

# A Brief History of English Education in the Japanese Public School System from the Close of World War II to the Present

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## Introduction

It is well known what a decimated state the country of Japan was in at the close of World War II. The Japanese Military's refusal to agree to the terms of the Potsdam Declaration resulted in the atomic bombings, that coupled with the fire bombing raids of the Western Allies, had finally caused enough destruction to drive a wedge into the prevailing militaristic ideology. At present count it was less than 50 years ago that Emperor Showa announced to the Japanese people that he was not a god and that the country was surrendering to the allied forces. News of the surrender led to the suicides of more than 500 military and naval personnel. Starvation was rampant. Basic necessities were a luxury. With help and an admirable drive to rebuild, it was not long before the country began to show signs of recovery. As the rebuilding proceeded, the citizens fed, clothed and housed, thoughts turned to education. Although these thoughts were well intentioned, one also does well to remember from whence this period of history unfolded. A visitor to Japan today will find little that bears resemblance to a nation crippled by defeat merely half a century ago outside of the dome in Hiroshima and the war museums which offer graphic testimony to the horrors of war. Buildings, transportation and communication networks are more easily destroyed and rebuilt than the institutions and ideologies a nation and her people have

formulated over time. A point that was not lost on the occupation forces, who attempted to instill Western ideas of education upon the Japanese.

### The Occupation Era

Before the Allied Powers got around to formulating educational reforms in early postwar Japan, efforts concentrated on instituting the decrees of the Potsdam Declaration and the demobilization of the military forces, repatriation of troops and residents from abroad. The removal of those who had espoused the ideology of militant nationalism from positions of responsibility in government and business were followed by economic reforms. Similarly, educational reforms targeted the removal of militaristic and ultranationalistic influences. George Stoddard led an educational mission for SCAP that advocated large scale revisions of the education system which were introduced according to the mission's findings. In short, rote learning was out, students would be encouraged to take initiative and explore ideas. School years were reordered following the American model, but beginning in April. English education would be incorporated into the lower and upper secondary schools as it was before it was banned from the curriculum during World War II. Control of public schools was to proceed locally. The role of the Ministry of Education was to shrink drastically to advisory status.

All this new order caused its fair share of confusion. Japan at this time had significant differences in the manner the education was designed in regards to gender. Attempts toward the reform of education for the female population were launched. The Fundamental Law of Education was made public in 1947, along with the School Education Law and a series of legislation followed. Teachers and

education unions were established. Education for the masses to benefit individuals and their just pursuits were the stated goals. Putting such lofty goals into practice in a country that less than three years earlier had waged successful military campaigns deep into the Asian mainland, expanding their empire as far north as Aleutian Islands and reaching south of the equator to the island nations near Australia, was a tall order. Notwithstanding the nationalistic influence the military imposed upon the nation, the Japanese tradition of believing they are a monoethnic, separate and unique people persists to this day. In practice, it was not long before the goal of education reverted from nurturing the individual to serving the state.

The early 1950's saw the publication of a number of progressive documents by the Ministry of Education in Japan. The several hundred page volumes provide comprehensive *advice* on how and what should be taught. Curiously enough, the documents address some of the important issues in English education in Japan today. Consider the following remarks from the Suggested Course of Study for English, 1951:

*On Curriculum Development*—"... to base any Course of Study to suit teachers who do not know their subject well, or do not know how to teach it effectively, or do not care to adopt newer or better ideas is unscientific and utterly retrogressive."

*On Functional Aims vs. Cultural Aims*—"... unless greater stress is laid on the cultural aspect than is usually done in a foreign language class, students will not know more about the foreign country or people than those not taking the language."

*On Unit Development and Organization*— "... pupils tended to learn or memorize materials in an isolated way without seeing relationships which could lead to generalization and without often seeing relationships between these materials and their own lives."

The content of these documents may draw a wry smile from those presently involved in the field of English education in the Japanese school system for they appear to make rather poignant criticisms of the system as it exists some 40 years later. There is broad based recognition by educators, both Japanese and non-Japanese, that the development of communication skills in English education in Japan has merely been given lip service.

### The Modern Era

With the withdrawal of the Occupation Forces, the Japanese resumed the task of governing themselves and were feverishly intent on rebuilding their country. Discussions of the nation's future were of paramount concern. Sectors of Japanese society were relieved by the departure of the Allies. Reminiscent of the Japan of old, there were those who resented the influence of the West. Concerns over the purity of the Japanese language being tainted by foreign loan words or the necessity to study foreign languages at all were topics under discussion.

The Occupation Forces had sought to instill the ideal that education serves both the individual by providing opportunity and in turn society benefits from the contributions of individuals. In Japan the manifestation is as follows: students study to pass exams that will prepare them for the destiny-laden university entrance exam. Passing the entrance exam of a prestigious university is the ticket to a good

job in industry or government. Cram schools, education-obsessed parents, entrance exam prep schools for students who have finished high school but not yet passed a university entrance exam, and sadly, suicide are only a few of the sociological side effects. Much like the Occupation Forces were unable to dismantle Japan's great financial combines for any length of time, education has for several decades since the war returned to a centrally controlled system aimed at serving the nation.

Earlier this year Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa made a plea to reduce the number of Tokyo University graduates hired as high-level government workers. More than 90 percent of new employees at some of the government ministries are Tokyo University graduates. The current Education Minister, Kunio Hatoyama, speaking in Japanese at an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum recently said Japanese-style education is strict and standardized and prevents the development of individual personalities.

What this all has to do with English education in the Japanese school system is clearer, in many cases painfully, to non-Japanese educators in Japan and many of their Japanese colleagues who experience it firsthand. English is a subject tested on university entrance exams and has been used as a mechanism to control enrollment since the Meiji era. The variety of English studied and tested rarely, very rarely, involves aural comprehension or verbal production. After six years of exposure to the English language, students are by and large unable or unwilling to introduce themselves. They may, however, be able to answer detailed grammatical concoctions that commonly occur on university entrance exams. Occasionally for laughs a Japanese television program will invite native English speakers to try their hand at some entrance examination questions. While their poor

results may at the time seem comical, the broader implications for young Japanese students are certainly not.

The question that comes to mind is, "What is going on in the classroom?" Far too often, much like a science or mathematics lesson, the teacher explains in Japanese the mechanical aspects of the English language that are most likely to be covered on university entrance examinations. Lesson after lesson, year after year, speaking and listening tasks are buried under a mountain of grammar and translation facts.

Many Japanese teachers of English have sought to expose their students to live English and provide cultural insights into English speaking countries. More often than not the educators making these commendable efforts find themselves caught betwixt and between. While holding the conviction that they would serve their students best by providing them with a practical, communicative learning experience, sacrificing class time that could be used for training to take entrance exams poses a delicate dilemma. It is also common practice for a Japanese high school faculty member to lead a club or coach any of a variety of extra-curricular activities after school. Although perhaps a rewarding experience, it is a time consuming demand that reduces opportunities for the faculty member to continue their own education and research.

It is not unheard of for private schools to have a native speaker visit their school. The number of such instructors has grown steadily along side such programs the government has introduced into the public schools. It has taken quite a time for this need to be recognized and the instructor-student ratio remains exceedingly low. Private schools, while thought to have more flexibility with their curriculum, operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Education to maintain

their accreditation. What is more, the private schools advertise themselves on their production of pupils who excel at passing entrance exams of prestigious universities and thereby justifying their tuition fees, which are not considered cheap.

A handful of international schools are well respected and popular with expatriates who could hardly imagine placing their children in a Japanese school. Some of the schools have religious affiliations. The curriculum at these schools is usually in English. Returnees, Japanese children who have studied some period of time overseas while their family lived abroad for whatever reasons, are often placed in an international school upon return to Japan by their parents who have come to prefer such a learning environment. While keeping their English skills in check, the returnees are also spared the potentially stigmatic circumstances that have been known to accompany rearticulation into the Japanese school system.

An institution by its nature is powerful and slow to evolve. Despite cosmetic changes, the education system in Japan has survived the social upheaval that has accompanied more recent Japanese history. A large number of dedicated professionals and earnest individuals, both Japanese and non-Japanese, have challenged the established practices and are working within the system to make it better. The ideas that culminated into the formation of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program(me) (JET) is testimony to the acknowledgement of deficiencies in the system and a willingness to improve it.

### The JET Program(me) Era

JET grew out of a project initiated by the Ministry of Education called Mombusho English Fellows (MEF) which got underway in 1982, and the British English Teachers Scheme (BETS) which followed the

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next year. The common goal of the projects was to assist in improving foreign language instruction. JET was established as an expansion of MEF and BETS in 1987. The objectives of JET include the advancement of internationalization at the local and regional levels and the betterment of foreign language education. The way the objectives are to be achieved is by inviting young people to Japan to fulfill the cultural exchange objective, and to have the young people help teach foreign languages, fulfilling the education objective.

The Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education and Home Affairs have taken the lead in developing JET and involving local authorities. The Conference of Local Authorities for International Relations was established in 1985. In 1991, the number of Coordinators for International Relations (CIR) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) numbered 2,874 up from the 848 participants in the inaugural year of 1987. The basic responsibilities for the CIR who work in city or prefectural offices include making guidebooks and pamphlets, interpretation and translation, public relations and activities and the like. An ALT could be an Assistant English Teacher (AET), an Assistant French Teacher (AFT) or an Assistant German Teacher (AGT) and their duties include a teaching schedule of about four classes per day carried out with a Japanese Teacher of Language (JTL). The remainder of the ALT's office hours are generally spent in, but not limited to, lesson preparation and evaluation.

The eligibility criteria for participants includes mainly common sense considerations such as sound health, interest in Japan and helping to educate the young students. Participants are usually under 35 years of age and hold at least a bachelors degree. In addition a CIR requires a functional command of Japanese and the motivation to get involved in international exchange activities. In 1991, participants

came from the following eight nations with the number of individuals from each country shown in parenthesis: Australia (142), Canada (488), France (18), Germany (18), Ireland (45), New Zealand (130), U. K. (488), U. S. A. (1,545). Of the total of 2,874 individuals, there were 175 CIR positions filled and 2,699 ALT participants.

An ALT is based at a given school or may have a rotating schedule visiting a set number of schools throughout the week. In the team-teaching setting, communicative activities form the core of the lesson plans. But what is more important is the interaction, perhaps even a smile or some other communication of a non-verbal nature, between the ALT and the students that may open a door of understanding.

Criticisms have been lodged against JET such as the participants have little experience in teaching and are just here on a lark. The participants themselves have raised concerns of privacy, especially in rural areas, and a lack of flexibility with Japanese colleagues who may feel threatened by the presence of the native speaker. Both lists of complaints could easily be longer. What is generally agreed upon is that JET, although not perfect, is a movement in the right direction. This is due to the care taken in the selection and training process, the support and counseling networks provided for participants, the efforts of the Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (AJET) which has provided a forum for discussion of issues to improve the program and spearheaded the publication of AJET magazine and the Peer Support Group counseling service hotline. Quality individuals from Japan and overseas have worked together from within the system to plant the seeds of change and have made JET the most important initiative in English education in Japan since the Meiji Era.

## Epilogue

The developments that have taken place in Japan since the close of World War II are both remarkable and unsettling. The speed at which the country rebuilt itself into an industrial economy of the future seems only to be matched by the retrenchment of social institutions into the past. Centralized authority in public education and its accompanying rigid examination system have proved to be ineffectual in language learning. The billion dollar English conversation service industry leaves little doubt that citizens in Japan are unaware of this. The educational doctrine espoused by the Ministry of Education since World War II is certainly progressive enough. Yet it is the prerogative of the Japanese citizens themselves to initiate and follow through on institutional reform. Active movement by local school districts, especially through CLAIR, are signaling a new direction in language education in the Japanese public school system.

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