

12TH OECD-JAPAN SEMINAR:

“GLOBALISATION AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCIES: RESPONDING TO DIVERSITY IN LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENTS”

ENGLISH EDUCATION AND POLICY IN JAPAN

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1. Introduction

- This paper aims to introduce a Japanese education policy regarding the teaching of English, the most popular foreign language in Japan, under the OECD Globalisation and Linguistic Competency project.

2. Basic policy for English education

- In Japan, education administration is implemented under the Basic Act on Education, the School Education Act and relevant laws and regulations about education as well as the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education published in July 2008. This plan stipulates that foreign language education, including foreign language activities at the primary school level, should be enhanced as a policy and fostered for the next five years.
- The “Action plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English abilities’” designed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in March 2003 is another basic policy focusing on English Education. Recognizing that the lack of sufficient English ability is putting many Japanese people at a disadvantage, MEXT has defined the English language abilities required for all Japanese people and clarified the measures that should be taken by the government to establish a system for cultivating “Japanese with English abilities” in five years.
- This action plan defines the English language abilities required for Japanese people as follows by education stage: average junior high school graduates should have basic communication skills with regard to areas such as greetings, responses, or topics relating to daily life; average high school graduates should be able to participate in normal communication with regard to topics, for example, relating to daily life; and, finally, average university graduates should be able to use English in at a professional level in their work.

- In addition, the plan suggests seven actions for improving English education: (1) improving English classes; (2) improving teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading the teaching system; (3) improving motivation for learning English; (4) improving the evaluation system in the entrance examinations; (5) supporting the English conversation activity class in primary schools; (6) improving mother tongue (Japanese language) abilities; and (7) promoting the practical research. Concrete measures have already been taken based on these suggestions.
- More local governments are putting effort into English education. For example, Yokohama city has formulated the “English Education Propulsion Program at Primary and Junior High School”, which addresses enhancement of English communication abilities with foreign people. Yamagata prefecture has set up the “Committee for fostering English education” which has shown improvement in the following three suggested areas: (1) motivation to learn English; (2) creating an English education environment; and (3) the teaching ability of English teachers.

3. Curriculum

Overview of Japanese school systems

- The educational system of Japan is comprised fundamentally of six years of primary school, three years of junior high school, three years of senior high school and four years of university. The first nine years of education (primary school and junior high school) are compulsory. In addition, there are kindergartens (pre-primary school); special need schools for challenged students; and Colleges of technology, five-year educational institutions for junior high school graduates aiming to cultivate engineers.

The course of study

- The Enforcement Ordinance of School Education Act stipulates the standard number of class from primary schools and junior high schools. The MEXT sets the Course of Study, the standards for the school curriculum in order to secure the same level of education all over the country. The content in the Course of Study should be taught in all schools, while the content beyond it also can be taught in schools.
- The Course of Study makes foreign language compulsory at the junior high and high school levels, and it especially provides that English should be selected for foreign languages class in principle. While the Course of Study for primary schools does not require English education, plenty of primary schools are giving foreign language conversation classes as part of global studies in the class of the “Period for Integrated Study” (*Sogo teki na gakushu no jikan*) in which students learn interdisciplinary and comprehensive issues. Moreover, according to revised the Course of Study in March 2008, “foreign language activities” class, which meets once a week, will be introduced in fifth and sixth grade in 2011.

The number of classes

- All junior high school students must attend English classes for fifty minutes, three times a week (four times a week in 2011). All high school student must take the “Oral communication I” (2 credits, 1 credit = one class a week for a year) which aims to cultivate listening and speaking ability or “English I” (3 credits), which aims to cultivate comprehensive English abilities. Many high school students in ordinary courses take “Oral Communication I” or “English I”, or both, in the first year, and they take some of the courses ”Oral Communication II”, “English II”, “Reading” and “Writing” (4 credits each) in the second or third year.

Educational objectives and achievement goals

- The Course of Study stipulates educational objectives and educational contents, including the number of vocabulary and grammatical items. Achievement goals, however, are not explicitly stated in the Course of Study, while, as mentioned, they are referred to roughly in the Action Plan.
- The Revised Course of Study for junior high school English class that will be in force in 2001 cites as educational objectives the following: (1) to enable students to understand the speaker's intentions etc. in simple English, (2) to enable students to speak about their thoughts etc. in simple English, (3) to accustom and familiarize students with reading in English and to enable them to understand the writer's intentions etc. in simple English, and (4) to accustom and familiarize students with writing in English and to enable them to write about their thoughts etc. in simple English.
- Although the objectives of the current Course of Study also contained as an objective “to accustom and familiarize students with listening in English” and “to accustom and familiarize student with speaking in English”, these were eliminated from the revised version because they will be cultivated in English activities at primary schools.
- “Simple English” means English with a vocabulary of approximately 1 200 words, collocations and idioms as well as grammatical items per Table 1.¹

Table 1. Grammatical items which junior high school students should acquire

(a) Sentences
a. Simple, compound and complex sentences
b. Affirmative and negative declarative sentences
c. Affirmative and negative imperative sentences
d. Interrogative sentences that begin with a verb or an auxiliary verb such as can, do, may, etc., that contain or, and that begin with an interrogative such as how, what, when, where, which, who, whose and why
(b) Sentence Structures
a. [Subject + Verb]
b. [Subject + Verb + Complement]in which,
(aa) Subject + be + noun, pronoun, adjective
(bb) Subject + non be + noun, adjective
c. [Subject + Verb + Object]in which
(aa) Subject + Verb + noun, pronoun, gerund, to infinitive, how etc. + to infinitive,a clause beginning with that
(bb) Subject + Verb + clause beginning with what etc
d. [Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object]in which,
(aa) Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + noun, pronoun
(bb) Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + how etc. to infinitive
e. [Subject + Verb + Object + Complement] in which,
(aa) Subject + Verb + Object +noun, pronoun
f. Other structure
(aa) There + be+~
(bb) It + be+ ~(+for~)+to infinitive

¹MEXT “The commentary of the Course of Study for junior high school foreign language class” (2008)

<p>(cc) Subject + tell, want etc.+ Object + to infinitive</p> <p>(c) pronoun</p> <p>a. Personal, demonstrative, interrogative and quantitative pronouns</p> <p>b. Basic restrictive uses of the relative pronouns, that, which and who used in the nominative case and that and which used in the objective case</p> <p>(d) Verb tense etc.</p> <p>Present, past, present progressive, past progressive, present perfect and future formed with auxiliary verbs etc.</p> <p>(e) Comparative forms of adjectives and adverbs</p> <p>(f) Basic to-infinitives</p> <p>(g) Basic gerunds</p> <p>(h) Adjectival use of present and past participles</p> <p>(i) Present and past tenses of passive voices</p>

- The objectives of each course in high school English class are as per Table 2. “Oral Communication I”, “English I” and “Writing” deal with a vocabulary of 1 600 words, “English II” and “Oral Communication II” that of 2 100 words, and “Reading” that of 2 600 words. The Course of Study aims to understand and use the grammatical items as per Table 3 in addition to those acquired in junior high school.

Table 2. Objectives of each course

Oral Communication I	To develop students' basic abilities to understand and convey information, ideas, etc. by listening to or speaking English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through dealing with everyday topics.
Oral Communication II	To further develop students' abilities to organize, present and discuss information, ideas, etc. in English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through dealing with a wide variety of topics.
English I	To develop students' basic abilities to understand what they listen to or read and to convey information, ideas, etc. by speaking or writing in English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through dealing with everyday topics.
English II	To further develop students' abilities to understand what they listen to or read and to convey information, ideas, etc. by speaking or writing in English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through dealing with a wide variety of topics.
Reading	To further develop students' abilities to understand information, the writer's intentions, etc. by reading English, and to foster a positive attitude toward communicating by utilizing these abilities.
Writing	To further develop students' abilities to write down information, ideas, etc. in English in accordance with the situation and the purpose, and to foster a positive attitude toward communicating by utilizing these abilities.

Table 3. Grammatical items which junior high school students should acquire

<p>A Sentence Patterns</p> <p>(a) 'Subject + Verb + Complement' in which the verb is other than be and the complement is a present participle or a past participle, or in which the verb is be and the complement is a clause that begins with what etc., that or whether</p> <p>(b) 'Subject + Verb + Object' in which the object is a clause that begins with what etc., or if or whether</p> <p>(c) 'Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object' in which the direct object is how etc. +to-infinitive, or a clause that begins with what etc., that, or if or whether</p> <p>(d) 'Subject + Verb+ Object+ Complement' in which the complement is a present participle, a past participle or a root infinitive</p> <p>(e) Other sentence patterns</p> <p>a. It +be etc. + ~ + a clause that begins with that etc.</p> <p>b. Subject + seem etc. +to-infinitive</p> <p>c. It + seem etc. +a clause that begins with that</p> <p>B Grammar</p> <p>(a) Use of the infinitive</p> <p>(b) Use of relative pronouns</p> <p>(c) Use of relative adverbs</p> <p>(d) Use of the pronoun it representing following noun phrases or noun clauses</p> <p>(e) Use of tenses: the present perfect progressive, the past perfect, the past perfect progressive, the future progressive and the future perfect</p> <p>(f) Use of the passive voice that follows auxiliary verbs</p> <p>(g) Basic use of the subjunctive mood</p> <p>(h) Basic use of participial constructions</p>

- Achievement goals are not clearly defined in the Course of Study. In this regard, the Japanese system is different from that of some European countries, which adopt the Common European Framework of Reference for language as achievement goals.
- The Action Plan stipulates the goals that average junior high school graduates conduct basic communication with regard to areas such as greetings, responses, or topics relating to daily life; and average high school graduates conduct normal communication with regard to topics, for example, relating to daily life. The plan gives an indication of English abilities by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (EIKEN), an English test unique to Japan, which also aims to have average junior high school graduates acquire an English ability equivalent to that needed to pass EIKEN third grade, and to have average high school graduates acquire an English ability equivalent to that needed to pass the EIKEN pre-second or second grade.
- However, only about 30% of students in ninth grade acquire the same English ability as EIKEN third grade and about 30% of those in the third year of high school acquire the EIKEN pre-second grade level..

Advanced case: Super English Language High School programme

- For the purpose of fostering innovative English education, the MEXT has designated the Super English Language High school and has taken budget steps for them to develop new curriculum focusing on English education and coordination with English education in junior high schools or universities. At this time, around 50 high schools are so designated to create distinctive methods

such as a comprehensive and cross-curriculum teaching method for developing self-expression primarily by speaking and writing, as well as English education for cultivating scientific logical mind and communication abilities.

4. “English activities” in primary schools

- The Revised Course of Study in force in 2011 determines to introduce “foreign language activities” class, targeting fifth and sixth grade students once a week.
- While current the Course of Study states that learning English starts in junior high school, more than 95% provide English activities for sixth grade students and approximately 80% provide English activities for first grade students in some form or another. However, more than half of primary schools provide them less than once a month.²
- English activities in primary schools are different from English education in junior high and high schools, which directly aims to acquire skill: “foreign language activities” and “English activities” aim to deepen the understanding of language and culture, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication through oral communication. Concretely, English activities at the primary school level comprise singing songs, playing games and engaging in basic conversations.
- Most schools conduct such English activities in the “Period for Integrated Study” which introduces experiential learning and problem-solving learning about the interdisciplinary and comprehensive as a part of global studies.

5. Instructor

Cultivation, Recruitment and Training for English teacher

- Licensing by type of school (primary, junior high school, high school) and by subject (except primary school) is required for teaching in any public/private primary school, junior high school and high school. While there are teacher’s colleges and departments of teacher training, it is also possible to obtain a teacher’s general licence through accumulating the required credits for a teaching licence in other colleges and departments. After that, one must pass the teacher recruitment test conducted by the prefectural board of Education for teaching in public schools, or take a test given by the private school for which one will teach. The licence is valid for 10 years, and is renewed after completing more than 30 hours training course. The general licence is valid nationwide.
- The special licence system is an exceptional example of this process of cultivating and recruiting teachers. The special licence, awarded to persons with excellent knowledge, experience and skill, enables them to teach in a school and has been given to people such as English native speakers and interpreters. The licence is valid for ten years, which is as long as the general licence is valid for, but it is valid only within the prefecture which issued it. Approximately forty people can obtain the special licence through all subjects and prefectures despite a recent increase.
- With regard to training, it is mandated by law that all public school teachers undergo a beginning teachers’ training programme and a 10 year-experienced teachers’ training programme as well as a training course for licence renewal. Prefectures give an incentive training course for English teachers aiming to improve command and teaching ability.

² MEXT “Survey on English Activities in Primary Schools FY2007” (2008)

Assistant Language Teacher

- In many schools, native speakers called “Assistant Language Teacher (ALT)” and Japanese teacher will team-teach an English class. According to the MEXT, ALTs participate in 60~70% of English activities classes, 27% of English class in junior high schools, and 15% in high school. The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) has dispatched many young ALTs to schools across the countries.
- For the purpose of deepening foreign people’s understanding of Japan, the JET program provides young foreign people with the opportunity to teach a foreign language and to become involved in an international exchange at the local level in Japan under the collaboration of the MEXT, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The JET programme consists of three jobs, ALT, Coordinator for International Relations (CIR), and Sports Exchange Advisors (SEA). Most of JET participants are employed as ALTs and 4 000-5 000 people teach language courses annually.
- Recently, the number of ALTs other than those in the JET programme, called “non-JET”, has increased. According to the MEXT, the number of non-JET ALTs doubled to 5 951 in FY2006 from 3 090 in FY2002, while JET program ALTs dropped to 5 057 in FY2006 from 5 676 in fiscal FY2002. Non-JET ALTs are employed directly by the local government or are dispatched from private English schools at the request of local governments.