

# **Reconsidering Japan's English Education Based on the Principles of Plurilingualism (2013)**

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## **Introduction**

The new course of study for senior high school, which came into effect in April, 2013, stipulates that English should be taught primarily in English. It might seem strange to some people that the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) should have to emphasize the teaching of English in English. However, the results of a survey conducted by MEXT in 2005 (MEXT, 2006) shows that even in Oral Communication subjects, almost half of the regular high school teachers use English to teach English less than 50% of the class time—with approximately 5% of the teachers acknowledging the use of primarily Japanese to teach English Oral Communication classes. As for the teaching of English I and II, which are four-skills integrated subjects, less than 10% use English more than 50% of the class time. These results prompted MEXT to re-emphasize the importance of teaching English in English in the new Course of Study.

Why is MEXT so intent on getting the young Japanese to acquire communicative ability in English? The answer is seen in the need to educate young Japanese as human resources for global development.

## **The government's proposals to cultivate Global human resources**

In 2012, a Japanese government committee produced a document (Cabinet Office,

2012) in which it emphasized the need to cultivate human resources for global development. According to the document,

[Globalization] is generally used to describe our current times in which, in the course of drastic technological innovation (mainly that of the end of the 20th century and onward) especially in the areas of information, telecommunication, and transportation, “people,” “goods,” “money,” and “information” in various fields including government, economy and society transfer at top speed beyond national borders. It is a time which activities in financial and commodity distribution markets, as well as solutions for various issues including population, environment, energy and public health must be viewed from a global standpoint.” (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 8).

In short, the document describes globalization as a phenomenon which affects the lives of all people, wherever they live.

It further goes on to define the concept of global human resources as comprising the following features:

Factor I: Linguistic and communication skills

Factor II: Self-direction and positiveness, a spirit for challenge, cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission

Factor III: Understanding of other cultures and a sense of identity as a Japanese.

(Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 8)

Of these three factors, in the area of Factor I, the document notes the following five levels of communication skills which need to be acquired. However, it is assumed

that levels 1 to 3 are relatively easy to acquire because of the idiomatic nature of the expressions used, but levels 4 and 5 require the ability to reason, argue and debate, and are, therefore, considered the most important.

- (1) Communication skills for travels abroad.
- (2) Communication skills for interactions in daily life abroad .
- (3) Communication skills for business conversation and paperworks.
- (4) Linguistic skills for bilateral negotiations.
- (5) Linguistic skills for multilateral negotiations. (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 8)

The ability to use English for purposes of negotiation (levels 4 and 5) is the area in which the Japanese have been considered to be especially weak.

Another point emphasized in the document is the need for more young Japanese to go abroad to study and work, so that they can acquire a broader and more international way of thinking. One of the reasons it gives for the decrease in the number of Japanese who opt to go abroad to study in high school—as we will see below—is the existence of college entrance examinations :

University entrance exams must be altered fundamentally so that no junior or senior high school students will feel hesitant about going overseas to study or work for fear of not being able to pass university entrance exams. (Cabinet Office, 2012, p. 13)

### **The English proficiency of the Japanese based on objective criteria**

The results of the TOEFL are often used to show the English proficiency of the

Japanese in comparison with people from other parts of the world. The results of the 2012 iBT TOEFL test shows that the average score of the Japanese examinees was 70 (out of 120), ranking 28th out of 30 Asian countries. Of the four skills, the Japanese examinees scored 17 (out of 30 points) on the speaking section, which was the lowest score in Asia, and the writing score was 18 (out of 30 points), which was also the lowest in Asia (Educational Testing Service, 2013).

Research conducted by GlobalEnglish (2013) which provides a Business English Index for countries and regions worldwide, shows that the Japanese are ranked in the Basic level (4.29 out of a scale of 10), which is defined as a level where a person is “able to understand business presentations and communicate descriptions of problems, but can’t take an active role in business discussions or perform relatively complex tasks.” Also, the IMD World Competitiveness Ranking results show the Japanese to have one of the lowest foreign language skills among the 60 countries assessed (IMD, 2013).

These international assessments all seem to point to the lack of English proficiency of the Japanese, and this is considered to be a critical barrier in the globalization of Japan.

### **Lack of confidence and ‘inward-looking’ tendency of the Japanese**

It is, however, not only the results of these outside assessments which are of concern. For the past 10 years, there has been a steady downward trend among the young Japanese to shy away from either working or studying abroad. From 2004 on, the number of Japanese studying abroad has steadily declined from over 82,000 in 2004 to a little less than 60,000 in 2010 (Cabinet Office, 2012). This tendency is seen, not only among college students—who comprise the great majority of this number—but also among high school students as well. Between 1994 and 2008, there

has been close to a 30% drop in high school students going abroad to study (Cabinet Office, 2012). MEXT (2013a) also published a report in which it was found that compared with high school students in Korea, China, and the United States, the Japanese students were the only group where the majority of the students answered 'NO' to the question, 'Would you like to go abroad to study in the future' (57.7%). One of the biggest reasons the subjects gave for this negative response was the language barrier (56%). Finally, a survey which was conducted by the National Institute of Educational Policy Research (2012) showed that although in comparison with the year 2003, the number of junior high school students who believed that 'knowing English would be beneficial in getting a good job in the future' increased from 46.7% to 69.6% in 2010, the number of students who answered 'NO' to the question, 'Would you like to get a job in the future where you will be using English' increased from 53.9% in 2003 to 71.3% in 2010. The need for acquiring English seems to be acknowledged, but it is not accompanied by the confidence of the students to use it.

In another survey conducted on newly employed company workers it was shown that compared to 2001, the number of young adults who answered negatively to the question, 'would you like to work abroad in the future' increased from 29.9% to 58.3% in 2013 (Sangyo-noritsu University, 2013). The major reason, again, was the subjects' lack of confidence in using foreign languages (65.2%).

As can be seen from the data above, all of these results seem to point to the lack of confidence of the Japanese in using English in real life.

### **Globalization and issues in English education**

In order to solve this problem, MEXT published a document providing concrete proposals and plans to improve the English ability of the Japanese (MEXT, 2011). In

the document, MEXT defines foreign language proficiency as the ability to use foreign languages to communicate effectively and efficiently with people from different countries and with different cultural backgrounds. It further goes on to describe effective and efficient communication to imply

[the] confident and active attitude toward communication with people of different countries and cultures as well as accurate understanding of the other party's thoughts and intentions based on his/her cultural and social background, the ability to provide logical and reasoned explanation of one's own views, and the ability to argue and convince the other party in the course of debates. (p.3)

One prominent feature of this document is that it officially recognizes the term 'English for International Communication' as the English for the Japanese to acquire. Up to now, the emphasis had always simply been on 'English', with the result that many people assumed the acquisition of 'native' English as the goal of English education in Japan. Although it has been acknowledged for decades (Selinker, 1972) that in EFL situations, very few learners of English ever attain native-speaker proficiency level—and, therefore, acquiring English like a native speaker is the exception rather than the rule—the Japanese have persistently used 'native-speaker' norms as the goal to attain in English education. The result has been that, as was mentioned above, even Oral Communication English classes are often not taught in English, students are not given chances to use English, and the confidence of the Japanese to use English, as can be implied from the 'inward-looking' tendency of the young people, has declined sharply in the past decade.

With the change in perception of English as a tool for international communication,

the above document points to the need to shift the way English is taught from the traditional lecture style to more “student-centered language activities” including speeches, presentations, debates and discussions. The contention is that unless English is used to teach English, and the students are given opportunities to use English, they will neither become proficient nor confident in using English.

### **Bilingual or plurilingual as a goal**

One thing which needs to be considered when talking about the lack of confidence of the Japanese in the use of English is related to the goal of English education. As was mentioned above, the goal of English education in Japan has been the teaching and learning of native-speaker English. Regardless of how few the number of Japanese, including English teachers, who have actually acquired native-speaker proficiency in English in the past is, the Japanese have persisted in acquiring native, or near-native proficiency. The problem with this goal is that, as Selinker’s interlanguage hypothesis (1972) implies, this is not a realistic goal for EFL learners—very few EFL learners will ever acquire native-speaker competence.

When we consider the immigrants to the United States, for example, who need English for virtually every aspect of their lives and whose goal is to become Americans, aiming to acquire native-speaker proficiency in English is probably an attainable goal. In other words, the goal of bilingual education, as seen in countries like the United States, is to create people who are capable of using their native language as well as their second language at the level of the native speakers of the languages in question. Being able to act and use English like Americans is an important condition for social and economic success. In this kind of bilingual education, therefore, the native model becomes the model of English to acquire.

However, living in Japan, where English is not used for everyday communication, and where neither social nor economic success depends on native-like proficiency to use English, is this kind of 'bilingual education' a viable goal? Does using the native model of English as the goal to attain reasonable and realistic? If even the English teacher's proficiency in English is far from that of native speakers, if the native model of English is provided predominantly in the form of native English-speaking assistant language teachers and CDs, and the Japanese teacher of English seldom uses English in class, how can the students be expected to acquire native-like English proficiency? The native model of English, therefore, may not be a realistic model of English to be used in Japanese English education.

On the other hand, in the European Union, the three language policy adopted by the member nations does not require the learners to acquire native-like proficiency in any of the foreign languages they learn. The goal of foreign language education is the creation of 'plurilinguals,' who are expected to acquire each foreign language to the level needed for specific objectives the learners are learning the languages for. For example, if one language is needed for higher education, then competence needed to cope with educational objectives becomes the main target to attain. However, if a certain language is needed for one's work, then the competence to cope with the language used in the workplace becomes the main target to attain. In other words, in terms of plurilingualism, multiple competence is always individualized, evolving, heterogeneous and unbalanced (cf. Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009). It will differ from person to person, and from situation to situation.

In comparing bilingual education and plurilingual education, it would seem that plurilingualism is a more appropriate goal for Japanese learners of English, because the Japanese are not learning English to become members of the English-speaking

world. They need English for purposes of international communication. This entails not just the ability to use English for everyday conversation, but more importantly, as is mentioned in MEXT (2011), the ability to explain our views logically, providing reasoned explanations, and to argue persuasively and convincingly in the course of debates and discussions with people from around the world.

**From learning ‘about’ English to learning ‘how and for what purpose to use’ English—adopting Can-do criteria as achievement goals**

To summarize, the characteristics of plurilingualism does not require learners of foreign languages to use native-speaker models, and the language they learn does not have to be ‘complete’—each learner learns the kind and level of language which is necessary for whatever purpose s/he needs the language for. The emphasis here on the ‘purpose the learner needs the language for’ provides the basis for a paradigm shift in Japan’s foreign language education—from teaching ‘knowledge’ of the language to teaching ‘how and for what purpose to use’ the language.

Japan’s English education has always focused on the teaching and learning of grammar and vocabulary as ‘knowledge.’ Furthermore, Japanese teachers of English normally use Japanese to teach the grammar and vocabulary. The students have very few chances to use English—except in repetition, reading and doing exercises of the structural patterns they learned.

The result, as seen in a survey conducted on ordinary Japanese adults (Benesse, 2007), has been that the majority of Japanese do not necessarily like English (55%), and most, if not all, have no confidence in using English (90%). Furthermore, when asked whether the English education they received in school had been helpful, 80% answered that it had not. Although it is not certain what the reason for this shocking

result is, the fact that 56% of the subjects answered that they have had problems with English (later on in life), is suggestive.

Although MEXT has been advocating the teaching of English for communication for a long time, how and what to teach has been somewhat vague, allowing many teachers to interpret MEXT's intention to mean that since knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is essential in learning how to communicate, the teacher's job was to teach the basic building blocks of communication—grammar and vocabulary. In fact, when MEXT's new Course of Study, in which was included 'English Expression,' took effect in April 2013, out of 17 English Expression textbooks authorized by MEXT, Vision Quest Standard and Vision Quest Advanced (Keirinkan, 2013), turned out to be the bestselling textbooks (46% share of the market). However, these textbooks are considered by many people to be basically a grammar book, with explanations of grammar rules and exercises based on the grammar rules (cf. Mainichi Shinbun Newspaper, March 27, 2013).

Although not in direct response to this phenomenon, MEXT, in 2013, released a document with the idea of making Can-do statements the concrete achievement goals of English education (MEXT, 2013b). The document is important in that setting Can-do statements as concrete goals in English education makes it clear that the intention of MEXT is to emphasize the development of communicative proficiency as the ultimate goal in English education.

### **The ultimate Can-do statement in Japan's English education**

Setting Can-do statements as goals in English education means that, for example, if we were to set a Can-do statement such as the following as an achievement goal,

I can express my personal desires in English to people I know (e.g., my desire to

speak English well)

anyone who can say “I want to speak English better,” “I wish I could speak English well,” “How can I become a better English speaker?” “Can you help me to speak English better?” “You speak English so well. How did you study?” etc. should be able to confidently say to himself, or to other people, “Yes, I can (express my personal desires in English to people I know).” It’s not the structure or vocabulary, but the ability to express one’s intention in English that’s important. It is also not native-like pronunciation or usage, but the fact that the learner can be a Japanese and express his desires in a Japanese-accented version of English as an international means of communication that’s important.

The kind of Can-do statement that the Japanese will be required to learn, however, will not simply be in the realm of everyday conversation. As was mentioned in MEXT (2011), ultimately the Japanese must be able to say “Yes, I can” to the following Can-do statements—“I can confidently and actively communicate with people of different countries and cultures as well as accurately understand the other party’s thoughts and intentions” and “I can provide logical and reasoned explanation of my own views, and argue and convince the other party in the course of debates”—and in order to introduce a model for how this might be realized, I will discuss Bloom’s hierarchy of cognitive educational objectives.

Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive educational objectives has influenced educational thought for decades. In 2001, Anderson and Krathwohl created a revised taxonomy which consists of the following stages:

1. **Remember** - Retrieving relevant knowledge from long-term memory.
2. **Understand** - Determining the meaning of instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication.

3. **Apply** - Carrying out or using a procedure in a given situation.
4. **Analyze** - Breaking material into its constituent parts and detecting how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose.
5. **Evaluate** - Making judgments based on criteria and standards.
6. **Create** - Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product.

Of the six stages above, the first three are included in most English classes taught in Japan—the teacher can get their students to say “Yes, I can” to the following statements.

1. can remember grammar rules, vocabulary, expressions, etc.
2. can explain or describe grammar rules, vocabulary, expressions, etc.
3. can use a learned grammar rule, vocabulary, expression in a novel context.

However, very few teachers include the processes of Analysis, Evaluation, or Creation in their teaching—not many teachers can get their students to say “Yes, I can” to the following statements.

4. can listen to arguments and debates and understand the thinking process, can read an essay and analyze the writer’s intentions and ways of thinking as well as the construction of the essay.
5. can evaluate an argument of statement based on given theses or standards.
6. can develop own arguments and proposals utilizing the processes above.

The cognitive objectives are, of course, not the only objectives necessary in the educational process, but this is one critical area where the Japanese find themselves lacking, and therefore, need to emphasize. To reiterate: the final goal is to get the Japanese learners to say “Yes, I can” to the ultimate goals stated in MEXT’s document on concrete proposals and plans to improve the foreign language proficiency of the

Japanese.

1. **I can confidently and actively communicate with people of different countries and cultures as well as accurately understand the other party's thoughts and intentions.**
2. **I can provide logical and reasoned explanation of my own views, and argue and convince the other party in the course of debates.**

These are included in stages 4 to 6 in the revised hierarchy of cognitive processes above.

#### **Using English as a Japanese—the use of English for International Communication as a confidence builder**

An interesting point to note is that, in order for the learners to answer “Yes, I can” to stages 1 to 3 in the revised hierarchy above, the learners do not necessarily have to be taught English in English because these levels do not require the students to communicate in English—all they need are chances to test their knowledge and use it in drills and exercises. The class may very well be conducted solely in Japanese and still, the stages can be reached. However, for the learners to answer with confidence, “Yes, I can” to stages 4 to 6, the learners will have to have the opportunity to use English to discuss and debate. Unless the learners are given the opportunity to use English to conduct discussions, debates and presentations, there is no way they can say “Yes, I can” to the ultimate Can-do statement.

The problem, then, is how can the Japanese learners develop the confidence to say “Yes, I can” to the Can-do statements? It was noted above that by adopting the concept of plurilingualism as the theoretical framework for Japan's English education, it becomes possible to accept non-native English as a legitimate goal to strive for.

Native English no longer becomes the norm. If the Japanese learners can use their own English to realize the Can-do statements, then they might feel more confident to use English. Learners do not have to sound like native speakers in order to debate and persuade in English.

Kawashima (2013) conducted an interesting experiment with Japanese high school students to see if the use of non-native varieties of English in class would have a positive or negative effect on the students' confidence to use non-native Japanese English themselves. His findings show that the more non-native varieties of English the students are exposed to in class, the more the students themselves develop positive attitudes towards non-native varieties of English, as well as towards using non-native Japanese English. On the other hand, it was also found that the less exposure to non-native varieties of English and the lower the English proficiency level of the students, the more negative their attitude becomes towards non-native varieties of English, and the stronger their attitude becomes towards the use of native English.

In other words, exposure to non-native English and given the opportunity to use English as a Japanese enhances the development of a positive attitude and helps to raise the confidence of the students in using English to communicate. In another study, conducted by Benesse Corporation (2007), it was found that when compared with Korean high school students the Japanese students had lower confidence in using English, and the difference was seen in the amount of 'experience' the students had with English. For example, to the statement, "I read English books other than textbooks," whereas 77.6% of the Korean students answered "Yes," only 27.4% of the Japanese high school students said "Yes." To the statement "I listen to radio and television news in English," 60.6% of the Korean students answered "Yes," and 27.3% of the Japanese students said "Yes." For all ten statements related to the use of

English outside the classroom, the Korean students' "Yes" responses were higher than that of the Japanese students. Although the statistics does not show any cause-effect relationships, we might assume, as a hypothesis, that the more exposure and experience students have in using English, the higher their confidence becomes in using English.

It seems that plurilingualism does enhance higher confidence to use English, and that the more the learners are given the opportunity to use their own English, the higher the confidence becomes. Teaching English in English (for international communication, and not necessarily native English) seems to be a prerequisite to developing Japanese who feel confident to communicate in English.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have discussed some recent trends in English education in Japan. The changes proposed by the government have been greatly influenced by the recent 'inward-looking' tendencies seen among the young Japanese, who do not want to go abroad to either study or work, and the lack of confidence to learn foreign languages.

We need to acknowledge that the role of English education in Japan is not to create 'bilinguals' of English and Japanese, but to produce 'plurilinguals' who are capable of using multiple languages, not necessarily on the basis of native-like criteria, but on the more practical criteria of how well the user is able to use the foreign language to perform specific purposes.

The evidence from research suggests that the use of Can-do statements as achievement goals has the potential to make the learning of English for international communication a more viable goal, and in order get the learners say "Yes, I can" to the

Can-do statements, the use of English in discussions and debates in the classroom becomes essential.

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