

English Education in Japan

-From Kindergarten to University

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English Education in Japan:

From Kindergarten to University

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1. Introduction

There are serious problems concerning English education in Japan. The most serious one, which is repeatedly referred to, is the poor communicative ability of the Japanese people in English. We study English for at least six years in junior and senior high school. Despite the long period of English education, most of us cannot use English as we would like. Where does this situation stem from?

We are going to contemplate on the reasons of this problem and the solution are presented in this report.

Our educational system is described in section 2. The present situation of English education in Japanese schools affecting each level is described in section 3.

Finally in section 4, a proposal is made to improve the present situation. The conclusion is that English should be introduced in much earlier stages of education, in the first or second year in elementary school and in kindergarten.

2. The Educational system of a second language in Japan

The educational system in Japan is a 6 year course of elementary school, 3 year course of junior high school, followed by 3 year course of high school and a 4 year (or 2 year) course of university. Elementary and junior high schools are compulsory. Most children go to high school and over 60 % students go to universities or junior colleges.

Most students started to study English in junior high schools as a compulsory subject until 2002. Generally speaking, in high schools, they can choose a foreign language other than English as a second language. But in reality, most high schools teach only English mainly because most universities treat English as one of the compulsory subjects in their entrance examinations.

The most recent controversial issue in Japan concerning English education is its

introduction to elementary schools. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture announced in 1998 that English can be introduced in elementary schools from 2002. At that time, it was not a subject of study. It was introduced in the lesson called “comprehensive learning”. “Comprehensive learning” was introduced into elementary schools as a means to enable education free from pressure. Schools can provide any kind of program in this period; planting rice, making rice cakes, listening to story tellers or inviting English speaking guests and “communicate” with them. A lot of elementary schools did invite foreigners and children greeted them in English. They were allowed to have 11 English classes a year at the most. Most schools, however, have an English hour only once or twice a year. The introduction of English into elementary schools is not aimed at teaching English skills. It is a way to introduce “international awareness” into students.

In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture announced that English will be introduced into elementary schools once a week (35 lessons in total in a year) as a regular class in fifth and sixth grade. They are not supposed to give any grade to the English lessons. The aim of the introduction of English, they say, is to train children to communicate with others actively and encourage them to communicate with English speaking people. The program will start in 2011 but most elementary schools have already started their original English programs. In some advanced schools, students have English lessons twice a week from first grade. There is a great diversity in the content and frequency of the English lessons, which has caused serious problems. We will point out some of these problems and want to present a proposal on this issue.

3. Problems with English education in Japan

3.1. Universities and high schools

3.1.1. The present situation

As the number of children has been decreasing in Japan, most students who want to go to university can enter without any difficulty or without studying so hard if they so choose. The result, of which, is the decrease in their academic ability. All the teachers in the universities are struggling with this and the teacher’s association for remedial education was established five years ago. The number of teachers who join the association has doubled every year.

We are members of the English department and are struggling with the poor vocabulary of our students. Due to the lack of vocabulary, they cannot read properly. They cannot write English sentences or communicate effectively with native teachers of English because of it.

Students of other departments are in worse condition. For example, students of the science department are not good at studying a foreign language in general and when they enter university through a recommendation, English is not a requirement to be accepted. It is quite difficult for these students to find interest in studying English even though most universities make English compulsory for freshmen.

Most high schools teach English as a compulsory second language. The frequency of lessons depends on how much study time each student needs. Those who go to university, whether they become a Humanities major or a Science major, English is compulsory and they should study hard. As for the students who want to become the Humanity major, they take five or six classes of English a week and when they are in their third year they take more than seven English lessons in a week. Those who major in Science take at least two or three English classes a week every year. On the other hand, those who do not go to university have only one or two English lessons a week only in the first and/or second year of high school.

They mainly study grammatical points to prepare for the university entrance examinations. It is very rare for high school students to have oral communication classes. They read textbooks, solve the questions in grammar books and write simple sentences following the pattern in the textbooks.

3.1.2. Problems

The biggest problem lies in the educational system of Japan itself and the entrance examinations of universities.

The educational system in Japan, as stated above, is largely divided into two: compulsory education in elementary schools and junior high schools and optional education in high schools and universities or junior colleges. Even though high school education is optional, 97.8 % students(as of 2008) go to high schools.

There is also another division in the Japanese educational system; public schools and private schools. Most of the public schools are built according to the 6-3-3 year system. On the other hand, most private schools are established with 6-6 year system, junior and senior high schools combined. The reason why most private schools combine senior and junior high schools is because it helps students to study efficiently and enjoy their school lives at the same time.

In the case of public junior and senior high schools they are divided into three years for junior high school and another three years for senior high school, and the students have to prepare for the entrance examinations soon after they enter junior high school. The students are between the ages of 13 to 15 years old and it is desirable

for the students of these ages to enjoy sports or other activities. When they go to public schools, they cannot fully enjoy them. They are stressed being forced to study hard for the entrance examinations by teachers and parents.

In this difficult condition, they have to study English, which most of them start to study in junior high school. They have to start from the alphabet and cover relative clauses and perfect tenses, which are very difficult for most Japanese to understand. They study only for the purpose of taking entrance examinations.

After they enter high schools, they have to study English to prepare for the entrance examinations of universities. Most Japanese students think that English is not necessary for their lives. About 60% of the high school students go to universities but maybe only half of them are required to study English for the entrance examinations. Then the rate of high school students who really have to study English is only 30%. If the rest of the students do not have an interest in English, they stop studying English. They spend six (or in some schools five) years to study English and get nothing. It only becomes waste of time and effort.

In the case of private schools, the situation is quite different. They have entrance examinations only when the students enter the junior high schools. They do not have to take entrance examinations for high schools. In public high schools, teachers have to conduct some remedial education or make up lessons for those who are not good at English. It is generally said that they have to spend one or two months for these review classes. In private schools, on the other hand, they do not have to conduct extra practice for high school entrance examinations or make up lessons at the beginning of high school. They usually finish texts by the end of the second year of high school and spend the last year preparing for the entrance examinations for university.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture allowed public schools to establish schools which have both junior and senior high schools. The number of these schools ,however, is still very small. What is most important for English education in high schools and universities is to make students realize the importance of English and encourage them to study more.

We really think that English is necessary for everyone. Of course the degree of necessity varies from person to person. Even the delivery clerks and salespeople, for example, use computers to manage the products and need some knowledge of English when using computers. We cannot live without English in this modern society and we have to study English for at least six years. So we, the teachers, must make the students realize the importance of English and encourage them to have an interest in it.

3.2. Junior High Schools

3.2.1. The present situation

English in junior high schools has a long tradition and its teaching methods are varying from very traditional grammar based ones to very modern communicative ones. It depends on the teachers at the school. In some schools, teachers explain the grammatical points of the lesson and make students do pattern practices and students repeat the sentences after CDs. In other schools students enjoy games or role plays without any grammatical explanations. They do not practice writing so hard as before and lots of students cannot write even alphabet in the middle of their first year. On the other hand, there are many who go to English schools after school. They do good at English and are unsatisfied with the English lessons at school.

3.2.2. Problems

Most elementary schools have come to teach English and it has become a serious problem for junior high school teachers how and what to teach at the beginning of English classes. The amount of English given in elementary schools vary greatly depending on schools. Students of two or three different elementary schools start studying in one junior high schools in general. As a result, the level of students vary considerably and the teachers are quite at a loss what to do with them.

The situation is terrible in public schools. In one junior high school which Ikegasihra visited this June in Niigata Prefecture, the most famous place for the production of rice, there were only three English teachers, only one of them was a full time teacher, for 500 students. They are unable to divide the students according to their ability. Over thirty students of various ability levels of English study together with exhausted teachers. This is not a rare case. In that bad condition, a substantial number of students give up studying English. They will never want to study English again. The result of introduction of English in elementary schools made matters worse.

3.1. Elementary Schools

3.1.1. The present situation

English education has just been officially introduced in the curriculum standards of elementary schools for raising international awareness in Japan. But almost ten years before this official announcement, a number of elementary schools started English programs based on their own objectives and necessity as a part of foreign cultural studies. These practices during this decade present some challenging situations for the initial educational systems of English in Japan.

One of the problems among those is regarding the introduction of English

letters, alphabet. According to curriculum standards, introduction of letters is not officially ruled or ruled out in the English education of elementary schools. It is only suggested that writing letters should be carefully introduced not to confuse the students or not to focus too much on it. But it might be said that English classes without any introduction of letters result in stressful situations to both students and teachers even in the early stages of elementary education in the following two ways.

One is caused by our daily lives which is affluent with many English words. Even the children are surrounded by numerous English letters in their daily lives where many brands, products names, sports teams and so on are given in English letters. So they could understand some of the alphabet. They probably know the pronunciation of these English words with the pronunciations in Katakana, like in /seibu laionzu/ (Seibu-Lions). Another is brought forth by the introduction of Romaji. The program of Romaji is an obligatory curriculum for elementary schools. They study Romaji which is used to write Japanese with alphabets, naturally reflecting Japanese sound pattern, a pair of consonant and vowel. In this stage, they naturally understand the pronunciation of the spelling of 'make' as /make/ not as English pronunciation of /meik/. They might be confused when they start to learn English sound systems at their junior high schools to find the very pronunciation to be /meik/. To avoid their confusion English letters should be carefully introduced in English lessons of elementary schools with the English sound system. We will discuss it in the following sections.

3.2. Kindertagens

3.2.1. Practice : Chiyodagaku Project

Ikegashira and Morita are taking part in "Chiyodagaku Project", which is supported by Chiyoda-ward, Tokyo with funds. We go to a kindergarten in the center of Tokyo and enjoy English with the children once a month six times a year. We give most of the children picture books and their reading CDs, originally recorded. We ask them to listen to the CDs at least once a day, looking at the books. The purpose of this project is to make them realize the difference of cultures and languages and to train them to be able to accept unfamiliar things easily.

One important thing we noticed in the project is that some of them can catch slight differences between the English sounds and the Japanese sounds. Especially those of the age four or five are more sensitive to the differences. We used a book with the title *Broom, broom* this June. It has a lot of onomatopoeia and there were quite similar ones, such as "broom" and "vroom". As Japanese do not have the fricative sound

[v] or [f], it is very difficult for most of us to make clear distinction between the two sounds [b] and [v]. We asked the children to listen to the words “broom” and “vroom” randomly repeated by CD and judge which word is pronounced. As it was the first time for the children in this kindergarten to have a lesson with us, and it was only 20 minutes in total, we didn’t expect that they detect the difference. To our surprise, however, there was a clear difference in the response of the children between the junior class (age group of 4 or 5) and senior class (age group of 5 or 6). All the children in the junior class detected the difference between the sounds while the children in the senior class said that they are the same.

3.2.2. Problems

It is said that over three hundred kindergartens have English courses or classes where they speak only in English. It is generally said that the younger a child, the easier for he or she to acquire linguistic sounds. On the other hand there are people, who worry about the offering foreign language education too early in their childhood. They say that very young children, those in kindergartens or in the first or second year of elementary schools, should study their mother tongue rather than a foreign language. They say to study another language do harm to the children or hinder the acquisition of their own language, in our case Japanese.

It is quite true that a lot of Japanese students have difficulty in writing or speaking Japanese. But we think that this is one issue and to study a new language is quite another. When children study a foreign language, it will help them to understand differences and to accept foreign things easily.

It is also a very difficult problem for a lot of students in junior and senior high schools or universities that they cannot pronounce English properly. It is quite difficult for students over 10 to imitate the sounds they hear as they are. As stated above, kindergarteners of 4 or 5 can imitate the sounds quite easily and try to imitate as they are pronounced. Therefore, we think it is very important for children to have the experience of listening to English (or any other language) sounds when they are very young. Even if they do not study or listen to English for several years, once the sounds of a language are put into their mind, they are kept subconsciously and come back easily when they start to study the language later.

To introduce letters in English classes seem to be a taboo in Japan. The Ministry of Education and Science ask elementary school teachers to wait until their students become fifth graders, 11 years old, to teach letters. Most 11 year old students sing ABC songs and study how they are written. They are too old to sing simple ABC songs. They

are also too old to accept English words as they are written. They are sure to analyze the word based on the alphabet and rebuild it in their own Japanese way. Lots of university students do that and make many mistakes in spellings. We think we should introduce sounds and spellings at the same time when they are very young.

4 Proposal and Summary

4.1 A Proposal to Introduction of English Letters

4.1.1 Basic Assumptions

Teaching the English alphabet should be done as soon as possible. In elementary school education, it is appropriate to be taught from the first grade. It is easier for younger children to recognize new letters as part of picture. Each letter can be viewed as a picture, as in pictography. Concerning the way to introduce letters, 'the ABC song' is a very common way to start. First grade children can acquire the correct pronunciation and order of the letters in a cheerful way. Singing songs is very suitable for first or second grade children, but not for the fifth or sixth graders. First and second graders need to know respective shapes of alphabets as well. Doing some picture puzzles or easy jigsaw puzzles is helpful. They could learn some simple conversation while they are doing puzzles with their teachers, too.

After introducing letters, words are given to children with the respective pronunciation and pictures as in picture cards (flash cards); first they grasp the word's entity (picture), pronunciation and the spelling as a whole. Gradually they recognize the word's entity (picture), the correct pronunciation, and the spelling separately. At this stage they don't have any mental barriers to learn the spelling of the very word. The teachers should expose the children to as much English as possible to allow them to develop their own ability to think logically in English. The teachers should build vocabulary as much as possible at this stage because children need to hear and watch enough English to develop English sound-spelling relation ability in themselves. This spelling education should be started soon after introducing letters.

The next stage is constructing sentences. Reading picture books is also effective and enjoyable. At this stage, a large quantity of English sound input is essential for constructing English sentences. After a picture book is read by the teacher, an audio CD of the story is very helpful. With this amount of input children remember English sentences as they remember songs. Audio books are also effective to maintain this input. In English education, the basic pattern of English sounds, words, and sentences should be made within the children's minds with tremendous amount of input and carefully chosen methods. These foundation will contribute to their study in their

junior high school days.

4.2 Summary

We have surveyed the education of English in Japan and some problems concerning it. It is always the case that we have some difficulties in studying foreign languages. In the case of us, the Japanese, however, when we study English or other foreign languages, we have to face serious differences in the sentence structures, grammar, letters and sounds between the languages. After we fully acquired our own language, at the age between eight and ten, it is really difficult to accept the sounds or structures of English as they are. The proposal made by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is to introduce English in this age period. It seems to be very dangerous and useless to make students start studying English in this period. They have lots more to study and feel English as a burden.

If we introduce English in kindergarten or in lower grades of elementary school, students can enjoy English fully singing songs and playing games. We should think more seriously about the age of introduction of English.