so that the changing educational context might be understood in all its complexity by people both here and outside Japan.

I. Recent Changes

The results of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) studies that were released in 2003 delivered a serious blow to the high ideals of the 1989/1998 curriculum guidelines. The relatively poor performance by Japanese students led to a stricter attitude when revising those guidelines in the following year. The earlier guidelines emphasized *yutori* (pressure-free education), whose ideas were reflected in the reduction of teaching hours and materials. Though ideally intended, *yutori* did not take root in society and was blamed to be responsible for the declining scholastic standards. This critical reevaluation has led to a fundamental change, which manifested itself in an increase in the number of teaching hours and materials.

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores are often used for international comparisons of the English ability. Not surprisingly, Denmark and the Netherlands lead such lists, and in Asia Singapore and India come out on top, which could be explained in terms of linguistic and historical backgrounds. Regrettably, Japan was placed only 29th out of 30 Asian nations in 2004. However, we have to remember that in these comparisons the number and quality of samples are not the same, which makes such a simplistic approach scientifically unsound. In other words, because too many not-so-competent students can afford to take the tests in Japan, the average scores turn out to be so low.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced a rigorous action plan to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities” in 2003. It included several innovative ideas, which were then put into practice. One of the outstanding features of the reform was the introduction of

experimental “English activities” classes in selected elementary schools. Their reports were carefully examined when deciding on the future direction of English language education in the meetings of the Central Council on Education.¹⁾ Furthermore, a 2-week-long in-service training program was provided for all of the 60,000 English teachers in public junior and senior high schools across the nation over the following 5 years. Another epoch-making outcome from the plan was the introduction of the listening test in the Preliminary University Entrance Examination (commonly called “Center Exam”) in 2006, which is taken by over 50,000 high school graduates every year.²⁾

II. Early English

When we watch TV programs that feature small children learning English, we find ourselves admiring and deploring them at the same time. It is admirable in that parental support plays an important role in children’s education, especially in learning a foreign language. It is deplorable, however, in that parents’ excessive enthusiasm can become a craze. At the time of the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964, there was a similar craze for practical English conversation among the general public. If this fever stems merely from the parents’ own failure to speak English, their motivation is rather short-sighted because their main interest is in so-called “English conversation.” Here we could make an insightful distinction between conversation and communication. That is to say, conversation refers to greetings and talking about the weather, often while we stand, whereas communication refers to conveying opinions and thoughts, usually after we sit down, not only orally but also in the written format. If we accept this distinction, it becomes clear that the ultimate goal of English language education must be communication, rather than conversation.

Early introduction of a foreign language is thus two-sided. It might be a waste of time and money if it is not well thought over, but it could have a positive long-term effect. In my wife’s International Communication class³⁾ at a private university in Tokyo, most of her outstanding students had an early exposure to so-called English conversation classes before starting school. At the time they were made to attend the courses by their mothers without realizing themselves why they had to go, but positive effects can be noticed not only in their pronunciation and fluency, but in their attitude toward communication. These students are not afraid of talking to a foreigner; on the contrary, they are more open-minded and eager to express themselves than many others who did not have such opportunities. These traits can therefore be considered positive effects of early introduction.

Even so, we cannot definitely say whether early exposure to a foreign language is entirely good or bad. A lot depends on one’s attitude toward education as a whole and on what follows afterwards.

In learning English, it is often said, “the earlier, the better.” However, we have to be careful in interpreting the so-called critical period hypothesis. “The earlier, the better” may be true as far as pronunciation is concerned, but in the areas of grammar and vocabulary, it does not necessarily apply. Our vocabulary acquisition is a life-long endeavor. Also, the word “critical” is misleading because it gives the impression that learning suddenly stops at a certain age. It has been scientifically proven that it does not come to a sudden halt, but it gradually declines. Therefore, it is more appropriate to call it not the “critical”

period, but the “sensitive” period (Singleton & Ryan, 2004).

Besides, learning a foreign language in school has a different educational purpose. In the EFL (English as a foreign language) context, where English is taught as an academic subject, our goal is not to produce mini-native speakers but Japanese with a functional competence in English. Now that English has become the means of international communication, we usually communicate in English when we meet people from other parts of the world, be they from France or from Thailand. In this way, English is no longer the monopoly of native speakers alone. It has become a vital means of cross-cultural communication even among non-native speakers. That is why we now talk about “World Englishes.”

III. Elementary School English

The new curriculum guidelines for elementary school were announced in March 2008 and attracted many people’s attention. In particular, English was made mandatory in the 5th and 6th grades of elementary school. However, it is not a “regular” class subject, like Japanese or algebra, which are subject to numerical evaluations. It will be taught one hour a week as part of a “foreign language activities” class, to be formally enforced in 2011 across the nation.⁴⁾

Regarding the issue of elementary school English, there are two opposing views. On the one extreme, there are excessive expectations that it will produce fluent speakers of English; on the other extreme end, determined antagonists claim that it will hinder children’s mastery of their mother tongue and deprive them of their national identity. Neither opinion is correct. Just one lesson a week will not render near-native fluency, nor will it harm the development of the children’s Japanese skills or their Japanese identity. On the contrary, through exposure to English, they come to experience different ways of thinking, realize a wider world and culture and become more flexible and open-minded. Eventually, this will produce more positive effects on the first language as well, which could not be expected unless they were exposed to a foreign language. One tends to take things for granted in one’s own culture. For example, it is never questioned in Japanese culture that *hazukashii* (literally, being shy) is a valid reason for not uttering a word, but one becomes aware that being shy has a different cultural value among adults in an English-speaking society. In this way, learning English leads to a heightened awareness of one’s own language and culture.

A heightened sensitivity to the meaning of certain phrases was demonstrated by our German-Japanese bilingual daughter as early as age four. She realized that the common greeting “*Ojama shimasu*” (literally, “I’m disturbing you”) is not truthful. So, she instructed her friends to say “*Ojama shimasen*” (“I’m NOT disturbing you”) whenever they came to play at our home. This kind of metalinguistic development is unique among bilingual children, but as they grow, such an interpretation focused on the propositional meaning alone will gradually be superseded by the process of socialization.

With regard to the parents’ concern about their children’s possible loss of Japanese identity, Downes (2001) studied 509 children in the immersion programs at Katoh Gakuen in Shizuoka, concluding that the benefits of immersion programs can go beyond additive bilingualism to include cognitive, cultural and psychological advantages. Not only do they open children’s minds to other ethnic groups, but they also encourage them to develop a strong appreciation for their own ethnic identity.

At the same time, it must be said that it is impossible to become fluent with just one lesson a week, especially in an environment where the target language is not used outside the classroom. The aim of teaching English early is not only concerned with developing language skills, but more importantly, it contributes to cross-cultural understanding and the personal development of children. Therefore our goal must not be the production of mini-native speakers of English, but of Japanese with a firm grasp of the Japanese language and culture, plus a functional competence in an international language. This idea corresponds to the new concept of “plurilingualism,” proposed in connection with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Plurilingualism, unlike multilingualism, where a number of languages are used in a given community, applies to an individual who has a functional competence in more than one language—typically a native-speaker competence in one and a functional competence in another for intercultural communicative purposes (Oka, 2008).

Cross-cultural understanding does not mean knowledge. Especially at a young age, it is important that children, through engaging themselves in English activities, become aware of the various uses of language and become sensitive to differences in the ways of thinking as well as cultures. In the Japanese culture, one tends to accept things without questioning. Consequently, discourse analysis of Japanese learners’ English conversations reveals an unusually frequent occurrence of the phrase “I see,” while nodding and agreeing all the time. Through exposure to the English way of thinking, the question “Why?” comes to the fore, which will lead to developing a sense of intellectual curiosity and critical thinking. Such experiences will eventually have a favorable influence on the children’s personality and attitude. Since they have to be more attentive when listening in a foreign language, they unconsciously acquire such a positive attitude when listening to others; by the same token, they have to be more explicit when speaking, thus reinforcing the new mind-set. Such a change in attitude was corroborated by a mother’s comment that her son became more cheerful and open-minded through attending the immersion program at Katoh Gakuen.

IV. Points to Consider

With regard to the prospective introduction of English in elementary school in 2011, there are two major areas to be considered for improvement. They are (1) the issue of continuity and (2) the quality of teachers.

It has often been said that even if you have a head start by starting English in the sixth grade of elementary school, the advantage gets diminished by the end of the first year in junior high school. This points to the problem of coordination between the two school systems. It is vital that curriculums be coordinated to facilitate a smooth transfer and progress. However, it must be noted that elementary school English should not qualitatively be the same, and therefore the problem cannot be solved by simply moving vocabulary and grammatical items forward.

In this connection, a MEXT official has made the following suggestions (Ogushi, 2009): A grounding in communication laid in elementary school will provide a higher starting point for junior high school English. For one thing, a positive attitude developed in elementary school can be exploited further. In terms of language, what has been learned in elementary school can be elaborated further in the following ways:

(1) combining the situation with the communicative function; (2) introducing the written language based on the spoken format learned in elementary school; and (3) reorganizing expressions acquired as chunks into rules. Clearly, we must bear in mind that while elementary school English should not be a simple moving forward of what used to be taught in junior high school so far, junior high school English in turn must adjust itself to fit what precedes in elementary school, so that a smooth transfer of attitude and skills can be achieved.

Besides the curriculum development, the role of teachers is crucial. Quite a few people have expressed their concerns about the quality of teachers who will be engaged in teaching English in elementary schools. We might depend partly on ALTs (assistant native-speaker language teachers), but it is generally believed that the classroom teacher is the most suitable for the job, rather than a subject teacher, for educational reasons. Classroom teachers know the children best—their development and personalities within the whole context of education. Here we might learn from the Korean example. That is, when they introduced English in elementary schools in Korea in 1997, they provided all the elementary school teachers with a 120-hour in-service training.⁹⁾

As part of its efforts, the Japanese MEXT has produced “English Notes” with CDs and teaching plans for the 5th and 6th grades, which will greatly help teachers with what and how they teach. The Ministry has also demanded a substantial budget increase—a total of 3.8 billion yen for fiscal 2009. It is hoped that by the time the new curriculum guidelines are implemented in 2011, the situation surrounding elementary school English will have improved, especially as regards teacher training and curriculum coordination.

V. New Directions in Junior and Senior High Schools

The new curriculum guidelines for junior and senior high schools were announced in 2008 and 2009 respectively. The most significant change is that greater importance is attached to teaching integrated English skills, rather than separating them into individual skills. In the previous guidelines, special attention was paid to oral skills because these had traditionally been neglected, a move that was symbolized by the creation of Oral Communication (OC) as a separate course. Along with OC, specific skill courses were offered in Reading and Writing. However, the so-called “four skills” do not exist separately; instead, communication activities in the real world involve integrated skills—e.g. reading an e-mail is often followed by writing an answer, or listening to a speech by asking questions, etc.

Accordingly, the new guidelines emphasize that in junior high school, (1) knowledge acquired through listening and reading should be developed into productive skills, and (2) communicative skills are to be facilitated through language activities combined with grammar. To make these possible, the annual teaching hours are increased from 105 to 140 hours (four classes a week, instead of the current three), and the vocabulary to be mastered is boosted from 900 to 1200 words, while the number of grammatical items remains the same.

In senior high school, the vocabulary is further expanded to the total of 3000, adding another 1800 words. Compared to 2200 so far, this is a substantial increase and is equivalent to that of other Asian countries such as Korea and China. The idea of teaching English as integrated skills is represented by the

creation of new courses called “Communication English I, II and III.”

To the amazement of many, it was specifically prescribed in the guidelines that in principle English classes have to be taught in English. Will this new approach make the grammar-translation method prevalent in many senior high schools obsolete? A conflicting controversy has already been sparked over the role of the mother tongue. A more serious problem, however, seems to lie in the linguistic competence of teachers as well as the traditional teacher belief. Combined with their lack of confidence in speaking English, teachers tend to believe English alone as a medium of instruction would not suffice to deal with the matters which are cognitively complex.

Another change in the system is concerned with teacher qualifications. So far the teacher qualification, once obtained, was valid for a lifetime, but under the new law enforced in April 2009, teachers will be required to renew their qualification every ten years, by taking a 30-hour in-service training course at authorized institutions.

VI. Adults

As for their English ability, or lack of it, the Japanese almost seem to take pride in not being good at English—in particular, their poor speaking ability—as even Nobel Prize laureate Dr Masukawa recently did. In the present-day global society such an insular view can only be considered an anachronism. One reason may simply be that speaking English is not practiced enough in class. Although sufficient input is important, one cannot develop the speaking ability with input alone. As is emphasized in the new guidelines, the key is the combination of input and output in the form of integrated skills.

Expressing one’s opinions and participating in arguments tend to be shunned even in the mother tongue in Japan, not only in the classroom but in society at large. However, it is wrong to assume that it is no use trying to engage in these activities in English because children cannot express themselves even in Japanese. Indeed, trying something novel in a foreign language can become an eye-opener and will then have a positive influence on their mother tongue. Endeavoring to formulate their thoughts logically and intelligibly in a foreign language will help sharpen their intellect. It will also open their minds to different ways of thinking, which will then benefit their personalities as a whole.

Examining this phenomenon further, a lack of speaking ability may after all be rooted in the Japanese indigenous culture. The problem does not only concern young students from elementary to intermediate levels of proficiency in English, but also applies to advanced learners, such as international business people. In their case, however, the problem becomes even more puzzling because they CAN speak, as is revealed by conventional English proficiency tests. In a survey we conducted with over 7,000 Japanese engaged in international businesses, it turned out that in spite of very high scores in the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) tests, they still found it difficult to make convincing presentations or to negotiate to their advantage (Koike, 2008). These are in the domain of “interactive skills,” which require more than the mere language abilities of speaking and listening. Such skills may not be within the scope of conventional language tests. In this respect the CEFR was innovative in that it

recognized the importance of such skills as the fifth domain, besides the traditional four skills. In the CEFR, we find significant reference to such interactive skills as “goal-oriented cooperation” and “transactions to obtain goods and services” (Council of Europe, 2001: 79-80).

This brings us to the question of culture. It turns out that the European framework cannot necessarily be applied to the Japanese context as it is. That is, the language skills of Japanese business people may not correspond to their business skills—negotiation and transaction skills—, unlike those of their European counterparts. We thus come to realize that such traits are deep-rooted in culture. If you grow up in a culture where self-expression is not encouraged and arguments are refrained from, it is not easy to play the game by different rules. In this respect, it becomes even more important and valuable to be exposed to a different culture early on. Children are young and flexible enough to absorb such differences without questioning. However, that alone will not be enough to produce internationally competent Japanese business people. Together with the early exposure to English, the role of higher education needs to be reconsidered. Students should be guided to engage in more rigorous content-based activities in English—e.g. learning other subjects by means of English. Through such diverse experiences at the academic level, they will learn to act effectively in the context of cross-cultural communication.

VII. Conclusion

Much remains to be improved in English language education in Japan, but it is too negativistic to conclude that school English has no value. Schools can provide a sound basis, from which learners can develop in higher education and later according to their needs..

We should look to successful examples for inspiration. Such people, after learning English in Japanese schools by the conventional grammar-translation method, typically go abroad on business or for study, and what they learned in English instruction at school becomes activated through sufficient exposure and input. In this way, their basic knowledge is transformed into a practical command of the language—a case of “learning successfully turning into acquisition,” contrary to Krashen’s input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). Without any pre-existing foundation in grammar and vocabulary, it would take them much longer to achieve a superior level of proficiency, or their English might become pidginized without ever attaining a high level of accuracy and functional literacy.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate once again that the goal of English language education in Japan is not to produce mini-native speakers of English, but Japanese with a firm grasp of the Japanese language and culture plus a functional competence in English for intercultural communication.

Notes

- 1) I served as a member of a subpanel of the Central Council on Education, specializing in foreign language education from 2004 to 2007.
- 2) When we read the action plan, we must pay special attention to its two-fold goals. On the one hand, it refers to raising the minimum standard of achievement across the population through compulsory education; on the other hand, it emphasizes the importance of producing Japanese with an internationally functional proficiency in English. We must not confuse these two because the former is concerned with universal education, while

the latter only applies to the elite.

- 3) My wife is Austrian and an English teacher by profession. She teaches German and English as a part-time teacher at private universities. We brought up our children bilingually with German and Japanese. Reference will be made to one daughter's bilingual development later in this article.
- 4) Besides being mandatory in the 5th and 6th grades, English can be incorporated into a "special activities" class in the 1st and 2nd grades, and/or into a "general studies" class in the 3rd and 4th grades.
- 5) It might be a little too simplistic, but when we look at the decision-making process of major educational policies, we find an interesting contrast between Japan and Korea. In Japan it is considered important to build a consensus step by step before coming to a conclusion. That is why it takes so long to introduce a major reform, whereas in Korea decisions are often made in a top-down manner. Elementary school English is a good example, as well as the introduction of a listening test in the university entrance examination, as early as 1994 in Korea, but only in 2006 in Japan.

References

- Council of Europe (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference of Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. CUP.
- Downes, S. (2001) Sense of Japanese Cultural Identity Within an English Partial Immersion Programme: Should Parents Worry? *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 4 (3), 165-180.
- Koike, I. (Rep.) (2008) *Final Report of the Koike Grant-in-Aid: A Pioneering Study on English Language Education Promoting Smooth Transfer from Elementary School through Junior/Senior High School to University, Based on SLA Research* [J]. Meikai University.
- Krashen, S. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
- Ogushi, M. (2009) The Revision of the Junior High School Course of Study and Authorized Textbooks [J]. *English Teachers' Magazine*, January Ed., 60-63.
- Oka, H. (2008) Investigating "Second language Proficiency" through CEFR [J]. *Language, Information, Text*, 15, The University of Tokyo, 71-84.
- Oka, H. (2003) English Language Education in Japan—Ideals and Realities. *Bulletin of Foreign Language Teaching Association*, 7, The University of Tokyo, 1-20.
- Oka, H & T. Kanamori (Ed.) (2009) *Elementary School English for Communication* [J]. Revised Ed., Seibido.
- Singleton, D. & L. Ryan (2004) *Language Acquisition: The Age Factor. 2nd Ed.*, Multilingual Matters.

[J] = Originally in Japanese