Chapter 6
Controversies Surrounding Revisions of the Course of Study for English Language 1989–2020

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Abstract There has been severe criticism of the English language curriculum in Japan's schools since at least the 1970s. An overemphasis on the study of grammar and written texts meant that generations of Japanese young people have finished school without the ability to communicate well in spoken English. Reforms throughout the period 1989–2020 were aimed at solving this problem. These reforms included introducing native-speaker Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), introducing English language as a subject in elementary schools, and revising the university-entrance exam system. Each of these reform efforts met with serious practical difficulties at the implementation stage as well as push-back from important stakeholders. However, efforts to add tests of spoken English have failed to bear fruit. Efforts to introduce English to elementary schools have been hampered by a lack of qualified teachers. Many students continue to see English as a very difficult subject with little relevance to their daily lives.

Keywords Grammar-translation · *Yakudoku* · Textbooks · Oral communication · Active learning · Monolingual

6.1 Introduction

Of all the subjects in the school curriculum in Japan, English language is the one that has sustained the most criticism since at least the 1970s. There is a perception that the state education system has failed to prepare Japanese students sufficiently well to communicate with the outside world. The course of study (COS) guidelines announced in 2017 represented yet another attempt to improve the quality of foreign language teaching. They required a significant increase in the time allocated to English language study at elementary school. For grades five and six the number of mandatory English lessons was doubled and for grades three and four, mandatory

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English was introduced for the first time. Another major change that was planned for 2020 was the introduction of a new testing regime for the common English language entrance exams required to enter many universities. The new regime would require the testing of all four skills of English as a foreign language—reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The intention was to produce a positive 'washback' effect to encourage a balanced study of all four skills throughout the time a student studies English in school. However, the introduction of the new system was first postponed to 2024, and—at the time of writing—looks like it will not be introduced at all.

There are also many practical obstacles that stand in the way of successful implementation. Proposed reforms do not always garner the full support of key stakeholders that are relied upon to implement the changes. This chapter will discuss the most controversial issues. It will explore practical concerns as well as ideological objections. An additional issue to be discussed in this chapter is the relationship between foreign language learning and inequality. In certain other nations, most notably those that are former colonies of Great Britain, aptitude at English language is a sign of high social status. This was never the case in modern Japan. However, there are concerns that this could change if the path to fluency in foreign language is only available to those with a sufficient amount of social, cultural or economic capital. This chapter will focus on efforts for reform and improvement made over the past thirty years by the Japanese government.

6.2 Background

'Consensus' is an important concept in Japanese society and culture. It is especially important in the administration of Japan's school system. There has long been a consensus on the need to improve English language education. To date, however, this has not been translated into satisfactory improvements. 'The history of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Japan for the last hundred years is often depicted deplorably as one of constant failure and confusion' (Saito, 2019: 211).

The post-war period was dominated by the grammar-translation (*yakudoku*) method in which English was taught as a written language, with the emphasis on understanding English words and phrases and being able to translate them into Japanese. Since very few Japanese people ever had a chance to talk with a foreigner this seemed like a logical approach, but it did not go unchallenged. In the 1970s, a debate took place over the future direction of English language education that was to have major consequences over subsequent years. The debate began in April 1974, when an LDP Diet member and former diplomat called Hiraizumi Wataru wrote a report that was critical of the status quo in English teaching. He pointed out that almost all young people when they leave the education system have poor skills at reading and writing English and non-existent skills in speaking or listening (Aspinall, 2013: 62). He argued that the reasons for these low standards were the lack of motivation to study, the university entrance exam system, and poor teaching methodology. Hiraizumi wrote a list of proposals to remedy these problems that included

making English an elective subject after the first year of Junior High School (JHS), selecting students with a talent for foreign language learning, and removing English completely from the entrance exam system. He added that only about five per cent of the Japanese population really needed to possess practical skills in English. His idea of selecting, at the age of thirteen, a small group of students who had a talent for English language learning offended two of the most important norms of learning in Japan: the belief that success at any subject or task is due to effort, not innate ability; and the egalitarian ideal that all children should study the same curriculum at least until the age of fifteen.

Professor Watanabe Shoichi of Sophia University wrote a rebuttal to Hiraizumi's proposals. He argued that all Japanese children should be taught a background knowledge of English, in the traditional *yakudoku* way. Students who wanted to master practical English or advanced English would do so in the upper stages of the education system or outside the education system altogether. In the short term, Hiraizumi's suggestions were not acted upon, but his criticism of the existing English language curriculum was to have influence on the debate going forward. During the 1980s this criticism was given extra weight by complaints from the Japanese business community that poor English skills amongst employees were hampering their ability to take full advantage of lucrative opportunities overseas. The Ministry of Education responded to these criticisms with a series of reforms over subsequent decades. The most important reforms took the form of course of study revisions.

6.3 A Review of the Four Most Recent Course of Study Revisions: 1989, 1999, 2008/2009, 2017

The course of study (COS) (*gakushū shidō yōryō*) functions as Japan's national curriculum. The first COS revision was announced in 1958 and it has been revised at ten-yearly intervals by the Ministry of Education since then. Prior to each new set of revisions being announced there is a consultation phase which is now coordinated by a subcommittee of the Central Council on Education (CCE), the main advisory body to the minister. Members of the CCE typically include professors of education, university presidents, business leaders, local political leaders, school principals, representatives of Parent–Teacher Associations, journalists, and cultural figures. (Classroom teachers or their representatives are not directly consulted). From the date of the public announcement of the revisions, there is a gap before changes are implemented to give schools time to prepare. Changes to the elementary school curriculum are implemented two or three years after the initial announcement of the new, revised COS, followed by junior high school changes one year later and finally senior high school changes a year after that. Consultation on the directional or foundational ideas of the following cycle of revision then begins all over again.

Each time the course of study is revised, publishers must provide new editions of the textbooks that teachers use and that normally play a crucial part in lesson

planning in every school subject. There is an official textbook authorization process that runs parallel to the COS revision. This involves the screening of new textbooks by experts appointed by the Ministry of Education in order to check that the new editions conform to the revised course of study. It is normal for publishers to begin the process of writing new textbooks before the official announcement of the COS revision. They can do this because the close ties they have with the ministry and the CCE enables them to anticipate the content in advance (Kariya et al. 2007: 10). In the case of English language textbooks, a native speaker is employed to check that the English contained in the book is 'natural English'. After the textbooks have been approved and published, prefectural and municipal boards of education around the country are free to choose which ones they will adopt. We will now proceed to examine the four most recent revisions in turn looking first at the general context and then the specific case of English language reform.

6.3.1 The 1989 Revisions: General Context

The debate on education reform in the 1980s was dominated by Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's Ad Hoc Council on Education, which called for far-reaching changes to exams and the organization of the secondary school system (for example it proposed combining each junior high school and senior high school into one continuous secondary school), as well as improvements in teacher quality and a return to moral education that emphasized Japanese values (Aspinall, 2001: 113). The emphasis on using schools to help instil a sense of national pride in children went hand-in-hand with an increased stress on the internationalization of the curriculum. On the surface this may seem paradoxical but in the minds of conservative educators and politicians there was no contradiction inherent in teaching Japanese children to have a thorough understanding of their own culture as well as encouraging them to learn about and respect foreign cultures. Taken in this way the controversial notion of 'internationalization' (which is always a contested concept) was not a threat to the traditional conservative view of the world. It was potentially reinforced by the notion of a binary divide between the nation of Japan and the 'foreign' other.

Few of the proposals discussed by Nakasone's Ad Hoc Council made it into the 1989 COS revision, although they did have a degree of influence on the education debate going forward. Calls from the business community for more liberalization and flexibility had an effect on what became known as a 'new perspective on academic ability' with a greater focus on students' individual interests and increasing their motivation (Cave, 2016: 19).

6.3.2 The 1989 Revisions to the English Language Curriculum

In response to the Ad Hoc Council's calls for internationalization, the 1989 revised COS for foreign languages in senior high schools included for the first time a section on 'Communicative English', which was subdivided into optional sections on English debate and English listening. Very few schools chose the English debate section because of the great difficulties involved in getting high school students to engage in debate in a difficult foreign language. It did not help that almost none of the students had been taught how to debate in their own language.

Practicing the skill of listening, on the other hand, did become a more important classroom exercise, a trend that was reinforced by two factors: the gradual introduction of listening tests as a core component of English entrance exams for universities; and the increasing use of native-speaker Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in secondary schools. The latter development was brought about by the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme launched in 1987 at the instigation of the Nakasone government (McConnell, 2000). This was one way in which the theoretical notion of 'internationalization' was put into concrete practice since it brought thousands of native speakers into the classrooms of Japan's secondary schools. The JET programme illustrates well the two-pronged notion of internationalization policy under Nakasone. As much designed to improve the understanding of foreign cultures amongst Japanese children as it was to promote Japan's image abroad. 'Particularly interested in improving relations with the United States, Nakasone embraced the opportunity presented by JET to shape Japan's post-war image as an internationally engaged and economically responsible rising power' (Metzgar 2017: 61).

6.3.3 The 1999 Revisions: General Context

The 1999 COS revisions were highly controversial. They introduced a range of far-reaching reforms designed to develop in children and young people *ikiru chikara*, which has been translated as the 'power to live' or 'zest for living'. The aim was to develop more independence and creativity amongst children without losing sight of the values of cooperation and empathy (Cave, 2016: 20). The reforms embraced the slogan of *yutori kyoiku*, a term which has been paraphrased in English as 'a more relaxed education style' (Kariya, 2013: 112). The plan was to cut the compulsory content of the course of study by 30% and introduce a new period of 'integrated studies' (*sogo-teki na gakushu*) into the timetable that would allow individual schools and teachers to design their own classes. The gradual phasing out of lessons on Saturdays was continued, and by 2002 no state schools had regular class on the weekends. These reforms were a direct response to long-standing criticisms levelled at secondary schools in Japan that alleged there had been an excessive amount of stress placed on children, and that curriculum planning was too 'top-down'. It was

also hoped that the ending of Saturday school would mean families would now be able to spend more quality-time together on the weekends.

Unfortunately for those in favour of these reforms, they were immediately the subject of an intense backlash from those who argued that in core subjects like mathematics and reading, standards were already in decline and so to reduce the course of study further was to invite disaster (Tsuneyoshi, 2004: 371–372). To add ammunition to the critics' case, the OECD-sponsored PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results that were published in 2004 seemed to show declines in the performance of Japanese fifteen-year-old students in reading and mathematics. The media soon dubbed this decline the 'PISA Shock' and pointed to a fall in Japan's scores relative to other nations (Takayama, 2008). In place of the reasonably smooth implementation of changes that normally takes place when the COS is revised, this time there was a crisis of such epic proportions that the reform process was halted before it was fully implemented, and a series of drastic U-turns took place that signalled a retreat. The 30% cut in the course of study was restored just five years after it had been ordered. In most prefectures schools remained closed on Saturday, but in some cases this change was also reversed in informal ways. For example, in 2010, the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education issued a notice that gave tacit approval for Saturday classes. Schools were told they could hold 'open classes' on Saturdays, i.e., classes that could be observed by parents. In practice schools used this opportunity to hold regular classes on Saturday (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 13th May 2010).

6.3.4 The 1999 Revisions to the English Language Curriculum

One suggested use of the new 'integrated studies' period, to be introduced into elementary schools from 2002 onward, was to increase activities related to English language learning. There had been a small number of pilot projects before 1999, but the majority of elementary schools continued to have grave concerns about how they could successfully teach English without properly qualified teaching staff. Since the Ministry of Education also lacked expertise in the teaching of English to young children, they turned to the private sector for help. In January 2000, Nakata Ritsuko, founder of the Institute for the International English Education of Children (IIEEC), was appointed to a panel of experts organized by Education Minister Nakasone Hirofumi (son of Nakasone Yasuhiro) to consider ways to improve English language teaching in Japan's schools. Nakata held workshops throughout Japan to introduce elementary school teachers to useful techniques for English language activities aimed at young learners. The absence of a sufficient budget for teacher training, however, was illustrated by the fact that many of these teachers had to attend the workshops at their own expense (*Daily Yomiuri* April 17, 2000).

The 2004 'PISA shock' mentioned above did not directly affect the debate on the English language curriculum because foreign language was not one of the subjects that was surveyed as part of the PISA study. It is very difficult to compare the foreign language curricula of different countries with different mother tongues. One survey of TOEFL scores showed that Japanese examinees had the lowest average score out of 25 Asian nations (*Asahi Shimbun* 28 March 2007). TOEFL is a difficult test taken only by a small proportion of students, so the results cannot be viewed as an accurate comparison of the foreign language abilities of whole cohorts of students. However, the poor performance adds ammunition to those at home and abroad who have a dim view of the foreign language abilities of Japanese people. Certainly, in all the COS revisions discussed in this chapter, MEXT and the CCE have taken the view that something needs to be done to improve standards in foreign language teaching and learning in Japan's schools. In subjects like reading (in Japanese) and numeracy there are occasionally concerns about standards slipping—such as the panic that followed the PISA shock. In the case of English language there is a consistently painful awareness that standards have never been high, except in the rather limited area of understanding written texts.

6.3.5 The 2003 Action Plan

The separate treatment of the English language curriculum compared to the general school curriculum was illustrated by the introduction of a major set of reforms that followed a timetable separate from the regular COS review process. This was the ambitious 'Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities' set out in 2003. In spite of across-the-board cuts in government spending brought about by Japan's increasing fiscal crisis, the Ministry of Education was able to secure increased budgets for programmes designed to improve practical English language skills. The Action Plan included clear and transparent criteria for measuring the English language ability of students. It made use of the 'Eiken' or STEP test, an English language test produced by the Society for Testing English Proficiency, an organization set up in 1963 by the Ministry of Education. The Action Plan had the following goals:

> On graduation from a junior high school, students can conduct basic communication with regard to areas such as greeting, responses, or topics relating to daily life. (Graduates should be at the third level of Eiken.)
>
> On graduation from a senior high school, students can conduct normal communication with regard to topics, for example relating to daily life. (Graduates should be at the second level of Eiken.) (MEXT 2003: 1)

These are extremely ambitious goals. Some boards of education were already using the Eiken as a school-leaving exam and the results showed that about half the JHS students in the country were not yet meeting these goals. Would it be realistic to try to raise so many students up to this level? Once again energy and resources were being expended on efforts to develop an English curriculum for *all* Japanese

school students, regardless of motivation or aptitude. The ministry was sticking to its ideology of egalitarianism, regardless of results. Simultaneously, however, the 2003 Action Plan also included innovations that showed greater realism in the form of special provisions for students who could proceed to more advanced levels of English than their peers. The most important of these was the Super English Language High School (SELHi) in which greater time and resources were provided to students who followed special English tracks (Aspinall, 2013: 66).

6.3.6 The 2008 Revisions: General Context

The COS revisions that were announced in late 2008 and early 2009 were the first to take place after the highly controversial revision of the Fundamental Law on Education (*kyoiku kihon ho*) that was passed by the Diet in 2006. The following objective was added to the Law: 'to foster an attitude to respect our traditions and culture, love the country and region that nurtured them, together with respect for other countries and a desire to contribute to world peace and the development of the international community'. This embedded in law the Nakasone-era goal of nurturing future Japanese citizens who could be proud of their distinctive Japanese identity whilst at the same time interacting successfully and productively with people from other nations. Nationalism and internationalization continued to be combined in official policy.

This set of revisions also formalized the series of U-turns that effectively reversed the reforms of ten years earlier. TV programmes compared textbooks for the 1989 COS, the 1999 COS and the 2008/2009 COS, and it was clear to the naked eye that the books had dropped in thickness by about one third after 1999, and then had been restored to their original thickness following the implementation of the 2009 revisions. The experiment of relaxed education (*yutori kyoiku)* was over.

6.3.7 The 2008 Revisions to the English Language Curriculum

So far as the foreign language curriculum is concerned the most controversial change announced in 2009 was the introduction of English as an academic subject into the elementary school curriculum in the fifth and sixth grades (the final two years of elementary school). The Ministry of Education curriculum for 'Foreign Language Activities' for grades five and six stipulates the following content:

1. Instruction should be given on the following items in order to help pupils actively engage in communication in a foreign language:

    - To experience the joy of communication in a foreign language

- To actively listen to and speak in the foreign language
- To learn the importance of verbal communication

2. Instruction should be given on the following items in order to deepen the experiential understanding of the languages and cultures of Japan and foreign countries:

- To become familiar with the sounds and rhythms of the foreign language, to learn its differences from the Japanese language and to be aware of the interesting aspects of language and its richness
- To learn the differences in ways of living, customs, and events between Japan and foreign countries and to be aware of various points of view and ways of thinking
- To experience communication with people of different cultures and to deepen the understanding of culture (MEXT 2008: 9)

This content is consistent with what has been in the foreign language COS guidelines for JHS and SHS since the introduction of 'Oral Communication' in 1989. The emphasis is on practical activities and the development of communication skills for use in real situations (for conversations with real foreigners). It is a long way from dry *yakudoku* activities involving rows of silent, passive pupils, and clearly represents a constructive response to the criticism that MEXT has received for so long about the *yakudoku* model. However, implementing these improvements in real classrooms remains a challenge.

The 2004 'PISA Shock' brought to a head a long-running struggle between reformers who want to encourage a 'zest for living' in Japanese children, and those who are worried about declining standards and want to go 'back to basics' with an emphasis on hard work and reading, writing, and numeracy. Reforms to the English language curriculum have also been influenced by this debate.

Language education expert Yoshida Kensaku was a member of the CCE's sub-committee that advised on the 2009 English language revision. He has made the argument that the two most recent revisions of the COS represent a move from 'declarative knowledge' to 'procedural knowledge'. 'Declarative knowledge' is knowledge about facts, whilst 'procedural knowledge' is knowledge about how to do something. This change can be seen both in the new course of study as well as the proposed reforms of the Centre Exam. In the English language curriculum that preceded these changes, students mostly answered questions that had only one correct answer. For example, they might be given a sentence with a word missing and asked to choose from four possible words. If they had learned English grammar 'correctly' then they would choose the one correct answer. This is an example of the student's declarative knowledge. Under the proposed changes students will be asked to write answers that require them to use language in a meaningful context.

Another innovation in this round of reforms was the requirement that foreign language education should do more than teach communication; it should also develop in students the ability to use language for more cognitively demanding purposes (Yoshida, 2009: 3). According to the sub-committee of the CCE responsible for

foreign languages, this included 'the ability to use language to deepen one's capacity for thinking and communicating with others on the basis of knowledge and experience, reasoning ability, and sensitivity and affection towards others' (quoted in Yoshida, 2009: 3). This educational objective is also applied to Japanese language and other school subjects in addition to English language classes. This is highly significant because it is the first time that a COS revision in the foreign language curriculum has been coordinated with a simultaneous revision in the national language (Japanese) curriculum. In making this change the CCE and MEXT have finally responded to consistent criticism of earlier English reforms that had attempted to improve abilities in one without the other (for example debate).

Also, in this round of reforms, MEXT announced that English classes were to be taught principally in the medium of English in all senior high schools starting from the 2013 academic year. This would require major changes in lesson planning and teaching style from teachers, especially those in high-level academic high schools in which the English language curriculum was largely devoted to helping students pass very demanding entrance exams for Japan's most prestigious universities. These exams require an understanding of very advanced and complex English grammar which is normally explained to the students in the medium of Japanese. Conducting these explanations in the medium of English would be impossibly demanding for teachers and students alike. Complaints were made that policymakers in Tokyo did not have a proper understanding of the day-to-day job of teaching English in actual classrooms. An editorial in the Asahi Shimbun spoke for many when it complained that 'by abruptly telling English teachers to start giving lessons only in English, the education ministry is creating confusion and consternation' (*Asahi Shimbun* 24 December 2008). The stress caused by a sudden top-down order for English to be taught in the medium of English illustrates the problem that can arise when policymaking bodies exclude teachers and their representatives.

6.3.8 The 2017 Revisions: General Context

The 2017 COS revision had as its focus the encouragement of 'active learning' which has been commonly understood to mean that children will be taught to evaluate data and come to their own conclusions, rather than being told by the teacher that each question has only one correct answer. This represents a response by officials to the increasing exposure of children to the internet. It also follows the lowering of the voting age in Japan from twenty to eighteen. Since eighteen-year-olds are now considered to be independent adults, they must learn to come to their own decisions about important topics like who to vote for in an election. The lowering of the voting age was also given as a reason for the addition, from 2022, of the new subject of 'public affairs' (*kokyo*) to the senior high school curriculum.

For the first time in 26 years a new subject in compulsory education was added when moral education became an official subject in elementary school. This was one measure taken in response to perceived increases in bullying cases in all types

of school, including high-profile cases that have led to the suicide of the victim. Textbook publishers played safe and mostly used materials (like traditional folk tales) that were already in use in non-subject class time that dealt with ethical issues (see Chap. 7).

6.3.9 The 2017 Revisions to the English Language Curriculum

The 2017 revisions are notable for linking Japan's aims in foreign language learning with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, which functions as a guideline for describing achievements of learners of foreign languages throughout Europe. This development was welcomed by experts who have pushed for the Japanese government to focus its foreign language learning objectives on standards that are recognized universally (Yoshida, 2020).

The 2017 revisions involved a large increase in the time dedicated to teaching English in elementary schools. In April 2020, 15 lessons of English per year were introduced to grades three and four, whilst the number of English lessons for grades five and six were increased from 35 per year to 50 per year. Concerns have been raised about where this extra time will be found in an already packed school timetable. Although at the time of writing, concurrent with the widespread and varied impact of the Covid-19 crisis, it is still not clear how this will be successfully implemented in practice, it is hoped that there will be more coordination between the English language curricula in elementary schools and junior high schools than before. Following on from the 2009 call to use language for more cognitively demanding purposes, the 2017 revision introduced 'active learning' methodologies and promoted the incorporation of debate and oral presentation activities. Once again, this revision was not confined to the subject of English language but was spread throughout the course of study.

6.3.10 The Textbook Revision Process

Textbooks need to be rewritten at least every ten years to comply with new COS guidelines. Teachers in Japan are legally obliged to use approved textbooks in their classrooms (although they are also free to add their own supplementary materials). The content and structure of textbooks therefore have an important influence on English language lessons, as they do for all other subjects. Unlike some other OECD countries where new technology, for example smart whiteboards, have been placed at the disposal of many school teachers, teachers in most of Japan before the onset of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020 were limited to a blackboard and the textbook. At least five different sets of textbooks for JHS and as many as thirty for SHS by different

publishers are approved for each academic subject and then local boards of education are free to choose which one their schools will use. There are various ways in which boards of education select textbooks but there is evidence that the role of teachers in making these decisions has been reduced since 2001.

In the case of JHS, textbooks are purchased by the local authority and given to the students. In the case of SHS, students are told which books are needed and they must purchase them for themselves. In both cases, therefore, books need to be inexpensive, and this limits them in their size and design. In the case of English language texts, the *yakudoku* tradition of language teaching requires detailed explanations of the grammar of the target language, and these are always given in Japanese. Because of the large amount of grammar that is required to be taught by the national guidelines, this results in the books being written almost entirely in Japanese with English words, phrases, and sentences being used to illustrate the various grammar points. I briefly had the job of doing a 'native-speaker' check on some draft textbooks in 1999 and 2000. My job was to check the English words and phrases for any mistakes or 'unnatural English'. It was quite an easy job because there was so little English contained in the books. I found only a very small number of areas for concern, but other studies of JHS textbooks have shown that the English sentences used as examples are often clearly translations into English of Japanese sentences. This can sometimes result in errors and 'unnatural English' being used. In contrast to this over-use of the L1 language in Japanese textbooks, secondary school English language textbooks in other Asian countries, for example Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, are written almost entirely in English.

6.4 English Language Teaching Reform: Problems and Obstacles

6.4.1 The Washback Effect of High School and University Entrance Exams

The course of study acts as the official, national curriculum of Japan. However, from the point of view of many students, their teachers, and their parents, there exists a second shadow curriculum which is of equal and sometimes greater importance. This curriculum is determined by the content of high school and university entrance exams. If a student is aiming to get into a very selective high school or university then it is not sufficient to study only the content of the national course of study. The exams for selective schools and universities are designed to be tougher than that and require the additional study of a large volume of extra material. Some of this study will take place outside of official school hours in the shadow education world of the cram schools (*juku*). The increased use of listening exams in universities during the 1990s, for example, gave added impetus to the practice of listening exercises during lesson time in high school.

The Minister of Education noticed that: 'Although reading, listening, writing, and speaking are the four necessary competencies for English language education, the common university entrance exams administered by the National Center for University Entrance Exams to over half a million students around the country each year focus almost exclusively on reading, with slight coverage of listening and almost nothing on writing and speaking' (quoted in McMurray, 2018).

After years of criticism the ministry finally decided to act. In 2017 it was announced that from 2020 the existing centre exam would be replaced by a hybrid system involving a privately run test of all four language skills combined with officially produced reading and writing tests. In November 2019, however, education minister Hagiuda Koichi abruptly announced that the new exam system that was supposed to begin in the 2020 academic year was now to be delayed until 2024. At the time of writing, it looks like the new system will not be introduced at all.

6.4.2 The Difficulty of the Subject

A major challenge facing policymakers in charge of English language education is the difficulty of the subject. Post-war education reforms used the United States education system as a model. For school subjects like mathematics this was unproblematic, but in the case of foreign language education a serious problem occurred. In the 1940s the foreign languages most commonly taught in American schools were French and Spanish. According to the United States Foreign Service Institute, these languages are classified as 'category one' for an English-speaking person to learn; a category that means these languages require between 575 and 600 hours of class time to learn. It is possible to achieve this in the six years of secondary schooling. Japanese, however, is classified as 'category four'—the most difficult category—which requires at least 2,200 class hours (Aspinall, 2013: 6). The same applies in reverse. For Japanese students, English is a difficult language in comparison to, for example, Chinese (with a similar script for some words) or Korean (with a more similar word order). A Japanese student receives 180 hours of English class time in JHS, and between 470 and 650 hours in SHS. This is well short of the minimum number of hours required. The introduction of English to elementary school will add more time to the curriculum—but not a sufficient amount.

6.4.3 Student Motivation

Surveys show that lack of motivation to study English amongst schoolchildren is a serious problem. Alienation from English starts very soon after children at the previous (later) starting age were introduced to the subject. In November 2011, MEXT's National Institute for Educational Policy Research conducted a nationwide survey of 3,225 JHS third-year students. The survey produced the paradoxical result

that whilst 85 per cent of respondents believed 'it is important to study English' and 70% agreed with the sentence that 'English will be useful to get a job in the future', only 11 per cent responded that they strongly hope to get a job that requires English skills. Furthermore, 43 per cent answered 'I don't want to get a job that requires English skills', up from 36 per cent in a survey conducted in 2003 (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 29 January 2012). An editorial in the *Japan Times* remarked that the 'disjuncture between what [the JHS students] consider important for the future and what they want for themselves is puzzling and disappointing' (*Japan Times*, 5 February 2012). It went on: 'English teachers, administrators, and the education ministry should take these results as a wake-up call. The current approach is clearly de-motivating students'. It is an uncontroversial fact that English language *is* difficult for Japanese children to learn, especially since it has direct relevance to the daily lives of very few of them. The national survey quoted above shows that most JHS students are aware that English ability is important for adults competing in the job market. But their daily experience in the classroom only teaches most of them that mastery of English is far beyond their reach.

In the face of these problems, many experts feel that more could be done to help students adopt a more positive attitude to English in the JHS classroom. Foreign teachers with qualifications in TEFL often express frustration when team-teaching in JHS classes because children are never allowed to 'have a go' at making an answer to a question when they do not have all the exact words at their fingertips. They are taught to remain silent until they have the one 'correct answer' in their heads, and then to verbalize the answer. It is often difficult to stop the learning style of other subjects from carrying over into the English classroom. So, if the students are told in their *kokugo* (Japanese language) class that there is only one correct way to write a kanji character (to give just one example), then they also unconsciously assume that there is only one correct way to make a certain English sentence. This is another example of the norms of the Japanese classroom working against a positive approach to learning a foreign language.

6.4.4 Large, Mixed-Ability Classes

An aspect of JHS English education that has come under much criticism from foreign and domestic experts is the insistence that students must be mixed in large classes regardless of their ability or whether or not they had previously studied English. There are countless reports of fluent and bilingual children following the same tasks as their novice classmates. The requirement that children in compulsory education (i.e., up to the end of JHS) should not be put in streams or sets according to aptitude or ability is one that is based upon some very deeply held beliefs in Japanese society about what a good education should provide. However, as any teacher of adolescents knows, if the content of the lesson is too easy or too difficult for some students the likelihood of class disruption increases. The unintended consequence is that parents are forced to pay for their children to go to *juku* or an *eikaiwa* class that is

appropriate for their individual ability and objectives if they want them to receive education in subjects like English. MEXT is aware of this problem, and as part of its 2003 Action Plan to improve English it proposed that 'Small-group teaching and the streaming of students according to proficiency in the English classes of junior and senior high schools will be positively adopted' (MEXT 2003: 3). Apart from some pilot projects, including the 'Super English High schools' (SELHi), no serious efforts have so far been made to implement this proposal. The widespread adoption of 'small group' teaching would require the recruitment of more teachers, something that is not possible due to budget constraints.

6.4.5 Teacher Beliefs and Attitudes

In every education system there is a tension between the stated aims of the curriculum and the reality of what goes on in individual classrooms. Teachers often worry that changes in the course of study might lead to unwanted disruption in the classroom. In the case of English language, traditional methods of 'grammar-translation' instruction have involved straight-forward classroom management skills, since this kind of 'teacher-centred' instruction requires the students to sit in silence facing the front of the classroom where the teacher stood upon a raised platform. The teaching of oral communication, on the other hand, requires constant chatter on the part of the students. If the class contains only a small number of well-motivated students accustomed to independent learning, then there are no problems with this method. If, however, as often is the case in Japanese secondary schools, there is a large group of students with mixed levels of ability and motivation, then the situation is much more challenging.

Innovations which help the teacher deliver communicative English classes successfully include a trained assistant, a reasonably small class size, a limit on the range of abilities present in the room and appropriate training for the teacher. In addition to the above, the English teacher is also helped if other subjects are also being taught in similar ways. So, for example, students are taught some basic debate skills in their own language before they are asked to debate in English.

The large increase in the number of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) has also caused problems. The Japanese teacher or teachers in the host institution who have been chosen to take care of the foreign newcomer have quite the set of responsibilities, for they must not only introduce the ALT to the rules and routines of the school, they also have to help the ALT in all aspects of their domestic life: arranging accommodation, helping them to open a bank account, telling them how to use the trains and buses and so on. Most ALTs who come on the JET programme have little or no Japanese language ability on their arrival and usually have never been to Japan before. They therefore need help in almost every aspect of daily life. In addition to helping foreign assistant teachers with mundane but time-consuming tasks like learning how to pay the electricity bill and grocery shopping, Japanese English teachers were often faced with the more intangible burdens that come with being

responsible for the only foreigner in a Japanese institution. A common conundrum was how to deal with the delicate issue of those English teachers on the staff who could not actually speak a word of English. Sometimes this problem was solved by the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) avoiding all contact with the ALT and refusing to team-teach with them. ALTs interviewed by McConnell told him that they did not find out that certain Japanese staff were English teachers until months into their school visits (McConnell, 2000: 218).

One of the features of Japanese school culture least understood by new Western ALTs is the way in which poor or inappropriate behaviour on the part of the ALT can directly tarnish the reputation of the JTEs who are responsible for them. The JTE must act as a go-between, between the ALT and the school. In the case of extreme cultural insensitivity or rudeness on the part of the ALT, McConnell found that the attitude of the staff would often be one of endurance, knowing that the time-limited nature of the ALT contract would mean that the source of irritation would eventually be gone (McConnell, 2000: 219). In many ways the results of the JET programme have been very positive, but it remains the case that the obstacles and problems described above prevent ALTs from being used to their full potential to assist Japanese young people in learning practical communication skills in foreign languages.

6.5 Inequality: Because not Everyone Needs English

I have already mentioned the serious problems posed when a teacher is required to teach a very challenging subject like English to a mixed-ability class of secondary school students. In the post-war period a strong egalitarian ethos pervaded the compulsory education system in Japan. There was a strong desire to uphold the fiction that all elementary schools are the same and all Junior High Schools (JHS) are the same. Furthermore, the students within these schools all advanced along the path to further knowledge lockstep in year-groups that were not sub-divided into sets or academic streams. This emphasis on uniformity was challenged by critics. Very quietly, changes were made. In a 2002 survey conducted by MEXT more than 60% of both elementary and junior high schools answered that they had adopted some forms of ability grouping, especially in mathematics (Tsuneyoshi, 2004: 385). English is a subject like mathematics that some students will go further with than others and at varying paces. The communicative and active approaches to teaching English introduced under recent COS revisions accentuate the divisions between those students who are motivated and able and those who do not see the relevance of English and struggle to master the basics. Up until now, more advanced students have only been able to improve their skills by attending supplementary classes (if their parents can afford it).

The 2019 decision to postpone the introduction of a new university entrance exam system for English from 2020 to 2024 was partly brought about by a gaffe from the education minister Hagiuda Koichi. When he was questioned about the extra costs for students required by private English exams, he remarked that students would

need to compete for places in good universities 'in accordance with their (financial) standing'. This broke the taboo that entrance to prestigious institutions should not be influenced by financial inequality. The English-language newspaper the *Japan Times* noted that by postponing these entrance exams until 2024, the education ministry only secured fairness by making every student less skilful in English communication regardless of whether they are rich or poor, or whether they live in the city or rural regions. (*Japan Times* November 11, 2019). This opinion is in accordance with my own views, presented in a book I wrote on international education policy in Japan. In the final words of the book I argued that 'the existing English language education system is one that spreads misery and failure equally throughout the land. This is a perverse form of egalitarian education indeed' (Aspinall, 2013: 187). In other parts of Asia, proficiency in English is often one marker of social status. This is especially true of former British colonies like India and Hong Kong, where local elites have been sending their sons to expensive, elite schools in England for generations. Members of Japan's elites, by contrast, have mostly shared with the rest of the nation an awkwardness in the use of foreign languages. This, combined with their shared Japanese language—unspoken in any other land—has been a marker of national solidarity; something that unites rich and poor. However, the price for this unity is a lack of capacity to fully reap the benefits offered by other languages and cultures, including minorities within Japan who are not monolingual.

6.5.1 Linguistic Minorities

The official ideology that every child in Japan receives the same education up to the age of fifteen, and then has the same access to educational choices after that age, makes it difficult for government policy to address the concerns of various minority groups, including linguistic minorities. In recent years there has been a growing awareness of such groups, and an increase in the diversity of people coming to Japan to live, as well as those leaving Japan for substantial periods of time and then returning. Such groups include Okinawans, Amerasians, Koreans, Brazilians (and other South Americans), Chinese, and Japanese child returnees. Official policy towards these groups both at the local and the national level has been to assimilate them into Japanese society mainly by trying to ensure that children from non-Japanese-speaking homes are taught sufficient Japanese language to be able to participate in the education system. Lack of government support for the children of immigrants is sometimes made up for by local NPOs and by individual volunteers. Support for returnees is sometimes undertaken with more dedication reflecting the fact that their parents are often of elite status (Kanno, 2008).

MEXT is aware that the number of English-speaking families living in Japan has increased since the 1980s, and in the 2003 Action Plan it stated that 'People living in the local community proficient in English will be positively utilized' (MEXT 2003: 7). The reality on the ground, however, is that in contemporary Japan it is hard to find any acceptance of the concept of multilingualism. In fact, parents who want their

children to grow up bilingually and biculturally in Japan must contend with the fact that the Ministry of Education and its schools do not 'recognize the possibility of students constructing multiple identities in the world' (Parmenter, 2000: 252). The officially endorsed concept of national identity as a monolingual Japanese identity creates practical problems for those in Japan who want to become fluent in more than one language. This may be the place where nationalism and internationalization prove to be irreconcilable. To add to the difficulties for those with more than one linguistic identity, the ministry does not accredit or financially assist bilingual schools that are established to help minorities. One example of this is the 'AmerAsian' school set up in Okinawa in 1998 for children of Japanese mothers and American fathers. To make matters worse, private donations to non-accredited schools such as this are not tax-deductible. This inflexible position of the ministry has undermined efforts to exploit the international human resources that Japan has within its own borders.

6.6 Conclusion

Since the 1980s there have been many efforts to improve English language teaching in Japan's schools. The four Course-of-Study revisions and the one 'Action Plan' considered here show the determination of Ministry of Education bureaucrats and their advisors to overcome the negative reputation that foreign language education in Japan has suffered from for decades. There has been a continuous effort to extend English language classes into elementary schools. Also, the SELHi programme showed that reformers, by their efforts to provide special advanced English tracks for more motivated and capable students, were not afraid to risk the accusation that they were being elitist. Unfortunately, the ambition to improve university entrance exams so they have a positive 'washback' effect on high school English, has been met with frustration and delay. The increased use of native-speaker ALTs has resulted in some positive benefits but has also been accompanied by disappointment and frustration in many instances.

For reasons of official nationalist ideology, models of multicultural or multilingual identity that might have had beneficial consequences for the foreign language curriculum have not been allowed to develop in the state education system. Japanese children are encouraged to see English as the language of the foreign 'other', and so it is unsurprising that many students fail to see the relevance of the language to their lives. In practice, government policy to promote nationalism alongside increased internationalization (in the form of trade and tourism policies) is not going as smoothly as some had hoped.

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