Chapter 2
Struggling for a Diverse but Fair Policy: Policy Challenges to Implementing English at the Primary School Level in Japan

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Abstract After many false starts, the Japanese government has mandated the teaching of English as an academic subject at the 5th- and 6th-grade levels, beginning in 2020. This means that English is part of the accountability system from the 5th grade until college in Japan. Compared with neighboring Asian countries, the Japanese government has taken slow steps to implement English at the primary-school level, with the process reflecting complicated domestic issues as well as global forces underlying policy decision. This chapter situates primary-school English education policies in the larger societal context in Japan and discusses the challenges to their implementation. There exists a serious mismatch between the policy assumption that English proficiency is a global competency and the realities of day-to-day life in much of Japan. In the context of growing concerns about the nation's decline in its economic and political presence in the world as well as increasing social-economic disparities within Japanese society, centralizing the diverse local practices in primary English education may promote unfairness as long as practical English skills are viewed as representative of global competence and are granted a significant role in the exam-based educational accountability system in Japan.

Keywords Language education policy · Japan · Socioeconomic status · Primary education

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Introduction

After a long dispute, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan finally decided to make English an academic subject at the 5th- and 6th-grade levels beginning in 2020. The pre-2020 program of "foreign language activities" (a de facto English language exploratory program) was pushed down to the 3rd- and 4th-grade levels. The change in policy was made as part of a larger reform program concerning language education from the primary to tertiary education levels. The policy was also partially motivated by a widely held belief that the earlier, the better for foreign language learning, even though that viewpoint is not warranted in light of empirical research (e.g., de Bot, 2014; Muñoz, 2014; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018). The policy shift signals a desire to respond to perceptions about the importance of English in an increasingly globalized world. According to MEXT (2017a), the new policy has two major goals: improve English proficiency (with an emphasis on practical English skills) as a global language among Japanese citizens and develop a firm identity of what it means to be Japanese through learning a foreign language.

With the rise in political and economic power of China and other neighboring Asian countries, Japanese policymakers have become increasingly concerned about Japan's declining economic and political stature in the world. Improving Japanese citizens' English proficiency and developing a stronger Japanese identity are considered indispensable ways for the country to regain its global reputation and confidence. This sentiment is reflected in the government's two previously mentioned goals. However, there is a serious mismatch between the policy assumption that English proficiency is a necessary global competency and the realities of day-to-day life in much of Japan (Kubota, 2011). Large-scale survey studies (e.g., Terasawa, 2014) have indicated that English is not the primary language used in intercultural communication in Japan and that only a small portion of Japanese citizens have the opportunity to use English for communication. In such a context, where English proficiency and oral communicative skills in particular are perceived by many to be more of an *imagined* global competency (Butler & Iino, 2016), introducing English at the primary school level appears to be largely motivated by, and have consequences for, internal societal matters. Equating English proficiency with global competence also overemphasizes the value of English-speaking bilinguals in Japanese society and does not match the reality of the growing number of non-English-speaking linguistic minority people (e.g., immigrants, foreign residents) in Japan.

One of the most notable ways that English is overemphasized in Japan is its gatekeeper role in students' access to higher education. English proficiency greatly influences college admissions, regardless of whether students actually need English skills in order to succeed in their studies or careers. In addition, there are growing concerns about the widening gap in living standards and academic achievement among children based on their socioeconomic status (SES) (e.g., Kariya, 2008; Nippon Foundation Children's Poverty Team, 2016; Matsuoka, 2019). The reality

for many students in Japan is that extra funding and resources are required to access opportunities to use English outside of their schools. This also holds true in some respects at their schools as well. The new policy of making English a compulsory academic subject in primary school is significant for stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers, and policymakers) because it means that primary English education is going to be part of a larger exam-based accountability system in Japan. The present chapter, therefore, aims to situate this new primary school English education policy in its larger societal and educational context in Japan and to analyze the challenges in its implementation.

Compared with Japan's neighboring countries in Asia (Spolsky & Moon, 2012), the Japanese government has been taking very slow steps to implement English at the primary school level. This slow and incremental process reflects complicated domestic issues as well as global forces underlying the policy decision (Cooper, 1989). As I discuss in what follows, local school boards and individual schools have experimented with various types of English-teaching methods for primary school students. A number of materials and textbooks have been produced locally, and unique collaboration efforts have been made between primary and secondary schools regionally while making use of local resources. The new policy centralizes these diverse practices and may appear to ensure equity in access to English. I argue, however, that centralizing current local, diverse practices and evaluating students' performance may result in unfair outcomes as long as practical English skills are believed to be representative of global competence and are granted a significant role in the Japanese educational accountability system and in access to higher education.

The chapter is organized as follows. I first provide historical and societal backgrounds of the policy as well as a summary of the current policy content, followed by analyses of the new policy of English at the primary school level based on Baldauf and Kaplan's (2005) framework of language-in-education policy goals. A particular focus is placed on analyzing the access, methodology, and materials policies in their framework. The chapter concludes with a series of policy implications. In the following discussion, *primary school English* refers to English education conducted at the primary school level, including both English exploratory programs and English as an academic subject.

Historical and Societal Background of the Policy

Japan is by no means a linguistically homogenous country; a number of minority languages are spoken, including various Ainu and Okinawan (or Ryukyuan) languages, as well as several other languages spoken by long-term and recent immigrants and foreign residents. Unfortunately, both Ainu and Okinawan languages are recognized as endangered languages by UNESCO despite regional revitalization efforts (UNESCO, 2017). Foreign residents have been increasing in number in recent years. The number of foreign residents increased from 2018 to 2019 by approximately three million people. However, they only constitute 2.2% of the

entire population in Japan (Ministry of Justice, 2020), and their language rights are little recognized in public sectors (e.g., schools, public institutions, and workplaces). Japanese monolingualism has been favored in domestic communication (including communication with immigrants themselves), while English education has been strongly promoted among Japanese citizens. English is the predominant foreign language taught at the primary and secondary school levels. For example, in 2014 only 15% of high schools offered foreign languages other than English, and 30% of such schools were private (MEXT, 2016). Foreign language education is de facto synonymous with English education in Japan, including at the primary school level.

Historically, two different approaches to English education have been emphasized alternately over time. One approach has been to focus on English for practical purposes (referred to as *practical English* hereafter) and the second approach focuses on English for academic studies and entrance exams (primarily as a means to access higher education, referred to as *English as a school subject* hereafter). The emphasis on practical English has usually been triggered by external forces, as I have discussed elsewhere (Butler, 2005, 2007).

English education in Japan, as part of the modern education system, started in the late nineteenth century when Japan opened the country to the world after 300 years of a policy of isolation. English initially was associated with modernization (largely an emphasis on Westernization) and was a major means of absorbing information from abroad. Everything related to the West was considered advanced, while traditional Japanese ways were seen as backward. During the initial stage of modernization, learning oral English from native speakers was referred to as a *seisoku* (the regular way), whereas learning English through translating written texts by Japanese teachers of English was referred to as *hensoku* (the irregular way). Signs of the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992)—an influential notion in language teaching that native speakers of the target language are the ideal teachers—are already evident in these terms. After the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and the ensuing rise of Japanese nationalism, however, worship of the West disappeared. As part of this renewed nationalism, the government initiated a policy of "education in Japan through Japanese," and foreign texts and teachers were gradually replaced by Japanese texts and teachers. English became primarily an academic pursuit and was studied mainly in preparation for college entrance exams, while practical English skills were devalued (Butler & Iino, 2005; Kitao & Kitao, 1995).

During the U.S. occupation of Japan after World War II, there was a renewed emphasis on practical English in Japan. English was embraced as a practical tool for communicating with U.S. military personnel. The *Anglo-Japanese Conversation Manual*, published immediately after World War II (in 1945), sold more than 3.6 million copies. Japan's educational system was reorganized by the U.S. military government; the 6-3-3-4 system was adopted, where the first 6 and 3 years (primary and middle school education, respectively) were compulsory. Soon after Japan recovered from World War II and established economic and political stability, however, the pendulum swung back to an emphasis on English as a school subject in the educational system. Enrollment rates for entering high schools and colleges

increased, and virtually all Japanese high schools and colleges adopted English as a subject on entrance exams. The exams primarily tested students' mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and reading (often through translation). High scores were regarded as a sign of diligence and effort, traits that were considered equally available to everybody irrespective of background. These traits were also highly valued as a critical qualification for those seeking higher education (Butler & Iino, 2005; Kitao & Kitao, 1995).

The pendulum started swinging back again to an emphasis on practical English in the 1970s. Since the 1970s, criticisms have been repeatedly leveled against exam-oriented English education for its ineffectiveness and failure to meet the needs of a globalizing society. Critics called for more emphasis on practical English, seeing it as a way for Japan to be competitive. Yet another external lever—globalization this time—became a major force for a renewed focus on practical English. A key factor in realizing the promotion of practical English was an influential policy plan (the "Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities") developed by MEXT in 2003. The major points in this policy included (a) aiming to improve all Japanese nationals' communicative abilities in English (as opposed to focusing on selected students), (b) specifying concrete goals, (c) granting greater autonomy to teachers and local agents, and, most importantly for the present discussion, (d) allowing primary schools to implement "foreign language activities" at their own discretion (Butler & Iino, 2005).

Around the same time, to relax the excessive emphasis on acquiring knowledge rather than creativity and critical thinking, MEXT also implemented *yutori kyoiku* ("relaxed education"). This policy was intended to enhance more individualized and diverse education and to substantially reduce curriculum content and the number of class hours, with the result that adding new subjects (including English at primary school) to the already crowded curriculum became difficult. In line with the relaxed education policy, the Period of Integrated Study was gradually introduced in the primary and secondary school curriculum starting in 2000. The Period of Integrated Study allowed individual teachers to develop interdisciplinary lessons of their own choosing to enhance students' autonomy, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. English activities at primary school, if they were offered at all, were frequently offered during these periods initially. It was during this relatively brief era of relaxed education policy that English education—in the form of optional language exploratory programs—was introduced at the primary school level.

Starting in 2011, after heated debates about whether the relaxed education policy led to lower academic achievement, MEXT reemphasized academic skills in a renewed *Course of Study*. As a result, policies reducing class hours and academic content were rescinded. This was considered the de facto end of the relaxed education policy. As those relaxed policies were reversed in 2011, MEXT made primary school English compulsory for the first time, with the goal of eventually regulating it as an academic subject requiring numerical evaluation of students' language attainment.

Current Primary English Policies

MEXT (2017a) described the implementation process of English at primary school as having the following four stages:

Stage 1 (English activities at selected experimental schools, 1992–2001)
Stage 2 (English activities as part of Integrated General Studies, 2002–2010)
Stage 3 (Mandated foreign language activities, 2011–2019)
Stage 4 (Mandated foreign language studies as an academic subject, 2020–present)

In other words, the transition from experimenting with English activities to fully implementing English as an academic subject took place over a 30-year period. There has been substantial opposition to these changes as well as support, and various domestic forces have influenced the decision-making processes. MEXT granted great autonomy to local boards of education and schools, especially during the first two stages. One could argue that establishing primary school English at the local level before implementing it nationwide was a calculated tactic, what Lukes (1974) would describe as the government exercising *covert power in action*. Regardless of the motivation, however, this local, piecemeal approach resulted in substantial variability in practice across regions and schools. While making use of feedback from local experiences, the new (Stage 4) MEXT policy aims to centralize these diverse practices by developing a uniform curriculum and materials and offering a top-down, cascade model of professional training[1] for teachers, in addition to existing, local professional development activities.

Based on Baldauf and Kaplan's (2005) framework of language-in-education-policy goals, Table 2.1 summarizes the major elements in the new central policy at Stage 4 as well as local policies undertaken. Limited space does not allow for a detailed discussion of each policy element in Table 2.1. Instead, I will focus on two issues. The first issue concerns the objectives of the new policy (curriculum policy). The second issue concerns the meaning of the policy change regarding English in primary school—from evaluation-free English exploratory programs to a compulsory academic subject—and the fairness issues associated with this change (access policy and evaluation policy).

[1] The *cascade model* is an indirect, top-down teacher training model where a limited number of selected teachers receive training initially and the training content is gradually passed down to layers of teachers at different local levels (Butler, 2019).

Table 2.1 Contemporary Primary School English Education policies in Japan

POLICIES	Primary School English language education policies	
	Central policies[a]	Local practices[c]
CURRICULUM *Objectives*	2011: End of relaxed education (de facto) 2020: *New Course of Study* enacted Objectives: "to develop the foundation of communication skills" (target to learn 600–700 words; pre-A1 level in Common European Framework of Reference).	1992: Experiments started. Since 2002: Various locally developed curricula and practices. 2020: Centralized curriculum (*New Course of Study*)
ACCESS *Target grade levels*	2002: Selected areas & individual school choice 2011: Grades 5–6 Mandated "Foreign language activities" (English explanatory program) 2020: Grades 3–4 Mandated "Foreign language activities"; Grades 5–6 Mandated "Foreign language as an academic subject".	Implemented English as an explanatory program 88% (2003) → 97% (by 2007). Most private PSs teach English as an academic subject in 2007; English as an academic subject was implemented among experimental schools and schools with special curricula; some PSs implemented English from Grade 1.
Frequency of instruction	2011: Grades 5–6, 35 lessons per year (45 min. per week). 2020: Grades 3–4, 35 lessons per year; Grades 5–6, 70 lessons per week (how to secure lesson hours is up to local schools e.g., using a module format, using summer vacation time, etc.).	Varies among schools; the majority of schools have 34 lessons per year from Grades 1–4 and 35–69 lessons per year at grade 5 and 6; different types of time allocations have been tried.
PERSONAL *Local teachers*	Homeroom teachers teach English along with other subjects; selected teachers were trained as "English education promotion leaders"; plans to hire an additional 4000 English teachers by 2020; modifications for certificate requirements for PS teachers (including English components).	Homeroom teachers teach in 91.9% schools; special English teachers in 4.3% schools; 5.4% of PS teachers also obtain English certificates at the secondary school level; 97.0% of local boards of education offer teacher training to teach English to PS teachers in 2017.
Native Eng. speaking teachers (NEST)	Promote NESTs as assistant language teachers (ALTs), including those from the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) program; qualifications vary tremendously.	12,912 NESTs (including 2253 JETs) taught at PSs in 2017; non-JETs were hired locally, but their working. contracts vary; 62.4% of PSs had some lessons by NESTs with varying capacity.

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Table 2.1 (continued)

POLICIES	Primary School English language education policies	
METHDOLOGY AND MATERIALS *Methodology*	Grades 3–4: Oral activity-based instruction to promote cross-cultural understanding and to develop foundations for acquiring communication skills Grades 5–6: Systematic English instruction including basic reading and writing activities; promoting metalinguistic awareness of Japanese and English.	Various types of methods have been tested at experimental schools and at local boards of education (e.g., co-teaching among various types of teachers, phonics, and other literacy lessons, Teaching English from Grade 1; Content and Language Integrated Learning [CLIL]; small class size teaching, etc.).
Materials	2009–2011: MEXT developed the supplementary material resource "*Eigo Note* (English Note)" for Grades 5–6. 2012: MEXT developed another supplementary resource "Hi Friends!" 2017: MEXT produced additional material for "Hi Friends!) ("Hi, Friends Plus" "Hi, Friends, Story Book"). 2018: MEXT developed a model textbook, which was tentatively used for the transition period; private publishers developed textbooks based on this model. 2019: MEXT approved multiple textbooks developed by private publishers.	Local boards of education and individual schools used MEXT's supplementary materials and/or developed materials of their own (e.g., "Welcome to Tokyo," developed by the Tokyo Board of Education); experimental schools reported their results to MEXT (the supplemental materials were not required for use) 2018: Selected public schools started to use the textbook made by MEXT. 2020: Local boards of education choose a textbook from among a list of approved textbooks (use of an approved textbook is required).
RESOURCE *budget*	MEXT had an annual budget of 1,290,218,000 yen (approx. $11.7 million) for PS English in 2017.[b] Approximately 50% went to personnel expenses for language aides and language coordinators outside of schools (e.g., NESTs); 25% went to material development.	Local governments have varying budgets and resources.
COMMUNICTY *involved agencies*	Use of local resources (retired English teachers, Japanese with high English proficiency, foreign residents) are encouraged to assist homeroom teachers; Initial training for English Education Promotion leaders by an external foreign agency (a cascade model of teacher training).	Local universities offer pre- and in-service teacher trainings; various types of experiments and research conducted by local researchers and universities; local efforts to collaborate with middle schools (searching for a smoother transition from primary school to secondary school).

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Table 2.1 (continued)

POLICIES	Primary School English language education policies	
EVALUATION *Assessment*	Numeric evaluation of (1) knowledge/skills, (2) thinking/ decision-making/expressions, and (3) motivation; Can-Do assessment is encouraged, but no concrete guidelines are provided to teachers (as of 2019).	Various can-do descriptors are developed and used locally; 77.9% of PSs have some forms of Can-Do descriptors in 2017; some schools implement oral performance assessments but practice varies tremendously; tremendous confusion about assessments among teachers.

Notes: PSs in this table stand for primary schools
[a]The description refers to the New Course of Study enacted in 2020 unless specified
[b]These figures do not include personal expenses for hiring new special English teachers and foreign ALTs from the JET program
[c]Information is based on a series of reports available on MEXT's website

Issues with Early Language Learning Policies

English as an Imagined Global Competence—Ambiguous Goal Setting

As mentioned earlier, introducing English at the primary school level was one of the major strategies in MEXT's 2003 action plan to improve citizens' communicative abilities in English. The underlying assumption was that improving peoples' ability to communicate in English—conceptualized as *the* global language—is critical for the nation's survival in the globalized world. Driving the policy was a serious concern that, with the rise of China and other Asian countries, Japan was losing its influence in the world. This concern was evident in the goal statement that Japan should aim to obtain one of the highest scores in Asia in international English proficiency tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT) and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (MEXT, 2014). The fact that neighboring Asian countries were already teaching English at the primary school level was a strong justification for advocating for English in Japanese primary schools (MEXT, 2015a), although curiously the actual effect of primary school English in other Asian countries was hardly mentioned in any documents that MEXT released to the public.

The influence of parents and other stakeholders on educational policies for young learners cannot be overstated (Enever, 2018). Reflecting a prevailing belief among the general public that "the earlier, the better" is an effective approach to language learning, primary school English was largely welcomed by parents. A large-scale survey (Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2018, $n = 7400$) indicated that approximately 80% of parents agreed with the new policy in 2017. Primary school teachers also generally subscribed to the notion of "the earlier, the better." Another large-scale survey (Benesse Educational Research and Development

Institute, 2010, $n = 4709$) indicated that teachers largely agreed with English exploratory programs, ideally starting from the first grade, but that many did not wish to have English as a compulsory academic subject in primary school. The main reasons that teachers disagreed with making English a compulsory academic subject included their belief that primary school children should concentrate on learning Japanese rather than a foreign language and that there is insufficient instructional support for teaching English at this level. It is important to note, however, that there is no empirical proof that the "modest" amount of primary school English education offered (a couple of hours per week) (Johnstone, 2019, p. 19) had a negative influence on children's first language development. Similarly, a series of empirical studies conducted in foreign language learning contexts have shown repeatedly that earlier introduction of a foreign language does not necessarily lead to higher performance in the target language (e.g., Jaekel et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2014; Ortega, 2009; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018). Finally, the main stakeholders, young learners themselves, generally indicated that they liked the activities in the English exploratory programs but that they also tended to quickly lose interest (MEXT, 2015b). Children's decrease in motivation was mainly attributed to a lack of reading and writing elements in the English exploratory programs. These elements were eventually included when English was taught as an academic subject (MEXT, 2015b). Interestingly, primary school teachers' attitudes about introducing reading and writing appeared to be divided. Those teachers who supported reading and writing instruction in primary school tended to believe that reading and writing activities should be developmentally appropriate for upper-primary grade students and that they are indispensable for English studies at the secondary school level (Ikeda, 2013). Knowing that reading and writing have become critical elements in English at the secondary school level and beyond, one can argue that it is hard for teachers to detach primary school English from the way it is being taught as an academic subject at higher levels.

One of the challenges of promoting communicative English, or practical English, in Japan is that there is a serious mismatch between this goal setting—to improve all Japanese nationals' practical communicative abilities in English—and the real needs of Japanese learners of English. Terasawa (2014) conducted a series of analyses based on multiple large-scale social research databases. He found that only 2%–3% of Japanese people actually use English regularly; even after including people who use English just a few times a year, the percentage barely reached 20% of the working population and 10% of the entire population. Moreover, despite the common discourse that English is increasingly needed in global business and politics, the actual number of Japanese people who use English decreased from 2006 to 2010 in Terasawa's analysis, and he speculated that the situation would not drastically change in the near future considering the industry structure and the dominance of Japanese language use in Japan. Furthermore, English proficiency itself did not seem to contribute directly to increases in income and promotions, as is often assumed. Terasawa's data showed that those who had higher English proficiency tended to have higher annual incomes than those who didn't, but this was largely due to confounding variables such as educational background. It is not practical

English proficiency per se that determines one's income and career opportunities but English achievement as a ticket to higher education that brings the rise of income and promotion.

Historically speaking, as discussed already, the promotion of practical English has been associated with external forces in Japan. The current discourse often refers to the necessity of high English proficiency among the Japanese because of growing numbers of foreign tourists and residents in Japan as well as the 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, which Tokyo is hosting (MEXT, 2014).[2] But the overwhelming majority of foreign tourists and residents in Japan do not come from so-called English-speaking countries. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization (2020), 70.1% of the tourists who visited Japan in 2018 came from East Asia (China, Korea, and Taiwan), and an additional 12.0% were from South East Asia (e.g., Thailand). Regarding foreign residents, in 2019, 27.7% were Chinese, followed by Koreans (15.2%), Vietnamese (14.0%), Filipinos (9.6%), Brazilians (7.2%), and Indonesians (2.3%) (Ministry of Justice, 2020). When it comes to school-age children who need specific Japanese-language assistance, or Japanese-as-a-second-language learners (JSL students), 25.7% were Portuguese speakers and 23.7% were Chinese speakers, followed by Tagalog and other Filipino language speakers (19.5%) and Spanish speakers (9.4%) (MEXT, 2019). None of these statistics justify the claim that English is the critical language for a globalizing Japan. Instead, multilingual competency, especially in Asian languages, appears to be critical. Pan (2015) observed that the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games made the Chinese believe that English was a "hypercentral language" (p. 154) and that it played a critical role by "building a globalized and internationalized China" and "improving the language environment in China and building Beijing as a real international metropolis" (p. 155). Whether the same phenomenon will be observed in Japan, however, is questionable. For the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, the default language on the volunteer application form was English instead of Japanese (or any other language). Organizers might have chosen English as the default language as a way to convey the importance of English abilities for volunteers (even though most volunteers do not need to speak English), but it became a target of criticism by the media (ANN News, September, 2018). Whether the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics become triggers for English learning among Japanese is an empirical question that has yet to be answered.

Under the circumstances just described, the discourse around practical English as a global competence appears to be driven more by an imagined ideal than the reality of day-to-day life in Japan, and it is an ideal that is difficult for most Japanese to conceptualize in a concrete way. Since the ultimate goal of learning English (practical English) is not totally clear, the role of primary school English is left ambiguous as well. Because English is becoming a compulsory academic subject in primary schools in Japan in 2020, MEXT has asked primary school teachers to conduct a numeric evaluation of student performance while leaving unspecified what to evaluate and how to evaluate it. It is indeed hard to set an appropriate and

[2] The 2020 Olympics and Paralympics were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

realistic goal for foreign language programs in primary school given the modest amount of time allocated to it (currently a couple of hours of instruction per week). However, without substantial exposure to the target language, the advantage of an earlier start in language learning cannot be expected (Muñoz, 2014).

A lack of concrete and realistic goals may create undesirable consequences for children. Johnstone (2019) reminds us that "the children in class have no models of authentic localised 'children's English'" (p. 19) in such a context. Teachers' localized English is often considered inauthentic and undesirable as a model (Butler, 2019). Studies of goal theories and students' achievement repeatedly show that setting a concrete goal as opposed to a general goal (e.g., "do your best") is important for students to maintain motivation and achieve higher performance (see Lee & Bong, 2019, for a review of such studies in the language learning domain). In foreign language classrooms, students are often asked to display their performance in front of their classmates so that they can easily compare their performance with that of others. In such an environment, it is important for teachers to help students develop a mastery-oriented goal in which students can focus on their progress against their own goals and maintain high self-efficacy (Lee & Bong, 2019). If teachers cannot provide students with such a goal orientation, "starting early" may have a negative impact on students' long-term motivation to learn the language.

The Danger of Making Practical English Part of a High-Stakes, Uniform Accountability System

As a compulsory academic subject, English at the primary school level has become part of the larger uniform accountability system in Japan. MEXT's promotion of practical English throughout the entire educational system, including during primary school, is being undertaken while English still plays a critical role as an academic pursuit. Critically, testing practical English as part of the exam system potentially imperils fairness among students in Japan's rapidly changing society (Butler & Iino, 2021).

MEXT's strong emphasis on practical English is manifested in its college entrance exam reform along with the new policy of English primary education. Starting in 2020 (the same year that English became an academic subject in primary schools), MEXT decided to ask high school students to take external standardized English proficiency tests, such as the English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), as part of the college entrance exam. Note that these tests are not necessarily aligned with the Japanese national curriculum. This policy of using external proficiency tests was motivated by the desire to improve students' English proficiency, especially their speaking skills (skills that are often considered critical for the nation to be competitive in the global market) (Abe, 2017). In a context where Japanese is used almost exclusively and only limited class hours are allocated to English lessons in school,

students must make a special effort to practice English in order to prepare for these tests. These efforts usually require financial and regional resources going beyond regular school work. Consequently, it is likely that students' socioeconomic status (SES) would be one of the strongest predictors of achieving high scores on these proficiency tests. After receiving substantial criticism, MEXT announced in November 2019 that they were postponing the policy for some time.

With the fear that lowering the starting age of English education may result in an earlier and more intense influence of students' SES on their performance, top-down centralized policies are often intended to create equality of access to English regardless of the students' backgrounds (Butler, 2005; Enever, 2018; Johnstone, 2019). The actual effect of such top-down centralized initiatives, however, appears to be much more complex than policymakers may anticipate. In recent years, there has been increasing awareness that the idea of Japan as an egalitarian society is a myth, and there have also been increasing concerns about growing disparities based on SES. Japan indeed has a high relative poverty rate; it was ranked among the 10 worst countries in the Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation (OECD, 2015). One in six Japanese children live in poverty (Asahi Newspaper reporters, 2016). While these children may have access to English due to the central policy, the policy also encourages parents who have higher educational backgrounds and who reside in large cities to invest more in their children's English education starting early (Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2014). A growing number of prestigious private middle schools have already started including English as part of their entrance exams in response to the new MEXT policy (Asahi Newspaper reporters, 2018). Empirical studies from other countries where primary school English had already been implemented have reported in concert that students' SES is correlated with their ability to access opportunities to *practice* English at the primary school level (for a collection of papers on this topic, see a special volume of System, 2018 edited by Butler, Sayer, & Huang).

As a foreign exploratory program during the relaxed education period, primary school English in Japan invited local varieties and unique practices. However, this diversity also has become a source of concern for the central government. Some schools focused on cross-cultural understanding, while others were geared more toward language learning. Over the years, local boards of education and individual schools experimented with various types of instructional methods and strategies (some were designated experimental schools and received special professional and financial assistance). Such experiments included coteaching among various types of teachers, phonics and other literacy-related lessons, teaching English from Grade 1, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), smaller classes, and so forth. A variety of materials have been developed locally as well. For example, the Tokyo Board of Education developed its own textbooks, entitled *Welcome to Tokyo*, featuring vocabulary and expressions appropriate for welcoming guests for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. According to MEXT's survey, by 2015, 67.9% of primary schools had developed their own materials in addition to textbooks (MEXT, 2017c). Because English at the primary school level has been carried out largely by relying on local resources, foreign residents and other language minority

residents were often invited to participate in creating lesson plans and materials reflecting community characteristics. The materials they helped create included multicultural and multilingual materials, as opposed to focusing exclusively on English. In addition, 43.4% of primary schools also arranged the content of English instruction to be at least somewhat aligned with the Japanese language arts curriculum (MEXT, 2017c). MEXT has supported some of these local experiments and efforts, but at the same time it has expressed concern with variations in lesson hours and content across regions and emphasized the importance of securing equal access to English education in primary school regardless of students' place of residence (MEXT, 2009).

It is often assumed that top-down policies intended to create equality may not match local needs, while bottom-up policies usually grant greater local autonomy and diversity. Finding "the best way to provide both diversity and equality of access" appears to be a challenge, as Johnstone pointed out (2019, p. 17). But it is also important to note that securing *equal access* does not guarantee *fairness*. When MEXT emphasized English as a school subject in the educational accountability system, it could justify making curriculum and materials uniform, and centralizing practices on the grounds that doing so ensures at least a degree of fairness. In other words, because knowing about the language and understanding how it works (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, and translation skills) in English as a school subject was believed to be an indicator of diligence—which is available to everybody regardless of SES and regional backgrounds—it was seen as a fair goal.[3] However, once practical English skills become a central part of the high-stakes accountability system, those students who have more resources are likely to have an advantage because, as discussed earlier, acquiring practical English skills in the context of Japan usually requires additional resources and motivation going beyond regular school work. Top-down centralized policies may quash the uniqueness of local practices without providing meaningful control over issues related to fairness. There is some evidence that primary school teachers, especially younger teachers, are enthusiastic about developing their own materials and lesson plans for their English classes (Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2010). Centralized curriculum and practice, however, may discourage such enthusiasm and innovation among teachers.

Implications

I have focused on two issues regarding the new primary school English policy decisions in Japan: the objectives of the policy and the consequences of uniformly making English a compulsory academic subject at the primary school level. These issues correspond to curriculum policy and access and evaluation policies in Baldauf and

[3] This assumption may not be true, however. Kariya (2008) argued that students' effort making is associated with SES.

Kaplan's (2005) framework, respectively. Based on the discussions above, a couple of policy implications can be drawn.

First, the objectives of Japan's English education policy need to be reconsidered. The assumption that English, as *the* language of global competence, is indispensable for a globalizing Japan does not match the reality in Japan. Recall Terasawa's (2014) series of studies indicating that such discourse is by and large false. What seems to be necessary is the acquisition of multilingual competencies rather than competency exclusively in English. Of course, considering the current limited multilingual resources in the largely Japanese-dominant society, expecting all individuals to become multilingual through school education is unrealistic. As an introduction to multilingualism, English is probably a good candidate. Indeed, there is evidence that Japanese people who have a higher command of English also show more interest in other languages (Terasawa, 2014). However, too much emphasis on English competence throughout the entire education system needs to be questioned. The education system should allow students greater flexibility to learn other languages in addition to English, even before they reach the tertiary level.

English at the primary school level in Japan may be more beneficial as originally conceived—as locally developed exploratory programs—rather than as a uniform school subject, at least until teachers receive sufficient professional training to be English-language teaching specialists. English exploratory programs have plenty of room for incorporating cross-cultural and multilingual awareness activities. Local boards of education and schools have already accumulated a wealth of experience, which often depends on unique local resources. The teachers are in a good position to integrate primary school English with other subjects as well. Of course, the effectiveness of local practices needs to be thoroughly examined, but it would be unfortunate if all these local efforts were washed away by the imposition of uniform English language instruction. The overwhelming majority of primary school teachers in Japan were not originally trained as English teaching specialists, and their English proficiency is largely considered inadequate. Only 1% of primary school teachers obtain Grade Pre-1 in the Eiken Test of Practical English Proficiency (roughly corresponding to B2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference [CEFR]). As a result, primary school teachers often depend heavily on native English-speaking assistant teachers in class (MEXT, 2015c). It is with this reality in mind that making English a compulsory academic subject (as opposed to English language awareness and cross-cultural awareness programs) before training local teachers to have sufficient English proficiency could promote an *English native fallacy* in young minds. This is an empirical question, but it is worth monitoring closely.

Second, it would be better not to incorporate practical English as part of the accountability system. More specifically, practical English should not be used as a gatekeeper to higher education because it structurally works against students from lower SES backgrounds in Japan. One may also speculate that language minority children often come from lower SES backgrounds as well, though no reliable statistics are currently available on this point. Perhaps the distinction between English as a school subject (i.e., knowledge about the language) and English as a practical communicative skill is becoming increasingly meaningless because English as a

school subject does not have any real significance outside of the Japanese educational system; language education should focus on how to use the language rather than solely acquiring knowledge about the language. In any event, the primary purpose of learning English should not be to pass exams at school, which is the top reason middle school students cite for why they learn English (MEXT, 2015c). Ceasing to use English as a gatekeeper for higher education would allow schools to create opportunities for students to learn other foreign languages as well.

Conclusion

Foreign language education policies are deeply embedded in specific local societal and historical contexts, making it impossible to discuss language-in-education policies in isolation (Cooper, 1989). In this chapter, I situated Japan's new primary school English education policy in larger societal and historical contexts and discussed potential issues associated with its implementation. The premise underlying the policy—that English proficiency is an indispensable global competency—does not meet the real needs or day-to-day realities of the vast majority of Japanese students. English education at the primary school level, which started as exploratory programs in Japan, has invited diverse but unique localized practices. Policymakers viewed this diversity of practices as a potential threat to equal access to English language education and in response have called for a centralized and uniform curriculum and implementation of English as an academic subject with numerical evaluation requirements. It is important to keep in mind, however, that there is a growing need for multilingualism as well as an increase in socioeconomic disparities within Japanese society. Within this context, centralizing locally diverse practices in primary school English education may result in unfair outcomes as long as practical English skills are believed to represent global competence and are granted a significant role in the exam-based educational accountability system in Japan. This is because acquiring practical English skills usually requires substantial resources beyond regular school work. Detaching English from the exam system would open doors for creative and unique practices while taking advantage of local resources. Considering the current social conditions in Japan, schools could make use of diverse languages and cultures rather than focus exclusively on English.

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