

CHANGES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN JAPAN: FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE?

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Today most Americans agree that education is a serious problem in their country. They advocate change although they usually disagree about how and what to change. Some even search for successful models abroad, particularly in Japan. What these disgruntled Americans forget—or perhaps do not know—is that the Japanese education system is also in crisis. The nation that once pointed with pride at the motivation, discipline and exceptional academic performance (especially in mathematics, engineering and science) is now plagued with what used to be considered “western” problems, namely, dropouts, bullying, low test scores, classroom violence, inadequate communication skills and poor reading comprehension. The proficiency levels in English have become a source of national concern because Japanese students now score far lower on the TOEFL and TOEIC tests than many of their Asian counterparts. People want to know what has happened. Where is the Japanese education system headed? “For worse” seems to be the answer on the lips of many. My comments on English language instruction in Japan are based on over 25 years of experience as an author, lecturer and professor in Japan.

In order to understand the reasons for these dramatic changes in the Japanese education system, we must first examine the delicate issue of identity. The Japanese firmly believe that they are a unique people with a special culture. While they welcome visitors with extreme cordiality, they are convinced that only the Japanese can be Japanese. No matter how well foreigners may speak the language or understand the culture, they remain *gaijin*—that is, outsiders.

This exclusive definition of identity can be explained in part by geography. Like many island nations, the Japanese have an insular mentality because they have had limited contacts with people from different cultures. Geography has also protected their nation from the military threats of overseas enemies. It is significant that until the Second World War, Japan had *never* been invaded.

History has also helped shape the Japanese identity. After the victory in the battle of Sekigahara (1600), the Emperor appointed Ieyasu Tokugawa as Shogun in 1603. Tokugawa moved the capital from Kyoto to Edo (present-day Tokyo). For this reason, the era of the Tokugawa Shoguns (1603 – 1868) is called the Edo period. During this Edo period, the Tokugawa Shoguns sealed off the nation from the outside world for 250 years. Except for the small Dutch trading port in Nagasaki, Japan had almost no trade relations with other countries. Foreigners were not permitted to enter. Foreign books were banned. The leaders planned this policy of self-imposed isolation to protect the

island nation from what they perceived as pernicious outside interferences. In their opinion, Japan must retain its Japanese “purity.”

During the 250 years of isolation, the nation enjoyed an uninterrupted period of peace thanks both to the rigid caste structure which prohibited social mobility and to the draconian system of justice which eliminated any display of dissent. During the Edo period, there was a strict hierarchy of castes. At the top of the social ladder were the samurai (warriors) followed by the peasants, artisans and merchants. The *eta* (outcasts) constituted a fifth class. These “untouchables” could not associate with the four other classes because they performed unclean jobs such as slaughtering animals or executing criminals. The Edo period also witnessed the emergence of a unique Japanese culture in art, music, theater (in particular, *No* and *Kabuki*), dance, literature, philosophy, tea ceremony and the martial arts of the samurai. Even after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the subsequent “opening” to the West, the Japanese continued to protect their traditional values from foreign influences. In 1868, the Tokugawa government was disbanded after Japan was forced to open its doors to the West. Emperor Meiji was given back his power. The Meiji Restoration reflects the nation’s dissatisfaction with the anachronistic government of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Instead of simply borrowing what they learned from the West, they *adapted* it to the cultural, ideological and psychological exigencies of their nation.

This theme of uniqueness has impacted the Japanese education system which was centralized during the Meiji era. As we all know, education fosters upward mobility and thus permits people to climb up the “social” ladder. This new social mobility, however, contrasted with the traditional caste system which did not allow individuals to change their class. To reduce this contrast, the Japanese superimposed *their* system of social hierarchy on the education system they borrowed from the West. Even the democratic system of universal coeducation created in the aftermath of Second World War still bears traces of a quasi-feudal system of hierarchy – what I like to call the *pyramid of power*. Teachers on their raised platforms are considered the “lords” of knowledge and discipline. Students at their neatly lined desks are supposed to be the obedient “feudal” subjects who memorize the material covered in class and study diligently at home. Discussion and dialogue are rare. Because of the emphasis on group harmony (*wa* in Japanese), individuality and originality are discouraged. The traditional distrust of individuality is summed up in the popular saying: *The nail that sticks out must be hammered down*.

Not surprisingly, the atmosphere in the Japanese classroom is stressful for teachers and students alike. The teachers are under pressure from their superiors to maintain and even improve academic standards. The students are under pressure to live up to the expectations of their teachers and their parents. Even today, most students including those in elementary schools attend one of the private *jukus* (cram school) after their regular classes. The classes at the *jukus* often end as late as 9:00 pm so that students have little or no time for play or rest. It is no wonder that they are stressed, over-tired and unhappy.

In Japan, English language instruction usually starts in junior high school although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has recently passed a bill to introduce English language instruction in the fifth grade. Despite recent attempts to revamp English education in Japan, the methodology is still uses the “old” system of rote and memorization so that there is little interaction between the students and the teacher. Often teachers simply translate English passages into Japanese. Because of the large classes (35-40 students), speaking is limited to group repetition. Since English classes usually meet once a week, students tend to forget what they have learned in the previous class. It should come as no surprise that most students dislike English. They must, however, achieve a certain level of proficiency if they plan to apply to college because English is a required part of the entrance examinations.

This unfortunate situation had produced negative repercussion in the undergraduate English departments. (In the 25 years that I have been writing textbooks for Japanese university students, I have seen these changes and have had to adjust the style and contents of my textbooks accordingly.) Although most college students have studied English for 5-6 years in secondary school, the results are disappointing, to say the least. Their listening and speaking skills are extremely poor, their writing skills are weak and their reading comprehension leaves much to be desired. In recent years, the proficiency levels have deteriorated to the point that MEXT is developing an action plan to “cultivate *Japanese students with English abilities*” (English Forum 2004: *Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” – Upgrading English Education in Japan*). The goal is to upgrade English language instruction in Japanese secondary schools, colleges and universities so that graduates have the necessary proficiency in English for careers in business, banking, education, technology and industry.

The declining birthrate in Japan has also contributed to the decline of academic standards. Today there are simply too many colleges (especially junior colleges) and not enough students to fill the places. Many junior colleges have been forced to close of low enrollments. Most women’s colleges have become coeducational in order to attract more applicants. With the exception of the prestigious institutions, there is little or no competition for college acceptance. In descending order of importance, the most prestigious national universities are: Tokyo University, Kyoto University and Tohoku University (Sendai). The top private universities are Waseda University and Sophia University, both in Tokyo.

These changes “for worse” are not limited to English language instruction. Instead they exist throughout the entire education system. Today the Japanese classroom is no longer a model of discipline, motivation and exceptional academic performance. Students often pay little attention to the teacher. They chat with their classmates, send text messages to friends, and even sleep. Many do not do their homework. Some cut classes. Others are hostile or antagonistic towards the teachers. Bullying is a serious problem. The outbursts of violence in the classroom and after school have shocked parents, teachers, educators and politicians. Clearly the old system is not working.

Innovation is not easy, especially in a country like Japan which tends to view change as a threat to traditional values. If the Japanese want to infuse new life and enthusiasm into their education system, they must embrace change. The so-called Rainbow Plan prioritizes strategies which, according to MEXT, will reverse the current trends in the Japanese education system. The seven priorities aim at:

- (1) improving scholastic proficiency
- (2) encouraging students to participate in community service
- (3) creating a student-friendly learning environment
- (4) strengthening the trust of parents and communities
- (5) training teachers as professional educators
- (6) creating universities with international standards
- (7) establishing an educational philosophy for the 21st century

Perhaps the Rainbow Plan should include an eighth priority which would encourage a more international perspective in education. The Japanese should view their unique identity against a “global” backdrop. If they want to be true international partners, they must stop insulating themselves against “threats”—real or perceived—from the outside world. For better or for worse, they cannot escape influences, both positive and negative, from other countries. The plan to revise the curriculum and update the context in which it is taught is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. The Japanese must also revise and revamp their attitude towards foreigners and stop treating the *gaijin* as outsiders. Now that Japan is opening its doors to foreigners and slowly becoming a multi-ethnic society, the nation will hopefully welcome differences. Recently the number of foreigners who are permanent residents in Japan is increasing because the government has relaxed its residency restrictions for foreigners. Many marry Japanese citizens. The children from these “mixed” marriages are Japanese citizens, and often identify with Japanese culture rather than that of their “foreign” parent. Japan is also allowing unskilled “guest workers” to enter the country because of the labor shortage for low-paying jobs. In short, the ethnic complexion of Japan is slowly changing.

Can the Japanese education system change “for better”? I believe that the answer is yes despite the plethora of problems. In my opinion, the adaptability of the Japanese will enable them to find new, perhaps unconventional solutions that will override the traditional reluctance to change. It will not be a smooth or easy transition, especially with a conservative government at the helm. But a conservative government is not necessarily an indication of a conservative population. When citizens express their views with energy and conviction, the politicians must listen or be voted out of office. Japanese citizens, I assure you, want and demand change in education.

In the area of English language instruction, I see signs of change, especially at the college level. The undergraduate English departments have moved away from the traditional emphasis on literature. They now offer courses in English on a variety of themes such as intercultural communication, Western culture, current events as well as classes for improving reading comprehension, strengthening listening skills, and preparing students for the TOEFL and TOEIC tests. The English departments have

revamped their policies for hiring native English speakers. They want to avoid the mistakes of the late 1980's and early 1990's when foreign teachers and teaching assistants were often hired primarily because they were native English speakers. As we all know, being a native speaker is not an automatic guarantee of quality or professionalism. The English departments are also tightening the requirements for study-abroad programs, welcoming more foreign students at Japanese institutions, reducing class size, introducing more seminars, and expanding the use of computer-assisted learning. During the semester breaks, some universities now offer mini-intensive courses in English taught by visiting professors as an alternative to study-abroad programs.

These changes in English language instruction are yielding positive results, especially at private institutions which have greater freedom than their national counterparts. While the private colleges and universities in Japan are not controlled by MEXT, they must submit curriculum plans and changes for approval. These private colleges and universities also are reviewed periodically by accreditation agencies. Since the Japanese education system is centralized, there is less leeway for private initiative than in the USA. The situation in secondary schools and national universities is less flexible because the curriculum is controlled by MEXT. An interesting case in point is the new bill to start English language instruction in the fifth grade in the public schools. It has met with vociferous criticism from the traditionalists who insist learning a foreign language is a threat to the Japanese identity! In their opinion, fifth graders must spend their linguistic energies on improving their command of Japanese, or risk becoming less Japanese. Because of these critics' preoccupation with the unique Japanese identity, there is considerable uncertainty about how and when the new English program will be introduced.

I believe in the power of language because it allows us to communicate and thus build bridges of understanding among people. Although I have been accused of viewing the world through rose-colored glasses, I know that language promotes change. Once the Japanese separate the issues of identity and foreign language study, they can change English language instruction "for better." That's definitely the way to go!

Works Cited

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