

ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN

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ABSTRAK

Jepang merupakan salah satu negara maju di kawasan Asia yang sangat menjaga budaya dan tradisi. Hal ini menyebabkan orang-orang Jepang menjadi fanatik terhadap penggunaan bahasa ibu mereka dalam berinteraksi. Namun seiring dengan perkembangan globalisasi, Jepang moderen merasa perlu untuk mengembangkan kemampuan dalam berkomunikasi dengan dunia luar secara efektif. Untuk itu, bahasa Inggris yang sudah diakui sebagai bahasa pergaulan utama di kancah internasional menjadi salah satu prioritas dalam kurikulum pembelajaran bahasa asing di Jepang dan menariknya Bahasa Inggris selalu menjadi pilihan favorit untuk dipelajari dari tingkat sekolah dasar sampai universitas di Jepang. Perkembangan metode pendidikan bahasa Inggris di Jepang juga cukup signifikan; dimulai dari mengadaptasi metode *grammar-focused teaching* sampai *communicative language teaching*. Selain itu, berbagai program dilaksanakan untuk mendukung peningkatan pengajaran Bahasa Inggris.

Kata-kata kunci: Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Jepang

INTRODUCTION

Japan is known as a monolingual nation. However, to maintain her tradition of quality in education and to increase the readiness for globalization, Japan has put much more attention to English by adopting it to the school curriculum as one of the most vital foreign languages to learn. Because the writing system and the root as well as the grammar of English and Japanese are so much different, many efforts in creating teaching materials and methodologies have been done to sup-

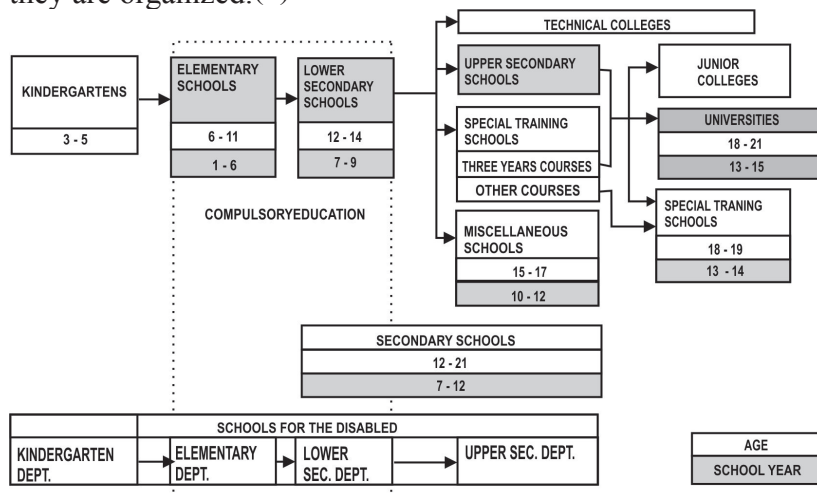
port the teaching of English. Japan has reframed the English language education by making a shift from the traditional teaching styles, teacher-centered instruction and grammar-focused teaching, to communicative approach that highlights communication ability. Japan has shown quite good progress in English proficiency. According to the 2009 TOEFL iBT score that was published by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Japan was ranked 28 thin Asia where Japanese examinees' average score was (67/120). The present paper discusses how English language education in Ja-

pan is planned and performed.

DISCUSSION

Education System in Japan

Prior to the discussion of the English language education in Japan, the country's recent education system is presented. Figure 1 below shows a chart of the Japanese schools and how they are organized.(1)



The Japanese Ministry of Education (Monbusho) acted out the Fundamental Law of Education after World War II in 1947. The Monbusho had their name changed to Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science, and Technology (MEXT) on February 28th, 2001. Similarly to the American schooling system, the Law states that the formal schooling system is segmented along the lines of 6-3-3-4 to provide equal education for all children. Following this rule, children attend six years of primary (elementary) education, three years of lower secondary education (middle/junior high school), three years of upper secondary education (senior high school), plus four years of university for those who wish to go on to higher education level.

Like many other countries that support the ultimate goal of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to encourage development of social and economic conditions, Japan stipulates the total of nine years education including six years of primary and three years

of lower secondary education for all children is compulsory. The compulsory education is considered as basic education and almost all children complete it. The average age of Japanese children to start their first formal schooling is at the age of six years old. The school year in Japan begins in April and ends in March of the following year. A school year has three terms: summer, winter, and spring that are followed by short breaks in spring and winter as well as a one month long vacation in summer.

After finishing basic education, it is estimated that 98% of lower secondary graduates continue upper secondary education at the age of 15. There are three types of upper secondary schools that offer different courses, namely: (1) general academic high school; (2) specialized courses, vocational education which provides students with skills for their future career; (3) integrated courses were introduced in 1994 as a combination of both general and specialized courses. In Japan, to get the most basic jobs at least people need to acquire a diploma from upper secondary school.(2)

Almost 49% of the upper secondary school graduates proceed to pursue higher education at university or junior college. Students who intend to pursue education at the university level are required to take competitive entrance examinations. In such a case, many students study at a preparatory school for one or more years starting from the upper secondary education to help them pass the entrance examination to their selected university. The four-year university program grants students an undergraduate degree. The MEXT recognizes several institutions to conduct tertiary education in Japan, i.e. universities, junior colleges, colleges of technology, and specialized training colleges.

Based on the School Education Law, a new system for universities began in 1949. Universities are intended for students who want to

conduct an in depth study of any discipline that will help equip them with advanced knowledge. For the undergraduate education, students need at least four years to finish the program and receive their degree. On the other hand, at the graduate level, students need two years to be able to finish their masters and at least three other years to gain a doctoral degree. Apart from that, junior college education is offered to students who wish to develop ability in a specialized field to be able to perform vocational skills. The program normally lasts for two or three years leading to an associate degree. Students mostly enroll in some popular courses, such as: humanities, teacher training, home economics, and social sciences. However, if they wish, the graduates of junior colleges are allowed to continue their education at the university level in order to gain a bachelor degree. The system of junior college was established in 1950 on a temporary basis and became permanent in 1964.

Unlike both universities and junior colleges, colleges of technology accept students who have completed lower secondary education and need to consistently commit themselves to studying for at least five years to learn vocational skills of any specialized discipline, for instance: industry. The colleges of technology were established in 1962. Additionally, the specialized training colleges offer various courses for vocational and technical education to address diverse demands of society. The offered programs are dressmaking, cooking, book-keeping, and so forth. The schools are mainly run by private agencies.

English Language Education in Japan

English is considered as one of the most popular elective foreign languages in Japanese curricula because English is one major subject besides math, science as well as social studies, and Japanese for the entrance examination both at the upper secondary school and university. The curriculum content of the English language is authorized by the MEXT. Hosoki (2011) explains that at the tertiary education level, English is

highlighted in most curricula and almost all students including non-English majors have to study English during their first two years at the university (p. 206).

Before the implementation of the new curriculum, English language education in Japanese school settings was first started at the grade 7 of lower secondary school and continues up to grade 12 at upper secondary school and university. But, recently the 2011 revised Course of Study mentions that lesson of foreign language activities should be part of primary school's curriculum. Thus, English through foreign language activity is taught once a week for fifth and sixth graders starting in April 2011 (Hosoki, 2011, p. 207). It can help students build better foundation of communication in foreign language.

At the lower secondary schools, in 2012 English is offered four hours of 50 minutes classes per week. According to the MEXT guidelines, the overall purpose of foreign language education is to give students a practical command of written and spoken English and to promote understanding of the language and culture. Also, it is expected to help students foster a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages (Section 9, p. 1). As for the textbooks of English used at the lower secondary school, teachers cannot choose their textbooks because beforehand the school board has decided textbooks that will be used in their classes. There are only six different textbooks used at lower secondary schools. Once certain textbooks are selected, schools must continue to subsequently use them until grade 9 of lower secondary school.

Meanwhile, at the upper secondary schools English is taught approximately four hours a week and the number of hours depends on students' grades. In addition, the content of learning is normally categorized into several subjects based on their grades. For example, English I that is taught at their first year of upper secondary school is an extension of lower secondary school English. At the latter grades, English II (reading) is taught with the additions of sup-

plemental courses of oral communication, reading, and writing. At private schools, the number of hours of English per week is more than that at public schools. This is because they generally offer five to six hours of reading and one to two hours of conversation lessons. Some upper secondary schools also provide supplementary English lessons before or after school or during school vacation to help students get ready for university entrance examinations.

Similarly to lower secondary education, English courses at the upper secondary education are also controlled by the MEXT. According to the guideline, a maximum of 1,800 words should be introduced, so a high school graduate has usually learned 3,000 words. In reality, at schools little attention has been given to the teaching of speaking. Instead many teachers give more emphasis on teaching reading and grammar because half of students intend to take entrance examinations to enter university. Currently, the communicative teaching model has been widely applied at most Japanese schools although at some schools, the teaching style is still conventional, i.e. teacher centered that involves lecture-style instruction due to large numbers of students in one class. Concerning textbooks, they must be authorized by the MEXT, but schools can make selection of the textbooks.

English is tested along with math, science, and social studies as well as Japanese for university's entrance examination. If students want to enter an English Literature Department, English score is given the highest weight out of the other subjects because it is believed that students at university need to read books in English. Interestingly, some top private and national universities use English scores to measure students' analytical and logical thinking skills (Iino, 2001). Unlike lower and upper secondary schools, universities have authority and flexibility to arrange their English curriculum. Non-English majors usually take two to four credits in the first foreign language (usually English) and four or more credits in the second foreign language (usually

French, Chinese, or German). University teachers are given freedom to select textbooks based on their own interest to be used at their classes.

EFL Teacher Training Programs and Teacher Qualifications in Japan

Like in many other countries throughout the world, English teachers in Japan are trained in the school of education or in the teacher training program at the credential universities that are appointed by the Japanese government. All lower and upper secondary school teachers are required to have a teaching certificate. In Japan, practice teaching is conducted at students' almamater and most attached schools, which have affiliation with the universities. Under the supervision of selected mentors, the training normally lasts for one month in July or September to help teacher trainees actualize and practice their teaching skills. After graduating from the university, the competition to be employed at a school for permanent position is relatively high because there are too many candidates who want to become teachers. The candidates must pass an examination conducted by boards of education for public schools.

Apart from that, the qualification needed to become university faculty members does not require candidates to have a teaching certificate as long as their academic qualifications are relevant to the field that they are going to teach. Also, they are expected to have a doctoral degree and prior experience of university teaching and research is preferable. In addition to it, Japan's universities hire many part-time language teachers, both native and non-native speakers of English

Moreover, Iino (2001) mentions that for miscellaneous schools including private language schools and juku mostly require applicant to possess an undergraduate degree as a minimum requirement (p.91). Many foreigners whose native language is English also come to Japan and work as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) at primary, lower, and upper secondary schools through Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) pro-

gram started in 1987. The ALTs do not necessarily need to have teaching certificate and teaching experiences because the JET's main goals are to let young people from all over the world to experience life in Japan and to promote international mutual understanding between people of Japan and people of the other nations.

ALTs normally help Japanese teachers of English to deliver around three to five classes everyday. It means that ALTs commit themselves to teaching 17 to 20 classes per week. Not to mention, they discuss lesson plans and other language teaching tasks with the Japanese teachers. Also they participate in school activities. But, the situations may be different from one school to the others. According to current statistics on JET's official website, 4,330 people coming from mainly 39 English-speaking countries participated in JETs program. The data show that in 2011 out of 1,753 JET participants 1,587 became ALTs.(3)

CONCLUSION

Japan has developed a school system and improved her curriculum time after time. English language has been part of the curriculum and Japanese government has made efforts to develop this subject. For instance, starting in 2012 English language is introduced in 5th and 6th grades of elementary school as a foreign language activity. Besides, many native speakers of English have been invited to become assistant language teachers (ALTs) through JET program. They work at public schools throughout Japan to help Japanese teachers in the classroom. Also, the teaching methods and textbooks have been developed in order to improve students' English proficiency. These are intended to make students become communicatively competent in a way that they will be ready to encounter globalization and to interchange with people worldwide.

Notes

1. This chart is available at <http://beanxiii.blogspot.com/>.

2. This information is available at <http://www.education-in-japan.info/sub1.html>.
3. The information about JETs program and ALTs is available <http://www.jetprogramme.org/>.

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