The Case for Changing English in Japanese Public Schools from Compulsory to Elective

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日本の公立学校における英語教育改革—必修から選択へ

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ABSTRACT

Even after decades of mandatory English at secondary and tertiary public schools in Japan, it is generally accepted that results continue to fall considerably short of expectations, despite periodic remedies implemented by educators and government. This paper reviews the current situation, uses it to support the view that the whole paradigm of mandatory English is inappropriate for Japan, and then lists important benefits to be gained from changing its status to elective.

A Global Perspective

English in Japan is experiencing some deserved backlash. “Critics [in Japan] argue that the dominance of English influences the Japanese language, race, ethnicity and identity which are affected by the world view of native English speakers, and that teaching English creates cultural and linguistic stereotypes not only of English but also of Japanese people.” (Kubota, 1998) Kubota thinks that Japan’s decision to require English, and only English, to be taught in schools is short-sighted, and is harming Japanese efforts to promote international understanding. She contends that siding with the language of the nation that happens to have the most power at this time in history “reinforces a cultural nationalism in an us-them discourse,” which is antithetical to the multi-polar globalism that Japan should be aspiring to. Such a pronounced leaning towards English also fuels the suspicion in other non-native-speaking (NNS) countries, especially China and South Korea, that Japan’s “kokusaika” (international understanding) movement is a ruse for promoting “nihonjinron” (Japanese uniqueness).

A poignant example of the adverse effects of a country’s rush to align with English’s power occurred in Vietnam, where “the sudden replacement of Russian by English....has
caused the society to have negative attitudes toward Russian, and thus made teachers of Russian struggle for their living.” (Hashimoto, 2000)

English is predicted to continue as a universal language of global communication well into the future (Zabliett, 2006), but with the number of expanding and peripheral NSS nations greater than the core, they are offering a variety of ways to more comfortably accommodate English linguistic dominance than Japan has. India has leveraged its relative minority of fluent English speakers to great advantage in software development and business outsourcing. Continental European countries have found that knowledge of English in addition to their own language often gives them an advantage over English-only speakers in international affairs. These examples are evidence that English, like open-source computer code, is free to be owned and modified by anyone. Crystal (1997) asserts that “English has already grown to be independent of any form of social control.” If true, it enables countries feeling disadvantaged by English’s hegemony to turn that strength, jujitsu-like, against itself. Since the Meiji period, Japan has looked abroad to study systems and methods and adopted those best suited to its cultural or political circumstances. That admirable eclecticism could serve again to solve its problems with English.

With Japan’s international profile continuing to be pre-dominantly economic, Japanese business leaders have long pushed for more English education as essential to maintaining the country’s ability to compete globally. They are concerned that because English is used in international meetings, Japan will be “underrepresented in the international community, if its leaders are not able to speak English directly with their counterparts.” (L’estrange, 2000) Bolstering their point is a recent competitiveness survey ranking Japan lowest among 60 nations in foreign language skills. (Jitsumori, 2006) This, however, cannot be seen as a major weakness, as Japan mostly exports products based on the language of math, not English, and the relatively few English-competent people that companies need for external contact are usually trained after they are hired, rather than recruited directly from college graduate pools, whose previous skills have generally been allowed to atrophy. Indeed, it could be said that since the overall costs of English education in Japan have outweighed its benefits during Japan’s rise to status as the world’s second largest economy, success was achieved in spite of English.

A Look at Recent History

Just prior to WWII Japan rejected English as a threat to nihonjinron. Subsequent events proved such extreme reactionism to be counter-productive, yet remnants of it echo in the current mild re-emergence of nationalism. This modern version could be made more legitimate than the previous by Japan reconsidering English more as a tool than a manifestation of inevitable geopolitical superiority.

Resistance to English had re-surfaced in the mid-70’s in the form of a debate between Hiraizumi, a member of the ruling party, and Watanabe, an English linguist. Hiraizumi proposed a plan that would teach English only to students who saw a need for it. His reasoning was that “most people simply did not require English.” (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006) Watanabe countered that “English education for examination is valuable to train Japanese students’ intelligence.” (Imura, 2003), an opinion which now
Japanese students (secondary and tertiary) come to the classroom with the following:

1) Geographical, linguistic and psychological distance from the English-speaking world: the seas keep Japan at physical distance from the rest of the world. Immediate and regular access to foreigners by simply stepping across a border is impossible, which naturally engenders a certain psychological distance. A logical antidote would be to allow in more immigrants, especially from NNS countries, ala Hawaii, but authorities are conservative, hesitant to do so for fear newcomers would not be easily assimilated into a society made homogenous through the centuries by keeping foreigners at bay. Chances are thereby diminished for students to improve their English, or any foreign language, through off-campus interaction with native speakers.

Linguistic distance: the Japanese language has far more context-dependent homophonic units than English, reflected in a variety of visual representations for one aural unit, and conversely, in different aural units for one visual representation. The difficulty foreigners have in mastering Japanese gives many students who feel forced to learn English an excuse for not learning it.

2) The belief that there are only two sociocultural entities – Japan and the “The World”: this flows directly from the previous point regarding the general populace perceiving itself as set off from the rest of the world, and results in English being thought fine for “them” but not for “us”.

3) The lack of a real need for English. Because they have done quite well through the centuries, thank you, on the strength of their own language, the great majority of Japanese cannot understand why they should have to learn another. Thus, a requirement to learn English is directly contrary to the thinking of most Japanese.

4) A cultural propensity toward reticence: as Guest writes, “this may seem preposterous to any foreigner who has watched a Japanese ‘wide show’”. or, I might add, listened to a “music” program that featured far more talk than music. In the English classroom, students talking together in Japanese seldom evince this propensity. But when asked by the teacher to respond in English, it is quickly deployed. So if reticence is a cultural trait, it appears to be a flexible one, used tactically by students to avoid engagement with an outsider’s language. The related trait of “tatamæ”, for which I think the best English translation is “civility,” is something which the
world needs more of. That said, it can also be repressive in the classroom when it morphs into conformity and prevents a student from raising a hand for fear of violating group norms. Present in all societies is the distinction between the "expressed" (intimate) and "performed" (theatrical) selves, but perhaps in Japan it is more "keenly felt." (McVeigh, 2003) Also, due to the Japanese emphasis on group harmony, or "wa," volunteering answers or personal opinions tends to be suppressed. Japan's strong hierarchical society, in which a person's status is either higher or lower, rarely equal, extends to the classroom, where the teacher is higher, and many students "play a role of trying to please the teacher." (McVeigh, 2000) I have experienced evidence of this when students from my previous classes, whom I had thought were friendly personalities, looked right through me in response to my smiles or nods of recognition in the hallways.

5) A cultural propensity toward "bottom-up" approaches:

Paying careful attention to precision and detail is behind much of Japan's success in technology and business, but Japanese encounter difficulty in trying to transfer that ethic to the study of English. English tends to be deconstructed into minutiae by older professors, as if a frog's life can only be understood by removing it from its natural habitat and dissecting it in a biology lab. This mindset blends all too neatly with the above-mentioned isolationist predisposition of keeping foreign phenomena at arms-length. A manifestation of this was brought home to me when I attended a commemoration for a Japanese professor of English on the occasion of a landmark number of his books on English having been published. Throughout the ceremony, not one word of English was spoken. Guest reminds us that "languages are rarely acquired this way (bottom-up) and instead often demand an ability to improvise based on understanding and interpreting holistic, dynamic, changing communicative environments, generally a 'top-down' approach." Encouragingly, though, I have seen among younger colleagues and students an increasing awareness that more joy comes from actually using English than from parsing it.

Teachers (at tertiary level) labor under these disadvantages:

1) Lack of concrete goals:

University English course titles are often so broad that teachers are unsure of what constitutes appropriate content. Needs analyses would help, but such metrics often only confirm wide differences in skills among students in the same class, take away from limited instruction time, and, anyway, are basically the responsibility of the admissions department. And lack of clear guidelines for course content means that evaluations of student progress will also tend to be more subjective.

2) Lack of coordination and integration:

This point is of paramount importance. Japanese tertiary teachers are by and large expected to operate more independently than their Western counterparts. This, of course, meshes well with the individualistic cultures from which most native English-speaking instructors come, but it seems strangely incongruous with the ethic of teamwork Japan is known for. Perhaps it has something to do with a shared cross-cultural respect for
“academic” freedom. Having been carried too far in the Japanese faculty setting, though, to quote Adamson, has resulted in “few integrated programs in which the contents of the curriculum are systematically taught. Critical points may be totally missing and other content may be taught more than once by different teachers. Also students who have had what was designated as a single course but were taught by different teachers may have had different content.” A recent study concludes that English departments in Japanese universities should strive to establish more explicit standards for student achievement, but fudges the issue somewhat with a caveat against hobbling the freedom to innovate. (Prichard, 2006) A recent survey on job satisfaction among English native-speaking tertiary teachers was compared with the results of the same survey conducted in 1997, and found that teachers continue to be “frustrated about the discrepancy between perceived and actual roles in their respective institutions, generally wishing to be a more valued member of the staff and having more involvement than just classroom EFL instruction.” (Hullah, 2006)

3) Dealing with Prevailing Japanese Beliefs Concerning the Function of College Education:

Japanese secondary education is so rigorous and regimented that college has necessarily become a period of relief and personal maturation, when students have more time to explore interests, experiment with lifestyles, and broaden acquaintances. (Kelly, 1993) In the West, this process is allowed to start in high school, so for most English native-speaking teachers in Japan, their own college experience was more about acquiring academic knowledge than developing their personal life. Teachers’ efforts to bring that admittedly culturally-biased view of college into their pedagogy becomes an underlying source of frustration. Most of them adjust by yielding to institutional and student expectations, forsaking their ideals in favor of grade inflation to keep their jobs, all the while wondering how long Japan can go on defining college education this way. But it should be kept in mind that it is premature and presumptuous to thrust so much of another language and its attendant culture onto young people who have yet to fully mature into their own.

Countering Main Objections to Change

1) As always, the first obstacle to overcome is entrenched bureaucracy. In deliberating radical changes in policy, the ministry in charge of education in Japan owes first priority to what will provide students with a comprehensive, balanced education. Therefore it should be taking the lead in relegating English from mandatory to elective. It will not, because it is beholden to stronger political powers, which have so far maintained that the countries necessary to ensure Japan’s security are mainly English-speaking. Nevertheless, the Ministry retains the institutional power to at least sponsor open hearings on whether mandatory English is really necessary or may actually be serving to perpetuate an unequal relationship with those countries.

Compounding the resistance to change in bureaucratic thinking is that Japanese ways of approaching a problem are “still rooted in an agricultural value system with a predisc-
position toward constancy rather than change." (Kelly, 1993) McVeigh’s suggestion is to "... get the Education Ministry out of the higher education business. Regardless of their good intentions, Ministry officials merely bureaucratize the educational experience, turning it into a non-educational experience." (McVeigh, 2003) A recent prime example of the Ministry being pushed into a issuing a poor edict is the soon to be required extension of English instruction down to the mid-primary level. David Nunan, a respected and influential linguist, has written, "There is, in fact, no evidence that younger = better." (Nunan, 2006) If that is correct, then college English teachers in Japan will inherit problem students whose dislike of English runs even deeper.

The recent Japanese governmental trend toward devolution of powers offers some hope. "Intervention into language policy planning on the part of students at local level [bottom-up] is a guarantee that a democratic policy-making process can be achieved." (Ok Kyoon Yoo, 2005)

2) Universities, particularly private ones, have relied on entrance exam fees as a dependable revenue side stream. That can continue, even without an English skills section in the exam. Canada and the U.S. do not have a foreign language component in their standard college qualification exams, so why should Japan. There will be some attrition of English teaching staff at all levels. University English departments can use that to retain the best teachers and upgrade quality; and freed resources can enrich the meaning of "university" by re-directing them to other foreign language courses or to study abroad programs. Private universities are generally more nimble in responding to shifts in educational demand, and will fare better than nationals, who are still somewhat tradition-bound and have not made the best use of their new freedom as independent entities.

Secondary-level English teachers can be re-trained or re-assigned to secure their employment, in the same manner that Japan spread the pain after the bubble economy burst.

3) Devaluing English in Japan is bound to face powerful resistance from the huge English instructional publishing industry here. There is no doubt that it will have to sustain a large drop in demand. But being in business assumes risks, and in the companies’ favor is the glacial pace of bureaucratic change, which ensures them time to adjust. Projections of increasing demand worldwide for English instructional material mean that the international companies now dominating the Japanese tertiary market will be able to maintain acceptable profit levels by focusing on emerging markets Secondary school English book publishers, mainly Japanese, will be harder hit, and they could delay or complicate efforts to make English voluntary. By standing up to them, however, national and local governments can prove to the public how seriously they regard reforming a failing policy.

Conclusion — Advantages to Change

1) Japanese society and government:

Changing English from mandatory to voluntary would symbolize a major irrevocable step in Japan’s maturation away from sixty-one years of psychological deference to the
U.S. The pride such independence brings can ameliorate the more chauvinistic type of nationalism recently ascending, and defuse a lot of anti-Japanese sentiment among its neighbors.

Japan will want English, but not need it, an attitude which will bring about a more positive view of global English and improve the motivation of those Japanese who do study it, thus raising general standards of English education throughout the country.

By changing the way English is taught, the Education Ministry will have shown itself as a leader in meaningful reform and efficient use of taxpayers’ money.

2）Secondary-level schools:

School administrators will not have to worry, as they do now, about the extra time and money costs of upgrading the English skills of teachers to meet expanding mandatory requirements. All secondary teachers of English will be relieved of pressure to follow the stultifying grammar-translation method to prepare students for the unnecessary English portion of entrance exams. They will feel freer to experiment with ways like drama or debate to better approximate real use of English to attract and motivate students.

3）Universities: The quality of English classes will markedly improve, as only students who are really drawn to English are likely to choose them. Teachers can raise course content levels and rationalize grading, thus gratifying their sense of professionalism.

Students who are not interested in English because they see little use for it in their future will not be forced to take it, reducing the resentment factor that now clouds classroom atmospheres.

English graduates will be more attractive to employers.

4）Secondary-level students

These students will be the main beneficiaries of the change. As it is now, English is very unpopular, because it is associated with rote memorization, cram schools, and exam hell. Making it voluntary will substantially reverse that image, by removing a large, unnecessary source of stress from their school lives. Any push to radically re-think the way English is perceived and taught in Japan has to come from teachers and policy-makers who put the needs of these secondary students foremost.

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