

Language Education Policy in Japan—the Problem of Espoused Objectives versus Practice

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Introduction

Japan is considered to be a typical monolingual-monocultural nation. Although there are opinions to the contrary (cf. Maher, 2002), the fact that the percentage of foreign residents amounts to just 1.4% of the total population (cf. Ministry of Justice, 2002) does suggest that the Japanese are, in fact, a homogeneous nation. Although the situation is different from that discussed by Shohamy, the discrepancy existing between the LP and LEP as construed by the government and the perceived needs and practice of the local educational institutions is a real problem.

The teaching of foreign languages (especially English) in Japan has been a topic of concern for many years. The Japanese study English—although there were actually 22 languages being taught in Japanese high schools in the year 2000 (Report of the Committee to Revise English Education in Japan, 2001)—for three years in junior high school, another three years in senior high school, and in the case of many people, at least another two years in university. Yet, when the results of the TOEFL are published by ETS every two years, we hear only sighs from across the country—not once, until 1999, had the Japanese average surpassed the 500 mark. Worse still, in terms of ranking in comparison with other Asian countries, the Japanese now find themselves second from the bottom in the CBT (Computer-based TOEFL) and third from the bottom in the PBT (Paper-based TOEFL) in Asia according to the results from the *TOEFL Test and Score Data Summary* for the years 2001-2002. (Cf. Educational Testing Service, 2002).

Granted there have been criticisms against a direct interpretation of the test results due to the large number of Japanese who take the test, the business community has for years expressed its dissatisfaction with English education in Japan. This frustration culminated in the report of the *Japan's Goals in the 21st Century* Committee (2000), in which a proposal was made to make English the second official language of Japan. Although this proposal itself gained only temporary notoriety, the need for what the committee called 'global literacy'—the ability to communicate with the world—has gained strong support from both the government and the business community. Although the introduction of English in elementary schools had been included as an option in the new Course of Study in 1999, the government has begun to take active measures to revise English education since the publication of the above report. In 2000, the Minister of Education convened the Committee to Promote Revision of English Education. In 2002, the co-called Super English High School (SELHi) project was instituted with 18 high schools (16 projects) from around the country selected to experiment with more effective ways of teaching English—including content courses being taught in English. Also, in 2002, the cabinet announced a series of Strategic Plans to revitalize the nation, and among the plans was a plan to educate "Japanese who can use English".

One point that should not be overlooked is that the government's initiatives are basically all geared towards the learning and teaching of English, and does not include policies for the education (maintenance) of minority populations or for the teaching of languages other than English. The main reason is because the government's LP is based on the strong demands of the business community which requires English as the international language of commerce..

A question might be raised at this point about the past LEPs of the Ministry of Education, before the recent developments initiated by the business community.. We will take a brief look at the objectives mentioned in the Course of Study of the past 40 years.

Objectives in the Course of Study

In 1960, the emphasis in the objectives was on the teaching of all four skills, plus understanding the people who speak the foreign language being learned. In 1970, after Japan experienced its first real test on the international stage by sponsoring the Tokyo Olympics (1964) and the Osaka International Exposition (1970), the emphasis was placed not only on teaching the four skills, but also on the more integrated communicative skills of “comprehending the foreign language” and “expressing oneself in the foreign language.” The need to understand the world views of foreign peoples and the creation of a basis for international understanding were also included.

Although few changes were made in the 1978 revision, the 1989 revision contained some major changes. It was in that Course of Study that the expression “communication” was first used. The major emphasis in these guidelines was placed on the importance of inculcating our students with a positive attitude towards communicating in the foreign language. Furthermore, in addition to the need to create the basis for international understanding, the 1989 guidelines went a step further, emphasizing the need to deepen our understanding of the international society.

Finally, while the most recent Course of Study continues to emphasize the importance of our students developing a positive attitude toward communicating in a foreign language, it also adds the need to develop the practical ability to communicate.

As can be seen from this short review of the objectives of the Course of Study, the Ministry of Education and Science has consistently taken a positive communicative view in its LEP. What, then has been the problem? The problem lies in the discrepancy existing between the ideal LEP objectives and the reality of the English education situation. In other words, what is espoused by the government and the actual practice of English education do not seem to coincide..

Practice

One of the primary reasons that have been given for this mismatch is the entrance examination-oriented teaching of foreign languages. As Shohamy notes, tests can to a great extent dictate the way foreign languages are taught. Although there is evidence to the contrary (cf. Watanabe, 1997), there is little doubt that entrance examinations do have a strong influence on the way foreign languages are taught in Japan. In the previous Course of Study, there were three Oral Communication subjects listed (A,B & C) from which students had to choose at least one. Oral Communication A was basically a conversation course with emphasis on speaking activities, Oral Communication B was a listening comprehension course, and Oral Communication C was a course requiring the students to perform higher level cognitive tasks in English, such as giving speeches, conducting discussions and performing debates (Ministry of Education, 1992). However, there are many entrance examination-oriented high schools where Oral Communication C was adopted only to be changed to what has become a term of ridicule, Oral Communication G--where G stands for grammar, in preparation for college entrance examinations. This washback effect is so strong that some researchers have termed the motivation students in similar situations have as ‘test’ motivation or ‘required’ motivation—referring to the fact that the students study English, not because they feel a need to acquire it for the purpose of communication, but because it is required as a subject in school.. (cf. Okihara.K. 1991; Tachibana, et. al. ,1996; Wen,X. 1997)

Unlike the heterogeneous situations noted in Shohamy’s article, the problem in teaching English in Japan is how the ideals envisioned in the government LEP can be implemented in the actual teaching situation. The recent developments mentioned above, are indications of this.

Recent developments

As was mentioned above, the Committee to Promote Revision of English Education was convened by the Minister of Education in the year 2000 to come up with concrete proposals to revise English

education in Japan. In the report which was submitted to the Minister in 2001, recommendations ranging from curricular considerations to teacher training—from elementary school to university—were proposed. The Super English Language High School (SELHi) project—which allots special subsidies to selected high schools allowing them to go beyond the curriculum stipulated in the report of the Curriculum Council and come up with English programs which will produce better English speakers—is based for the most part on the recommendations proposed in the report: the introduction of ‘content’ courses taught in English, better use of computer and internet technology in the teaching of English, setting up exchange programs with foreign high schools and increasing opportunities for international understanding, etc.

The Strategic Plan to educate Japanese who can use English was another result of the recommendations. In this plan, four task forces have been created to develop even more concrete and viable plans to change English education—1) to research the relationship between the objectives noted in the Course of Study and the actual state of English education, and to research the possibility of using ‘standardized tests’ to measure the proficiencies specified in the Course of Study, 2) to develop a training program for training all junior and senior high school English teachers, 3) to research the level of English proficiency necessary for Japanese teachers of English to be considered truly qualified to teach English, and 4) to make concrete suggestions for the introduction of English-medium content courses in universities. There is also another task force looking into the feasibility of teaching English in elementary schools as an official subject.

Of the four task forces, the goal of the first task force is the most relevant to our discussion in that its job is in filling the gap between the espoused objectives of the government-initiated top-down Course of Study and the actual situation in which English is being taught. The research group is looking into the actual practices of English teachers to see how far they are realizing the objectives, and also, is also researching how much students are actually capable of performing in English (Can-Do criteria). At the same time, the National Institute of Educational Policy has recently also administered English tests based on rubrics created from an analysis of the Course of Study to over 10,000 students respectively in both junior and senior high schools around the country to see how much the objectives are actually being realized.

Afterword

I have tried to show that filling the gap between the espoused objectives of the LEP and the actual situation in the classroom is where most of the efforts are being concentrated in Japan at the present time. However, there are also other problems related to LP and LEP which must be solved. For example, the problem of the ‘model’ of English to be taught is a problem which still needs to be resolved—especially when we have over 6,000 so-called Assistant Language Teachers (mostly native speakers of English) representing not only native Englishes but also western culture as being the ideal models for the Japanese to emulate. Another problem concerns the ‘other’ languages which are also learned and used by some people in Japan. The Course of Study states that the same guidelines that apply to the teaching of English also apply to other foreign languages as well. However, if we look at the number of foreign languages a student may take as a subject in the nationwide University Entrance Examination Center test, we see English, French, German, Chinese and Korean, but not Spanish or Portuguese—which are also languages spoken by quite a number of workers from South America—as well as all the other languages being taught in different high schools.

Finally, although Japan is basically a homogenous nation, it is true that there are other indigenous languages, such as Ainu and Okinawan. However, at the moment, we do not have any official LP to either preserve or revitalize these languages.

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