

Revision of Foreign Language Education Policy in Japan

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0 English education in Japan

English education in Japan has been taught only from the junior high school level up until recently. Nevertheless, an increasing number of elementary schools have begun offering English activities, including games, songs and conversation lessons as part of education for international understanding during so-called comprehensive studies classes, which were introduced in 2002.

What to do during comprehensive studies classes is currently up to each elementary school, with more emphasis on teachers to create new and original lessons focusing on such things as environmental or international issues. In the case of the vast majority of elementary schools, this resulted in many teachers having to introduce English for the first time.

According to a survey conducted by the Education Ministry, 93.6 percent (20,803) of all public elementary schools across the nation (22,232) offered English-language activities in fiscal 2005. Nearly all the lessons involve fun and games, making it easy for children to get used to both English and foreigners, because of the native English speaking assistant language teachers (ALTs) helping them. "I like English because, unlike other subjects, we can enjoy ourselves while we're learning it," a student at Daisan Hino Elementary School in Tokyo said to a newspaper reporter.¹ However, what is taught in English lessons and how often they are offered differs from school to school. The survey mentioned above indicates sixth-grade students, on average, studied English only 13.7 hours for an entire year.

1 Background

For the past several decades, the Japanese Ministry of Education has formulated various measures such as the revision of the Ministry's Courses of Study with a further focus on cultivating students' basic and practical communication abilities. However, in order to make such improvements bear fruit, "A Strategic Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" was formulated in July, 2002, as a comprehensive and concrete plan for the purpose of drastically reforming English education in Japan.² Building on the strategic plan, "an Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities'" was established in March, 2003.³ The formulation of this concrete action plan clarifies the goals and directions for the improvement of English education to be achieved by 2008 and the measures that should be taken by the government to realize these goals. Such measures include improving teaching

¹ *Mainichi Weekly*, July 29, 2006.

² Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

³ Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

methods, improving the teaching ability of teachers, improving the selection system for school and university applicants as well as creating better curricula.

2 Report by a Council's panel

In March of this year, a report was issued by a subpanel on foreign languages in the Central Council for Education, an advisory panel to the Ministry of Education. It recommends that fifth- and sixth-grade students at six year public elementary schools study English at least once a week, and that those in lower grades learn the language as part of special activity programs.

2.1 Objections

Not a few people disagree with the report, as evidenced by the articles and letters to the editor pages of major newspapers:

What is the meaning of teaching English in elementary school?

Elementary schools should place importance on teaching Japanese or other subjects than English.

Most elementary school teachers in Japan have little or no experience teaching English and students' Japanese skills may be sacrificed.

The introduction of compulsory English education at elementary school would be a great burden for students and schools.

And those against the idea are concerned that as many as 60-70% of Japanese students end up hating English in junior high school after the first semester. So the students who are introduced to English in elementary school in this way will only end up disliking English much sooner.

3 English as a subject

Their opinions, however, do not seem to be based on linguistic, pedagogical or sociolinguistic foundations that teaching English to 11-year-olds is ineffective, unnecessary or even harmful. The council's proposal is modest in scope, only assigning one or two class hours per week to the subject. Even if children study English 35 hours a year for six years, the total hours of tuition is just 210 hours. Teaching English for such a short time would not sacrifice the learning of Japanese.

The subpanel's report noted that currently offered lessons are not necessarily uniform in activity and hours and cited the need to provide a common base for learning the language. Certainly introducing English at an early age is a step in the right direction but does not go far enough. It is a compromise approach.

3.1 Compromise

It seems that the Education Ministry is keeping its English curriculum implementation gradual and vague in order to avoid open rejection by the elementary school teachers who will need to be responsible for it eventually. Possibly out of consideration to critics who say Japanese-language

education must be given priority, the proposal says the policy is aimed at enhancing children's interest toward languages and advancing their understanding of Japanese.

3.2 English as a foreign language

English activities are technically not English classes, and aim to promote intercultural awareness and familiarity with communicating with persons from foreign countries. English education in Japan should be viewed in terms of English as a Foreign Language and we should make "English learning" an explicit goal and set realistic targets. The Japanese Government's education guidelines are, however, that in English conversation activities during the comprehensive studies classes, the simple introduction of junior high school English education at an earlier stage as well as teacher-centered methods for cramming knowledge should be avoided. In other words, the main idea behind Elementary School English is to present it not as "language education", but in the form of "learning activities". This means that it should not be taught like a subject in junior high school through grammar, reading and writing, but instead should emphasize listening and speaking through cross-curricular and integrated learning activities.

Experiential learning activities based on the children's interest and curiosity are certainly meaningful, but classes held for second graders are often virtually the same as classes held for sixth graders at some schools, failing to go beyond the singing, playing games, and exchanging casual greetings typical of a second grade class. For children in the sixth grade who have considerably more intellectual curiosity than younger students, such classes may well be boring. In fact, an elementary school teacher says, "We're singing and dancing in English, so it's a lot of fun."⁴

3.3 Pilot schools for research purposes

The Japanese Ministry of Education has been developing, through the system of pilot schools for research purposes, areas such as the curriculum and teaching methods for English education at elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools. In 1992 the first two schools were designated as pilot research schools for elementary school English education not based on the courses of study. There are 77 designated experimental elementary schools across the nation as of fiscal 2005. Shikaoi Elementary School located in the town of Shikaoi in central Hokkaido is one of them.

Shikaoi has been a sister town of Stony Plain in Alberta since 1985 and has thus enjoyed a cultural relationship for 21 years. The local board of education has been hiring two Canadian teachers, who teach at elementary and junior high and high schools in Shikaoi. In 1996, the first student exchange

⁴ *Mainichi Weekly*, July 29, 2006.

program was initiated. Every year thereafter all tenth grade students at Shikaoi High School travel to Stony Plain around the first of October for a ten day stay in Canada. Overall, it has provided time to further cultivate a mutual understanding between Shikaoi and Stony Plain.

3.4 Certified schools in special zones for structural reform

In addition to these pilot experimental schools, 55 prefectural governments and municipalities (as of fiscal 2005) that were designated by the central government as special zones for structural reform and deregulation have begun offering English education as official curriculum at elementary schools. Some of the schools, by trying to link English education between elementary and junior high school levels, began presenting junior high school level material in elementary school. The Education Ministry's guideline limits the English vocabulary that is to be learned during the three year junior high school to about 900 words. This number is certainly too small in comparison with 1600 found in English textbooks designed for the third to five grade students in Finland, for instance. Although another 2000 words are added during high school lessons, that's well below the 7,000 to 8,000 words said to be necessary for practical English skills.

3.5 The Super English Language High School (SELHi) Program

In 2002, the Education Ministry began to designate "Super English Language High Schools" to promote innovative English education at senior high schools and unified secondary schools. By 2005, a total of 100 schools were designated as Super English Language High Schools, where part of a subject is taught in English, linking with universities and sister schools overseas.

3.6 Immersion

It is sometimes questioned whether bilingualism confuses children's minds or dilutes their Japanese identity, and what the long-term effects of early immersion are. The Katoh Gakuen immersion program (K-12) in Numazu, Shizuoka Prefecture is a successful example.⁵ The intent of the program is to integrate an internationally recognized International Baccalaureate program into an accredited Japanese school curriculum for bilingual Japanese students. Among the perceived benefits are obvious ones such as a solid base in hearing and speaking English; a head start in international awareness; and a broader outlook on life. It is also claimed that students even have an advantage in learning their first language, contrary to what is believed by many Japanese academics. Their students have been accepted to some of the best universities in North America (Harvard, Yale, Duke, Virginia, Michigan State, etc.) and Japan (Keio, Waseda, ICU, etc.)

⁵ <http://www.bi-lingual.com/School/EnglishHome.htm>

4 Conclusion

As I mentioned, the council's recommendation issued this spring is not enough strong. While not a few people disagree with the report, many Japanese are concerned about their admittedly poor English proficiency. Japanese students, along with their North Korean counterparts, have consistently scored among the lowest marks among all Asian students taking TOEFL. Such results also demonstrate the need to improve the way English is taught in Japan's school system since complaints always turn to the alleged ineffectiveness of English language education at school. In order to make English language education successful at the elementary level following conditions are necessary to satisfy:

1. Clear learning objectives;
2. Curriculum design covering all planned years;
3. Sufficient teacher training for both the Japanese homeroom teachers and the foreign teachers who will assist them; plus, for the time being, the use of local personnel who are proficient in English through overseas experiences, and the participation by junior high and senior high school teachers in English conversation activities at elementary schools

Japan's new Education Minister Bunmei Ibuki said late last month that English language teaching at the elementary school level is not necessary, adding that there is no use studying English unless children speak beautiful Japanese. Ibuki's reference to the "beautiful Japanese language" appears to resonate with the "beautiful country, Japan" concept being advocated by the new Abe government. However, in this globalizing world, English, like mathematics, should be regarded as basic knowledge everybody should acquire, and the basics of the language ought to be taught to everybody.