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Implementing Language Policy in Japan: Realities and Recommendations

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Introduction

The ineffectiveness of the Japanese education system in fostering English language learners who can communicate effectively in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has provoked outcries and calls for change from the corporate sector, politicians, and the general public (Butler, 2007). In response to Japan's growing dissatisfaction with its English proficiency levels compared to the rest of the world, the Ministry of Education,

Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has moved to restructure its courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) throughout both upper elementary and secondary school. MEXT formally released these revised courses of study in 2008 and 2009 (Yoshida, 2009). Uncertainties about how to implement the policies in the classroom initially ignited much debate. Attitudes remain unsettled, and, like it or not, these policies continue to 'rock the boat' in the EFL world. Regardless of a language instructor's qualifications, teaching context, or level of experience, across the board, these policies affect to different degrees. Moreover, as messengers of the new policies, teachers will be held responsible for the outcomes. Yet, MEXT has still not made it clear to teachers and administrators how the new policies should be implemented within the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). This critical point must be analytically illustrated and, as such, is the impetus for this collaborative research, as it is presented by five candidates in the Master of Arts (TESOL) at Columbia University Teachers College, Tokyo. Through a literature review, and a series of personal interviews with high school and university educators, the five researchers have collaboratively reached an understanding of the reasons for the changes, the reactions to the changes, and, as a result of better understanding the whole picture, we are able to distil recommendations for how the changes can be more effectively implemented. While this research hopes to provide a clearer pathway for implementation, it also aims to create a dialogue amongst educators, administrators, policy makers, and learners, as we promote a positive culture of English language learning.

The New Foreign Language Course of Study

For many years, English language education in Japan was not required at the primary level. Since April 2011, fifth and sixth graders have begun taking mandatory English activities. These activities, which are not lessons in the traditional sense, are for one hour a week. They consist mostly of the learning of simple words and expressions, basic English interaction, songs, and games, and their purpose is: (1) to create a ‘foundation’ upon which later acquisition of ‘structural and meta-linguistic knowledge’ can be based; (2) to increase motivation of L2 learners; and (3) to raise awareness of cultural, communicative, and linguistic differences between Japan and other countries (Yoshida, 2008; 2009).

Foreign language education will focus on acquiring basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in English in junior high school, and English cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in senior high (Yoshida, 2008; 2009). In junior and senior high schools, the current curricular goals and objectives have been deemed appropriate and will remain unchanged. Other than the addition of an extra hour of instruction per week and the requirement of English as a medium of instruction in lessons, it seems that the junior high school English curriculum will be relatively unchanged when the new policy guidelines go into effect in 2013.

However, it is the English courses at Japanese public senior high schools that will undergo heavy restructuring. By 2013, the current English I & II and Oral Communication I & II courses will be replaced by the following English-medium

ones: Communication English I-III & Basic, English Expression I-II, & English Conversation. The mandatory Communication English I-III will focus on fostering CALP integrated English skills in learners, while the optional Basic course will serve as remedial ‘bridge’ between the lower secondary and higher secondary foreign language curricula. Learners will also have the option of taking the CALP English Expression I-II courses - where they can focus on improving their discussion, debate, and presentation skills - as well as a BICS English Conversation course. In spite of what seems to be an overall positive move, it is this last class, according to Yoshida (2008) that may undermine MEXT’s attempts to promote English-medium instruction throughout all high school English courses, the fear being that teachers may relegate English use solely to this particular course. In order to better understand the current context and the impact of the new policies, it is necessary, at this point, to review the history of foreign language education in Japan.

Yakudoku, Juken, and English proficiency in Japan

This section will critique three realities of English education in Japan, two that have their roots in the traditions of *Yakudoku* and *Juken*, and the third, the current concerns about the English language component in university entrance examinations.

Yakudoku, which began as the method for reading classical Chinese, has a history dating back over a thousand years (Suzuki, 1975) and is “the method of teaching English in Japan” (Hino, 1998, p. 46). It is considered a technique for

reading in a foreign language even though the target language is translated word for word into Japanese and then reordered to match Japanese word order. When using the *Yakudoku* method, the teacher's main job is to explain the target language word-for-word translation in Japanese, present model translations, and correct students' translations (Kakita, 1978; Tajima, 1978). It does not have any theoretical basis (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), and does very little in terms of cultivating practical, communicative language skills (Prator & Celcia-Murcia, 1979; Brown, 2007), so why do most students in Japan still learn English under *Yakudoku*?

The reasons all hinge on the university entrance exams. Since the 1970's, published research has pointed to the many shortcomings of the *Yakudoku* method in teaching EFL in Japan; however, it continues to prevail. According to Hino (1988), the entrenchment of *Yakudoku* and university entrance exam preparation is a 'sociological' condition. This sentiment is reiterated by O'Donnell (2005), who states that "once a pedagogical practice is accepted as a societal tradition, it becomes the educational norm" (p. 302). *Yakudoku* and university exams have been around so long that few question their validity. It seems that despite efforts from MEXT in delegating more emphasis on practical English communication, change has been slow to come. Communicative approaches to teaching English are still not common in the secondary schools of Japan (Sakui, 2004; Taguchi, 2005). Most prospective English teachers were English literature majors at university who rarely receive any training in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Once they become teachers, they often don't have the time to learn these

methods (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Despite these well-known flaws, the use of *Yakudoku* persists, and proponents claim that it is necessary as this method is perceived as "the key to success" in *juken*, the preparation for the university entrance exams (O'Donnell, 2005, p. 302).

Juken, itself, has long dominated the course curriculum and teaching methodology of Japanese secondary education. According to Amano (1990), "the main purpose of secondary schooling is on preparation for university entrance examinations" (p. xix). Given that English is tested on these exams, English education at the secondary level has almost entirely focused on *juken* and, by extension, *Yakudoku* (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Kikuchi, 2006). However, some scholars question the effectiveness of *Yakudoku* in exam preparation (Gorsuch, 1998; Mulvey, 1996; Watanabe, 1996). In addition, some institutions do not cater to teaching to the exams because the teachers believe that exam preparation is not synonymous with real learning and is ultimately a disservice to students (Kaneyoshi, personal communication, June 3, 2011).

Finally, the quality of the English language component of Japanese university entrance exams has also been called into question. Reliability and validity are key qualities of any language test (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown, 2005). However, according to Murphey, Japanese entrance exams tend to be made by non-expert test-makers, and lack reliability or validity (Murphey, 2010; Willis, 2011).

Therefore, secondary foreign language education in Japan revolves around a methodology (Yakudoku) and an assessment tool (university entrance exams) for which there is no solid justification. On top of this, Japanese regularly perform poorly on international tests of English proficiency: Japan ranks 27th out of 30 Asian countries on the TOEFL iBT, and third from last out of representative countries on the TOEIC (TOEFL, 2010; TOEIC, 2005). These statistics need to be put into perspective. Waring (personal communication, May 21, 2011) stated that more Japanese take standardized tests more often for the simple purpose of self-evaluation of their English proficiency, and because they have the financial resources to do so, compared to learners in other countries who delay test taking until they have reached an optimal level of English proficiency, primarily due to the cost. Waring claims that this habit of test taking tends to negatively skew the statistics. Because there is a larger pool of test takers in Japan compared to other nations, the test results tend to encompass a wider range of lower-end scores. However, the general conclusion here is that the overall English skill level of Japanese ranges from low to mid-level when compared to their international counterparts.

Recommendations on Successfully Implementing the New Language Policy Guidelines

The research for this paper has summarized recommendations on how to successfully implement the new policy guidelines, and which seem to fall into five broad groups: (1) developing English teacher competencies and

confidence; (2) improving communication among educators and administrators; (3) creating agency and communities of practice; (4) revising the university entrance exams and (5) fostering intercultural awareness and authentic communicative contexts. Of these five groups, the first demands most elaboration.

Developing English Teacher Competencies and Confidence

Several scholars have indicated that Japanese Teachers of English (JTE) require more extensive training in CLT practices for the revised language policy guidelines to be effectively implemented (Sekiya, personal communication, April 17, 2011; Tanaka, personal communication, May 13, 2011; Willis, 2011). This could entail expanding the English-teaching practicum in pre-service teacher certification programs, and providing incentives (e.g. salary increases) to JTEs willing to engage in in-service training. Without training, teachers generally default to Yakudoku methodologies which they themselves were taught, thus perpetuating the status quo (Fanselow, personal communication, April 19, 2011). Teachers are only required by MEXT to have a minimum TOEIC score of 550 or equivalent of TOEFL; yet, according to a recent ministry survey, less than 50% of secondary school teachers reached this prerequisite (MEXT, 2006). Mandating higher English proficiency scores for teacher certification is also an option.

One important study has been the extensive and robust grant-in-aid for Scientific Research project by the Japanese Association of College English Teachers (JACET) English Education Special Interest Group, which was completed in 2010 in response to MEXT's earlier guidelines and new policies (Kiyota, personal communication, May 11, 2011). Kiyota, a co-author of the study and the 35-member research team, determined clear recommendations under the study's title; *Developing English Teacher Competencies - An Integrated Study of Pre-service Training, Professional Development, Teacher Evaluation, and Certification Systems* Jimbo, Hisamura, Yoffe (Eds.) (2010). The five-year study involved Japanese university scholars conducting research in Europe and the United States. The recommendations from this study, if implemented by MEXT, could act as a major foundation in educational change from a teacher training aspect with the provision of 74 precise descriptors for both pre-service and in-service teacher self-assessment and for the contextualization of the Common European Framework's European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL) to the Japanese Educational context.

With improved pre-service training and ongoing professional development there is still, for many teachers, a harbouring socio-psychological and cultural barrier that causes a lack of confidence in speaking and using English communicatively in class. The belief that native speakers represent the ideal model for all learners of English is a fallacy and thus a barrier. Many JTEs perpetrate self-denial, believing they can never match native speakers of English, and therefore cannot be language role models. Since L2 users represent the majority of English speakers

around the world, adopting the concept of World Englishes would be a positive step which would enable JTEs to develop their self-image as English speakers, and thus present a legitimate identity to their learners as English language users.

Tanaka (personal communication, May 13, 2011) states that Firth (2009) claims there are two important meta-theoretical elements of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) that will bring confidence to Japanese Teachers of English (JTE). The first involves a meta-theoretical paradigm shift in thinking among all stakeholders in ELT. This means the notion of the L2 speaker as an inferior communicator, the notion of interlanguages, and the notion of errors should all be revised. Tanaka further states that teachers and learners need to adjust their views on English speaker role models. JTEs are not meant to be native-like speaker role models; rather they are examples of the negotiator of English as a mutually communicative medium. Strategies need to be introduced to negotiate meaning between speakers. JTEs and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) must demonstrate this negotiation of meaning with repairs, confirmations, back channelling with their discussions in front of the students.

Furthermore, the curricula of most pre-service EFL programs tend to focus on the inner circle (Kachru, 1997) where English is the L1. Matsuda (2003) refers to Brown's (1993) recommendation that most pre-service EFL programs would benefit immensely by incorporating a World Englishes perspective. Matsuda (2003) also states that Brown and Peterson (1997) argue that simply a brief introduction to issues surrounding World Englishes is not enough.

Ideally, every course should be informed by the current landscape of the English language. Having pre-service teachers take a World Englishes course (or an English sociolinguistics course which scope is not limited to the inner circle) early on in their preparation is likely to result in a "world view... [that is] more consistent with the sociolinguistic realities of the spread of English as an international language" (Brown and Peterson, 1997, p. 44). A further recommendation is to utilize a course curriculum based on international intelligibility, that is, an ELF Core, and accommodation strategies instead of the outmoded, unrealistic native speaker models that are currently in use (Jenkins, 2002). Such a curriculum would be more universal as well as more teachable and learnable (Jenkins, 1998). It would also empower JTEs, particularly those lacking confidence in their English abilities. Currently ELT in Japan is still being taught as an inner-circle language, almost exclusively utilizing American or British English, using course texts with thematic units based on characters and cultural topics from English-speaking countries of the inner circle (Matsuda, 2003). JTEs and ALTs need to be better informed and trained on these new curricula.

Improving Communication among Educators and Administrators

In interviews with ALTs (Plaza, personal communication, May 1, 2011; Shermer, personal communication, March 10, 2011), the consensus is that there was a lack of adequate information given to them by the MEXT and that the minimal instructions they did receive on the new program came from the individual schools. Further

recommendations include improving communication lines and maintaining a continuous open dialogue between ALTs, Home Room teachers, the local school administration, and the MEXT. Improvement of administration efficiency within all levels of education is needed. A common complaint from all educators has been the constant intrusion of non-teaching duties into curricular responsibilities. These non-teaching obligations eliminate any time for improving current teaching practices. Similarly there is no time for adapting and developing new instructional methods that would embrace MEXT's new curriculum directives.

Creating Agency and Communities of Practice among Educators & Learners

One critical way of ensuring that educators embrace the MEXT policies and take ownership of their own professional development is to create agency and Communities of Practice (CoP) at the classroom level (Tanaka, personal communication, May 13, 2011). Agency, according to van Lier (2008), involves initiative or self-regulation by the learner (or group). In addition, it mediates and is mediated by the socio-cultural context. Finally, it incorporates an awareness of one's own actions vis-à-vis the environment, including affected others (van Lier, 2008). CoP is a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field.

It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally (Wenger 2006).

Fukada (personal communication, May 4, 2011), professor of the Meisei Summer School Project (MSSP), at Meisei University in Hino city, Tokyo, reflects that agency is not simply created individually but is developed and strengthened between students working together in groups. MSSP is a credit course offering Meisei students the chance to enhance their English in a real context through interacting with NPO international sponsored volunteers over a two-week period. Together they plan and teach half-day sessions for local six to 15-year old elementary and junior high school learners. According to Fukada, Meisei students initially do not have strong motivation to speak or work on a given task in English, but when they work with other team mates in groups, they develop a sense of agency and belonging, that is, an identity as a member of a team and thus are more actively involved. These collaborative teams in the MSSP can be referred to as CoP. CoP connect classroom learning (internal) to real-world applications (external), and foster continuing interest in learning beyond the schooling period (Wenger, 2006). A CoP of JTEs needs to be created, at the grassroots level of the education system, in order to foster an ownership of a culture of continual professional development and plausibility in their teaching. Some believe there must also be change in the *juken* system of entrance examinations.

Revising the University Entrance Exams

Several scholars have noted that successful implementation of the new language policy guidelines hinges on revising the university entrance exams. Because many universities lack the resources to produce effective tests on their own, Murphey et al. suggest that the government could start its own College Board to standardize entrance exams (2010). They further argue that the government could also work in tandem with *juku* (cram schools) to improve the exams, since many of these cram schools have specialized staff in writing and analyzing the tests. Iino suggests removing non-practical subjects (e.g. Classical Chinese Poetry) from entrance exams to lighten the teaching burden on instructors and learning load on students (personal communication, February 17, 2011). Likewise, Watanabe (personal communication, March 27, 2011) recommends requiring prospective students to participate in a supplementary English interview in addition to the tests. According to Fukuda (personal communication, May 4, 2011), entrance exams would be made more practical by adding writing and listening questions. Japanese universities base the majority of their admissions solely on the entrance exam results of learners. As a result, Murphey et al. (2010) have suggested encouraging universities to expand the student selection process and include high school records, extracurricular activities and other achievements in admissions. This would require training of specialized staff.

Entities within the government and universities are already moving to change the university entrance exams. On June 19, 2010, the National Center for University Entrance Exams (NCUEE) proclaimed that they would improve university admission procedures in an effort to be more progressive, meet international standards for testing, and furthermore to reduce the 'negative' effects on society (Murphey, 2010). However, revising the university entrance exams may not, on their own, provide enough impetus for high school JTE's to move away from Yakudoku teaching methodologies. Corporations such as Rakuten and UNIQLO are demanding more English communicative skills of their employees (Matsutani, 2011). This could result in a more effective shift away from grammar translation and towards CLT (Tanaka, personal communication, May, 13, 2011).

Fostering Intercultural Awareness and Authentic Communicative Contexts

Fostering cross-cultural sensitivity among teachers of different backgrounds is essential to improving relationships between JTEs and ALTs (Schaules, personal communication, May 11, 2011). Encouraging ALTs to develop Japanese language proficiency would help them integrate more successfully into the culture of their particular institution. Increasing the number of JTEs who engage in teaching internships abroad would provide training in intercultural awareness, as well as exposure to different teaching methodologies.

Promoting intercultural awareness among students is also important in terms of adding relevance and raising motivation to their English learning. Interactions between JTEs and ALTs can

serve as models of authentic intercultural communication for learners (Yatsugi, 2011). According to Iino (personal communication, February 17, 2011), requiring more Japanese students to study abroad and providing more attractive packages for international students to study at Japanese universities are key to creating authentic communicative contexts for students. According to Fukada (personal communication, May 4, 2011) the effects of the MSSP causes Japanese students "to realize that they do not have to speak perfect English all the time, and it is okay to make some mistakes...or have a Japanese accent when communicating with each other." He says that they can transmit their ideas, their intent, and opinions in English, and they develop more confidence in communicating in English when using English in a real context. As non-native English speakers, many of them are surprised at the high level of English proficiency of the international volunteers and that has a positive influence on the Japanese students' English language learning. "They see those non-native English international volunteers as near peer role models, and many of them feel comfortable speaking to them, and don't feel much pressure when interacting" (Fukada, personal communication, May 4, 2011).

Conclusion

From this research, it seems that MEXT has recently revised the Foreign Language Course of Study as an answer to national dissatisfaction with English education in Japan, in order to foster 'Japanese with English abilities' who can thrive in the current era of globalization. Successful implementation of the revised guidelines hinges on several factors, most notably the revision of the university entrance exams, the improving of communication among educators and administration, the development of English teacher competencies and confidence, the creation of agency and communities of practice, and the fostering of cultural sensitivity and authentic international communicative contexts. Future directions of the research will include discussions with educator focus groups in CoP about their current adjusting experiences and future needs of professional development.

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Extending Professional Practice: Publications

Keith Barrs

Extending professional practice for language teachers involves participation in environments and networks beyond the classroom, in order to initiate and facilitate professional development. This can be achieved through various means such as publishing research and teaching ideas in print and online journals, attending and/or presenting at conferences, constructing and maintaining a Personal Learning Network (PLN) and conducting individual and/or collaborative Action Research

(AR). Below are details and links to 8 publication opportunities based in Japan. If you can't access the hyperlinks then just copy and paste the web address:

1. [Peerspectives Online](http://peerspectivesonline.org/)

<http://peerspectivesonline.org/> (this journal)
An online peer-reviewed journal/newsletter including research, teaching ideas and professional development notes.

2. [SiSAL Journal](http://sisaljournal.org/)

<http://sisaljournal.org/>
An online peer-reviewed journal published by KUIS connected with self-access learning. It includes research papers, perspectives, works in progress and reviews.