

Viewpoints on English Education in Japan: Perceptions of Japanese University Students

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ABSTRACT

A great deal of energy and effort is expended on English education in Japan. Even so, there is no shortage of criticism, from the international community and within Japan, about the ineffectual nature of the study. Naturally, curriculum would be the first place to look for improvements. The National Course of Study is, however, a very progressive document advocating practical communication skills. Then perhaps the testing of English as a subject for entrance examinations should be reviewed. Yet on the contrary, efforts to make tests more communicative in nature have been a top priority in recent years. Perhaps the introduction of English education to elementary schools will improve the situation. In that case, what subject would be removed to make way for English, and is there any guarantee that the courses would be of lasting value to the young students? Such are the many questions facing English education in Japan. In this paper, university freshman were asked via questionnaire what their experience of studying of English was like in secondary school, and what they perceive they would have ideally like to have done in regards to English education. Additionally, participants in the study were asked to share their viewpoints on the issues of university entrance examinations and the introduction of English education to elementary schools.

Key words: *English education, Classroom research, EFL*

1. Introduction

Education is valued highly in Japanese society. One subject where much effort and expense is spent in schools is that of English language education. This is said to be because of the importance of English as a test subject for university entrance examinations and for employment and career advancement in the emerging international society. It was reported 548,574 students took the general English examination or *sentaa shiken* in 1997¹⁾. This figure does not include the many applicants to private universities that make their own examinations and include English as a test subject.

Some startling contradictions are evident in the study of English in Japan. For example, it is generally agreed that the average Japanese citizen has no compelling need to use English in their everyday life (Suzuki, 1991). Furthermore, the majority of respondents to a survey believe very few students will ever become effective speakers of English²⁾. Another quagmire is that of the ability of the Japanese teaching personnel active in the nation's classrooms. While teachers in Japan's secondary schools are thought to be among the hardest working of teachers in any country, there has been no shortage of self-critical remarks by concerned Japanese educators themselves as Manto (1994) comments:

It is true many JTEs who teach English in class cannot communicate in English, and their instruction is done totally in Japanese. (1994: 128)

With regards to improving foreign language education, Japan's Ministry of Education has long been one of the most progressive advocates of practical communication. Consider these comments on foreign language education which appeared in the National Course of Study in 1951 that seem to criticize unqualified faculty, class organization and prior teaching

methods:

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 regressive.

On 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 - ... 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 the materials and their own lives³⁾.

These same basic criticisms can be heard from various sectors of society now almost half a century later from bodies such as the Central Council for Education which over the years has repeatedly called for the improvement of foreign language education. The National Course of Study outlines numerous objectives for English, German, French and "other language" programs. It now includes components called *Kokusai Rikai* or international understanding, and Oral Communication. A large number of new textbooks for the subjects have been written and submitted for authorization to the ministry, yet it is quietly acknowledged in that such books go unused in many public and private secondary schools because they lack relevance to university exam preparation and are not based upon the grammar-translation method widely in use.

The system of entrance by exam to institutions of higher learning intensified when the growth of the schools in the university system nearly doubled and the population of students more than tripled by the year 1971. The Central Council for Education in its Directions for Curriculum Reform issued in 1971 stated that:

Foreign language training should aim at giving students a knowledge of foreign languages and the ability to use these languages for communicating with people of other societies. (Beauchamp, 1994:225-6)

The reality of the situation has not escaped the attention of National Council on Educational Reform which reported in the Third Report on Educational Reform in 1987 that:

As pointed out in the Second Report, English language instruction is very inefficient. It is necessary to make a basic review of the teaching content and methods of this subject.

In English education in the future, emphasis should be placed on mastery of the English language as an international language as a tool for international communication. The content and the methods of the teaching of this language should be reviewed to simplify the content and help to develop students' skill in active communication with foreigners. (Beauchamp, 1994:327)

Mastery of a foreign language, and the widespread reform that has been called for to attain it, represent lofty goals. The goals for a new communicative curriculum and its accompanying practical reform measures advocated by the Ministry of Education are in accordance with the emerging approaches of the learner-based or learner-centered classroom that many

language educators now propose. Much of the basis for these “approaches” evolved out of the end of the search for a perfect language teaching “method” as described by Nunan (1988) who states:

A major impetus to the development of learner-centred language teaching came with the advent of communicative language teaching. In fact, this is more a cluster of approaches than a single methodology, which grew out of the dissatisfaction with structuralism and the situational method of the 1960's.

... a basic principle underlying all communicative approaches is that learners must learn not only to make grammatically correct, propositional statements about the experimental world, but must also develop the ability to use language to get things done. (1988:24-5)

Using language to accomplish tasks or to fill in information gaps is also a fundamental concept in communicative language teaching. Additionally, in learner-based teaching the process of language acquisition is enhanced by the learner taking an active responsibility for their learning by acting as a source of content in the classroom. Campbell et al. (1992), express it as so:

The main principle in learner-based teaching is that all class activities can be done using information that the learners themselves bring to the class. (1992: 5)

This new openness to engage the learner in a creative process to develop the necessary strategies to formulate their own communicative competence (Candle and Swain, 1980) is explained by Harel (1992) as follows:

Communicative competence develops with the acquisition of communicative strategies during the process of communicating within the immediate social framework. A framework, then, for acquiring a second language is one in which students are involved in the process of reciprocal activity, communication with others in which the focus is on the content and meaning of the message rather than on the form. (1992: 157)

A refreshing and insightful analogy regarding the empowerment of the learner, and where the responsibility for creativity in learning resides, is provided by Scarcella and Oxford (1992) in their work which focuses on the individual in the classroom:

The learner creates the second language much as a weaver creates the tapestry. Ultimately, the learner decides when the product - the degree of communicative competence - is adequate and what its size, shape, and texture are to be. Others may help along the way, but in the long run, the learner's enthusiasm and desire to learn shape the quality of both the process and product of language learning. (1992: vii)

Much of the progressive notions for reform and expansive goals that the Ministry of Education in Japan have called for are illustrated in the above commentary by recognized international experts. The trends now prevalent in the field of language education coincide with the goals for English education in Japan's secondary schools. Both agree on the need to focus on practical communication and to provide the students with the necessary tools or strategies to initiate active and reciprocal communication. Creativity in the use of language, and the opportunity to express ideas freely in a supportive atmosphere, both inside and outside the classroom, are goals

all parties seem to be in agreement with. Providing students with these opportunities to grow and facilitating that growth is still another function of education that both educational administrators and researchers agree on. But what about the students? Where have they been and what do they think? In order to obtain a clearer picture of how students view the English education circumstances which surround them, a questionnaire was distributed to university freshman in Japan to see what and how they have studied, and what their perceptions are on the important issues of entrance examinations and the introduction of English education to elementary schools.

2. Research Design

2.1 Subjects

A total of 118 students, of which 65 were male and 53 were female, participated in the study. The students were enrolled at three universities in three different prefectures in Japan. The students were all first-year freshman at their respective universities and were not majoring in English. The students have studied English for a total of six years in junior and senior high school and some may have taken extra lessons from extra-curricular private schools or *juku* in order to fair better on their university entrance exams. Some of the students, referred to in Japanese as *ronin* or masterless samurai, may have spent a year or two studying at preparatory schools or *yobiko* after failing to gain entrance by competitive exam to university. Thus, the students in this study range from eighteen to twenty years of age.

2.2 Procedures

A questionnaire was distributed to students before midterm in June of

1996. The questions were printed in Japanese and the students received instructions on the manner in which their answers were to be recorded. Students were given up to 30 minutes to complete their answers. The questionnaire was anonymous and the students were informed verbally and in print that it would have no bearing on their grades, and therefore to write their answers without concern of reprisal. Rankings and ratings were made by writing in numbers of rank or circling ratings. The sections requiring qualitative responses were to be written in Japanese. For use in this paper, the questionnaire, rankings, ratings and written responses have been translated from Japanese into English.

2.3 Questionnaire Format

Gender: Male • Female Age: _____

- I. Of the seven skill areas listed below, rank in order (1-7) the amount of class time in junior and senior high school used for its study.
(Skill areas include reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation)
- I a. Please write your opinions or impressions of your English language study in junior and senior high school.
- II. Of the seven skill areas listed below, rank in order (1-3) the skills you would like to have studied most in junior and senior high school.
(Skill areas include reading, writing, speaking, listening, *grammar*, vocabulary and pronunciation)
- II a. In the future, what direction do you think should be pursued for English language education at junior and senior high schools? Please write your opinion.
- III. Do you think English should be included as a subject to be tested on university entrance examinations?

Absolutely included	Absolutely not included
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0	

III a. If you agree it should be included, what type of test would be suitable?

If you disagree with its inclusion, why is that so?

IV. Do you think English language education should be started at elementary schools?

Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0	

IV a. If you agree it should be started, what kind of lessons would be suitable? If you disagree with it starting, why is that so?

2.4 Data Analysis

Nominal data was obtained through the rankings, and Likert scale ratings. The questionnaire includes quantitative or open-response questions from which the students' opinions are listed in order of appearance and discussed in general parameters. Data for the former is analyzed by the means total and standard deviation, while the latter is analyzed through a descriptive presentation of numerical outcomes calculated from student responses based upon order of frequency.

3. Results and Discussion

Question I

Question I asked students "Of the seven skill areas listed below, rank in order (1-7) the amount of class time in junior and senior high school used for its study?" The skill areas include reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The results were calculated by

giving seven points for a first ranking, six points for a second ranking, and so on down to one point for a seventh ranking. The outcomes based on the point totals are as follows:

Reading	(2)
Writing	(3)
Speaking	(7)
Listening	(6)
Grammar	(1)
Vocabulary	(4)
Pronunciation	(5)

Those people familiar with English education in Japan would not be likely to find these results surprising. It has been suggested that because of the nature of university entrance examinations, the curriculum in secondary schools focuses upon the skills emphasized in the higher rankings shown above. However, since the examinations have so long been a feature of the education system it can be postulated that teachers are lacking in the capability to teach the oral-aural skills, or perhaps qualified to but not inclined to do so because of the content of the examinations. It is true that efforts are constantly underway to improve the examinations and thereby influence the curriculum. However, further research should be conducted to determine what extent the English education system in Japan is being bogged down by the examinations, a curriculum that caters to the examinations, and the inability or lack of incentive for teachers to present material in the classroom that would result in approaching the goals stated in the National Course of Study.

Question I a

Please write your opinions or impressions of your English language study in junior and senior high school.

The written responses grouped into general categories are listed below.

- 1.) Class time was used for entrance examination preparation.
- 2.) Lessons were uninteresting and lacked conversation practice.
- 3.) What we learned was of little use or forgotten.

The responses were not encouraging in the sense that the students took this opportunity to point out their dissatisfaction with the time they spent in class at secondary schools before coming to university. On a positive note, a few responses emphasized the time they spent in class helped them with their reading ability and as will be seen below, reading is a skill the students fortunately express an interest in.

Question II

In Question II students were asked, "Of the seven skill areas listed below, rank in order (1-3) the skills you would like to have studied most in junior and senior high school." The seven skill areas were again reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The results were calculated by giving three points for a first ranking, two points for a second ranking, and one point for a third ranking. The outcomes based on the point totals are as follows:

Reading	(3)
Writing	(6)
Speaking	(1)

Listening	(2)
Grammar	(5)
Vocabulary	(7)
Pronunciation	(4)

Speaking and listening are ranked first and second here, but showed up in the last rankings in Q1. Reading was ranked third and this is important in that it shows that students are not ready to reject the non-oral-aural skills simply because they feel those skills may have been overemphasized in the curriculum.

Question II a

In the future, what direction do you think should be pursued for English language education at junior and senior high schools? Please write your opinion.

The written responses grouped into general categories are listed below.

- 1.) Conversation Lessons
- 2.) Practical English
- 3.) More lessons with native speaking teachers

It is clear that the responses reflect the rankings in Q II as well as reinforce the sense of dissatisfaction shown above in Q1a. Students appear to want something different than they are being offered, or perhaps more variety in the kind and quality of their instruction.

It should be noted that none of the students responding to the questionnaire sought to portray their JTEs in an unfavorable light, so the idea that blame for their dissatisfaction should be placed on their teachers has no

basis in these findings.

Question III

Do you think English should be included as a subject to be tested on university entrance examinations?

Absolutely included											Absolutely not included
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	

The average for the numerical responses is 6.92 for the students with a standard deviation of 2.536. At a rating of nearly seven points it seems the students are not entirely against the inclusion of English as a test subject. This may be the result of their interest in the study of the language. What their interest is seems to be represented below in the type of examination they would find suitable as indicated in the qualitative written responses below.

Question IIIa

If you agree it should be included, what type of test would be suitable?

If you disagree with its inclusion, why is that so?

The written responses grouped into general categories are listed below.

- 1.) Conversation/interview
- 2.) Listening/hearing
- 3.) Practical English

The content of an exam thought suitable by students mirrors their interest in how classes be organized in secondary schools. It is clear that the students are reasserting their preference for classes they would have like to

have had at the secondary level which appeared in Q2 above. Of the students who felt English should not be a subject tested on the entrance examinations, the reason given was that such exams should be based on the intended field of study the student would pursue at university. That is to say, students majoring in a field unrelated to English need not be burdened with the study of English if it is not relevant to their career goals.

Question IV

Do you think English language education should be started at elementary schools?

Strongly Agree												Strongly Disagree
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0		

The average for the numerical responses is 6.08 for the students with a standard deviation of 2.860. The tentative nature of this figure, being only slightly higher than a neutral rating of five points represents some ambivalence on the part of the students. Insight of how this may have resulted is revealed below in the qualitative written responses below.

Question IVa

If you agree it should be started, what kind of lessons would be suitable? If you disagree with it starting, why is that so?

The written responses grouped into general categories are listed below.

- 1.) Conversation lessons
- 2.) Play activities, games and songs
- 3.) Lessons to interest young students in English

When considering the introduction of English to elementary schools, the students do not want young children to be subjected to the same type of curriculum they experienced in secondary school. Moreover, the emphasis on conversation is in line with their preferences for how class time should be spent. Of the students who were against the introduction, concerns over the issues of building up Japanese language skills first, that elementary school students have enough to do already, and that English might end up being tested as other subjects are, were also emphasized.

4. Conclusion

Reviewing the data from the viewpoint of the students' perspective shows the students themselves have definite ideas on what, when and how they should be studying. The communicative classroom for English education that is advocated by both administrators and researchers has yet to be realized according to the students. Though curriculum is constantly undergoing revisions, it appears the students are not convinced that what is actually happening in junior and senior high school classrooms is what is best for their education. While the students are not against the university entrance examinations entirely, they do express a strong preference that the content of the exams be changed much like they suggested the curriculum in the secondary schools should be revised. The apprehension students expressed regarding the introduction of English education to elementary schools is further indication of their concerns over the traditional pattern of classroom drills and testing. Efforts are underway to improve testing, curriculum and teacher training. Given the widespread agreement by administrators researchers and students on the communicative direction English education should take, it is time to focus on the obstacles to implementing a full and proper revision.

Notes

- 1) The University Entrance Examination Center, 1997
- 2) Yomiuri Shimbun, March 14, 1988
- 3) Ministry of education, National course of study, 1951

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