

Educational Reforms and Development in Japan: Language and Culture Education for Global Competitiveness

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Due to an increase in globalization, international business, and the Tokyo Olympics being held in 2020, Japan faces a growing need to develop a population with the English language skills and cultural awareness needed for global success. The need to address these goals has been noted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) who is spending large amounts of money on various initiatives in schools, universities, and businesses across Japan. This paper outlines some of the key policy changes and educational initiatives that are being spearheaded by MEXT in order to develop the Japanese population's English language proficiency and to create a more international higher education system in order for Japan to remain competitive on the global arena. These initiatives will then be framed within the concept of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or English as an international language (EIL). Finally, this paper specifically describes a number of programs, all of which have received considerable funding from MEXT, that have been developed at one university in Tokyo to develop globally minded bilingual individuals capable of performing in international academic or business contexts. Results of some of these programs are described in terms of language gains, study abroad placement, and post-graduation employment statistics.

1. Introduction: Educational Reforms and Development in Japan

The perceived ineffectiveness of the Japanese education system in developing individuals who are able to communicate effectively in English has provoked widespread calls for change from the businesses, politicians, educators, and the general public (Butler, 2007). In response to such criticisms of the English education system, along with concerns over other issues such as the falling number of Japanese students studying abroad, and the relatively low number of international exchange students coming to Japan, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has implemented a number of educational reforms and initiatives in elementary schools and universities over the last few years, and is recommending an overhaul of the university entrance exam system in order to shift the focus of high school English education from grammar and reading to a more four-skills, communicative approach (Shimamura, 2013, 2014). In addition, the trend of increasing focus on content and language integrated curricula in Japan has led to a dramatic increase in the number of universities offering such programs. According to Miichi (2010), over 190 universities offered English-medium content courses in 2008.

A number of these initiatives and changes will be outlined and discussed below in order to show the degree to which these issues are considered important to the current Japanese government. However, before moving on to specific actions taken by the government, it is prudent to provide a summary of a recent statement issued by the chief minister of MEXT, which shows the centrality of the issues of globalization and global competitiveness to Japan: As globalization takes root in numerous fields, and global spanning issues like environmental problems emerge, no one country can stand alone. Faced with the issues of the falling birth rate and aging population, which is decreasing the working-age population, Japan has no other course than to enhance the capabilities of each and every citizen through education if it wants to continue to grow as an affluent nation and keep its position within the world. It is paramount that Japan focuses on its higher education system, particularly through internationalization of universities, in order to foster highly capable people with a global perspective and abilities who can play an active role in many fields and strengthen Japan's international competitiveness. (Shimamura, 2013).

As seen above, globalization and internationalization seem to be very important issues for the Japanese government, and the initiatives and changes in the education system outlined below indicate the role that English as a foreign language (EFL) plays, and highlights the steps government is taking in practical terms to address Japan's perceived needs.

2. Main Body

Changes to Elementary School EFL Education

MEXT formally released its revised plans for the EFL curriculum within the elementary school system in 2008 and 2009 (Yoshida, 2009). However, although beyond the scope of this paper, as noted by (Mondejar et al, 2012), MEXT has still not made it clear to teachers and administrators how the new policies should be implemented. In addition, very little pedagogical training seems to have been provided to teachers working under this new curriculum. However, the changes that have now been implemented in the Japanese elementary schools system are briefly outlined below.

From 2011 English was implemented for 5th and 6th graders for the first time on a national level. This new EFL focus took the form of one 45-minute English lesson held once a week with a focus on simple verbal communication (singing songs and playing games). However, English is not an officially required subject, but instead is offered as part of an 'International Understandings Studies' curriculum (McKenzie, 2010). However, it has recently been reported that the Education Ministry is considering starting English education from the third grade by 2020. In addition, in response to a government education panel's call for "developing human resources needed in this age of globalization", they are considering increasing lessons for fifth- and sixth-graders to three times a week, as well as upgrading them to "full-fledged language classes" with more focus on spoken and written English. (MEXT, 2014). It could be argued that this focus on introducing EFL at a younger age is a major step towards bringing Japanese language education closer to that of other countries.

Global 30

This 5-year plan was launched in 2009 to attract 300,000 exchange students to Japanese universities. Under this plan, significant financial support was given to 13 universities with the goal of creating a university-wide international environment. This plan was in part a result of the falling exchange rate student numbers at the time (Shimamura, 2013), but also in response to general criticisms of the university education system from the professional or business sector, which was said to lack the international level education and research output of other developed countries. However, this program has been widely viewed as unsuccessful as international students enrollment increased by only 12,000 from 16,000 in 2008 to 28,000 in 2013 (Shimamura, 2013) as a result, which is a long way off the target of 300,000.

However, under this program, 155 new English-only degree programs were created, and as Japanese students are able to take these degrees, it has been noted that an indirect although not yet quantifiable benefit, is increasing the English proficiency and international perspectives of Japanese university students at these universities. In addition, as students taking these courses have first-hand experience of studying in English with international students, a further result could be an increased interest in, and ability to succeed in study abroad opportunities for Japanese students, something which has also been noted as a key goal of MEXT in previous years (Shimamura, 2013, 2014. MEXT, 2014).

Top Global University Project

37 universities have been accepted (13 type A & 24 Type B) to this new initiative which aims to facilitate system reforms through 10 years of financial support. According to MEXT (2014), the aim is to bolster the international competitiveness of Japanese higher education research and teaching thorough internationalization and university reform; developing international-level educational research. There is a focus on supporting universities in internationalization through inviting educational experts from foreign universities and creating new opportunities for young foreign faculty. Again, according to MEXT (2013, 2104), the plan is to create 1,500 new full-time faculty positions for “young and foreign faculty members”. With regard to language, specifically English, the plan aims increase the number of courses carried out in English, reduce student-teacher ratios in language classes, and double the number of Japanese students studying abroad, and the number of foreign students studying in Japan by 2020. Each of the 13 Type A universities will receive ¥420 million (USD 3.9 million) annually in subsidies, and each of the 24 Type B universities will receive ¥170 million (USD 1.6 million) annually. Therefore, this significant amount of spending is another example of how Japan is aiming to create a more international educational environment to improve Japan’s global competitiveness, and English education plays a significant role in this plan.

Changes to employment within JET program and ALTs in general

In recent years there have been a number of changes to the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, a program which sends young foreign graduates into Japanese elementary, junior and senior high schools to work as assistant language teachers (ALTs), predominantly in an EFL context. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the changes in the program,

but some of the main issues are described. First, there is a shifting focus in terms of the native language of JET English teachers. In 2000, 90% of ALTs on the JET program came from USA, Canada, UK, Australia, NZ (in order), but by 2008, only 2,701 out of 4,707 (57%) came from these countries (McKenzie, 2010). This, it has been argued, has shown a shift away from requiring native speaker models (inner circle), and a move to more world Englishness such as those spoken by expanding or outer circle speakers of English (McKenzie, 2010). In addition, the number of ALTs is increasing, not just through JET, but also through other employment opportunities. There are currently about 10,000 English speakers working as ALTs in Japan, but this set to increase due to the changes in elementary school English education described above (Shimamura, 2103, MEXT, 2014).

Private Sector Initiatives: Cool Japan

There have been a number of initiatives carried out by other governmental departments such as the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Tourism. An example of one such initiative is the proposal to create 'Special English Zones' which refers to specific areas of Japan where English would be established as one of the primary languages of business "in an effort to strengthen Japan's ability to participate in international cultural and economic exchanges in the lead-up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics." (Japan Today, 2014). It has been proposed that companies within the zones that adopt English as their working language will be eligible for tax deductions. This idea falls under the broader campaign called 'Cool Japan' which aims to promote various aspects of Japanese culture and society to raise the profile of the country and increase international business and tourism. In addition to the 'Special English Zones', other proposals under the 'Cool Japan' initiative include providing funding to TV networks to increase the number of bilingual broadcasts and programs using English subtitles, and either employing or recruiting volunteers comprising of speakers of numerous foreign languages to assist tourists visiting Japan during the 2020 Olympics.

As seen above, it is not just within the education system that the Japanese government is trying to improve and expand the use of English within Japan. There is also a great deal of time, effort, and money being spent on increasing the use of English within the private sector.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or International language (EIL)

Although there seem to be numerous positive steps being taken in terms of English language education in Japan, there are still a number of problems or issues being widely discussed. One such issue relates to what form of English should be taught in Japan.

According to McKenzie (2010), a third of the world's population are speakers of English, and English is increasingly spoken as a lingua franca "between individuals from different nations who have learned English as a foreign language as well as to communicate with speakers who have learned English as first language and/or in the former colonies, in all likelihood, as a second language." (p. 2).

The fact that a large proportion of people now speak English as a foreign or other language, and that a great deal of English interactions involve speakers whose first language is not English, and therefore, may not represent a 'native model' calls into question what form of

English should be taught to learners of EFL. In fact, whether the term EFL should be used at all has been questioned, with many calling for the terms ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), or EIL (English as an International Language) to be used instead. This point is noted in McKenzie (2010) who states that “the increasing use of English for international purposes calls into question the validity of the notion that those who have learned English as a first language can claim its sole ownership. Indeed, for many, English may no longer be associated with specific countries in, for instance, the US, the UK or Australia ... for the time being English as Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL) as it is still sometimes known, is a fact of life” (p. 3).

Given the fact that English can no longer be understood as being a specific or concrete language form such as that used by the British or Americans, but is a language that is used for global communication with many different acceptable and effective forms, the pedagogical question is what should learners of English strive for; ‘native-like proficiency’ or just proficiency. Kirkpatrick (2012) states that the goal of English education among the outer and expanding circle countries should be set at the level of successful ELF users rather than that of Native Speakers. As noted in Block (2010), the fact that most learners are presented with an unrealistic and unnecessary goal of reaching native-like proficiency, and that global pedagogical practices such as communicative language teaching (CLT) that were developed in one context such as the UK or the US, but are then imported and used by teachers in other contexts and cultures without giving thought to their suitability to learners from different backgrounds with different goals, is an issue of importance.

Adopting a CLT approach using western designed materials and models, and expecting learners to reach native proficiency is not always well suited to the purposes and goals of many students, but is nevertheless what is often expected by course designers and administrators. In addition, materials do not always represent situations and context in a real way, something which can cause problems for students when they study abroad or encounter English for real world purposes. For example, how are we preparing Japanese learners to cope with real world English’s spoken in business or academic contexts by non-native speakers from places such as China, India, and Singapore after years of being exposed only to British or American English? In other words, how are materials that present inner circle models (McKenzie, 2010) of English preparing students for communication with English speakers from outer or expanding circles, which now represent the majority of English speakers worldwide? It has been stated that approximately 70% of business interactions carried out by Japanese employees take place with non-native speakers of English (Bircan, 2013), however, current curriculums and materials used in Japan present only native-speaker models. Especially in terms of understanding accents and vocabulary of non-native speakers of English, Japanese students are not being well prepared for real world or international English.

These issues are not discussed in any meaningful way within the Japanese English education context. While, as mentioned, there have been positive steps towards providing English instruction that does not focus on inner circle models in Japan (see the section on JET program developments), there is still clearly a strong preference for inner circle models in terms

of teachers, textbooks, materials and standardized test (Block, 2010; McKenzie, 2010). As a result, Japanese learners, even those who have reached a relatively high level of English proficiency, are often unprepared or unequipped to communicate, especially in terms of spoken discourse, with other speakers of English as a foreign language. This point has been repeatedly mentioned by my students who have come back from study abroad experiences in places such as China, the Philippines, India and Europe; they are fine when talking to British or American speakers, but have serious difficulties in comprehending local speakers of English. For many students, not only is this situation surprising, but can also be very demotivating or embarrassing.

Therefore, English education that offers students the realistic and attainable goal of reaching proficiency not native-level, that focuses on communication, and which provides listening materials and language taken from real world use is needed in Japan. The next part of this paper describes some programs that have been developed at one private university with these goals in mind. One of these programs have been recognized by MEXT as an exemplary program, and all of them can be seen to fit into the current Japanese government's educational goals as described in the first part of this paper.

Case Study: Programs at Soka University aimed at developing globally minded bilingual graduates

Soka University, a private university in western Japan, has a relatively long history of creating and developing intensive programs aimed at equipping learners with high-level English proficiency. These programs also aim to develop various academic and business skills needed for success in international academic and business contexts. First, this paper will provide a fairly detailed overview of the longest running program; the International Program (IP), which has been running for more than 10 years, and which has received significant levels of funding from MEXT, and has been acknowledged for its innovative practices and success in terms of language gains and employment statistics. Then, a number of newer programs will be briefly described; however, as these are newer programs, less quantitative results are available.

The International Program: Curriculum Design and Assessment

The International Program (IP) in the Department of Economics at Soka University hopes to serve as a model of effective English, content and skills development after 12 years of development and assessment. According to Aloiau (2008), "The IP is an intensive English-medium economics program that provides academic preparation for undergraduate and graduate study-abroad, and preparation for students' future employment in international contexts." (p. 108). The program was recognized for distinctive good practice by the Japanese Ministry of Education under its Distinctive University Education Assistance Programs in 2007. After two years of initial piloting, "the IP was officially established in 2001 to meet the needs of Soka University economic majors who aspire to achieve one or more goals" (Aloiau, 2008, p. 108). Many students highlighted a desire to (1) study economics-related content in English, (2) to gain high proficiency in English as a foreign language (EFL), and (3) to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to study abroad at undergraduate or graduate level, or (4) to work in an

international context. Therefore, a curriculum was designed that would allow students to attain these goals.

The International Program Curriculum

Level 1, Semester 1. Due to the challenging nature of EFL learners taking English-medium content courses (Grabe and Stoller, 1994), combined with the IP goals of developing relatively high EFL skills, highly intensive EAP courses were designed.

In the first semester, students do not take any English-medium economics courses. However, they take six hours of English classes, which involve substantial (10-15 hours) out-of-class work per week. The focus of these courses is to increase students' English ability in order to be successful on their upcoming English-medium economic courses, improve study skills, and help with the attainment of increased standardized test scores, such as TOEFL and TOEIC. Material and content used as a medium for skills such as reading, writing and listening also serve the purpose of introducing students to a variety of economic themes.

Level 1, Semester 2. During the second semester, students not only continue with the above English courses, but also begin taking three hours of an introductory English-medium economics lecture taught by a professor of economics. The economics content lecture, and all related work including outlines of each chapter of the class text, three economics tests, and in-class discussions, is carried out in English. In the EAP classes, not only does the level and complexity of the course materials and activities intensify, but the academic reading and outlining is integrated with the content of the introductory economics course.

Level 2, Semesters 3 and 4. Starting in the third semester, the curriculum moves to a fully adjunct format along the CLIL continuum. An EAP Economics Laboratory course is paired with an English-medium microeconomics lecture in the spring semester and a microeconomics lecture in the fall semester. The economics lecture is taught by a professor of economics using English university level textbook. The required coursework includes outlines of textbook chapters, discussion on micro / macroeconomic concepts and a research paper and presentation. The research project consists of a 25+ page paper on the analysis of a business (microeconomics) and the analysis of a country's economy (macroeconomics). The EAP laboratory course is fully integrated with the economics lecture, focusing on the academic outlining of the textbook chapters, essays on economic themes covered in the lecture and the drafting process for the semester long research project. The focus clearly shifts in Level 2 from the foundational language skills developed in Level 1 to the application of these skills in a university level content course. With the use of a university level English economics text, the advanced economics lecture and a research project, the program provides an immersion-like environment with the support of a fully integrated EAP laboratory. The objective of level 2 is to prepare the students for study abroad coursework in their home country.

Level 3, Japan-Asia Studies (JAS) Program. These courses are all specialized, international level, English-medium economics courses taught by either Soka University faculty, or a host of visiting professors from overseas institutions. Students must maintain a GPA of 3.0 over the first four semesters and achieve the required TOEFL ITP test scores of 530 in order to be eligible. The courses typically contain 60-70% international students, and 30-40% IP students. As

a result, students able to participate in an overseas-like study environment while in Japan. Students can take more than one course per semester, and can access these courses until their graduation. From semester 5, students do not take any EFL courses.

International Experience

In order for all students to further improve their English language ability, as well as increase their cultural or global awareness, the university offers a number of study abroad opportunities for all students. Although these programs are not specifically part of the curriculum, many IP students take part in at least one of the programs offered, and as such study abroad for between one and two semesters.

Measurements of Success

Gains in TOEFL ITP and TOEIC scores. All students who complete two years on the IP obtain a TOEFL ITP score of 530 out of a maximum of 677 (minimum entry score for semester 4), and many students achieve TOEIC scores of well over 800 (out of 990).

Enrolment and Grade Point Average (GPA) performance. In both 2010 and 2011 over 70% of all incoming freshmen in the faculty of economic enrolled in the IP. Furthermore, IP students must maintain a higher than university average GPA average of 3.0.

Percentage of participants in study-abroad programs and international internships. Economics students now typically account for almost 50% of all participants on the various programs each year.

Job placement and postgraduate education results. Over the last 8 years, between 20 and 45% of IP graduates have obtained jobs within a company listed on the Section 1 of the Tokyo Stock Exchange. Almost 100% of students who complete the full program find full-time employment, or are accepted to postgraduate programs, within one year of graduation, which is much higher than the 2011-12 national average of 63.9% (MEXT, 2012).

Global Citizenship Program (GCP)

Soka University launched the Global Citizenship Program (GCP) in April 2010. According to the university website, "The GCP, which is the equivalent of an Honors Program at foreign universities, strives to develop broad humanistic and humanitarian perspectives on global issues for undergraduate students who seek careers on the international stage." (para 1, n.d.). Unlike the IP, which is only open to Economics majors, the GCP is open to students from any of the faculties. The course involves taking intensive English language courses for two years (4 semesters) which focus on both academic English skills and English medium content in addition to regular classes taught in Japanese. The English component involves 3 hours per week of four-skill instruction with a focus on raising students' TOEFL test scores. and an additional three hours of content-based instruction on a variety of subjects where students are required to read and listen to academic content, carry out further research, and complete a variety of written and verbal response and synthesis assignments. In the third year, a large number of GCP students study abroad in an English speaking environment, although not necessarily in an inner circle country; many students study in India, the Philippines, or Europe, for example. Therefore, while most students begin with a TOEFL iBT score of around 40 to 50,

they are expected to graduate with scores of around 90 to 100, and many of the current third and fourth years students have already attained this level. Based on comments from regular and visiting faculty, and potential employers, students have been credited with not only high levels of English proficiency, but also cultural awareness and international mind-sets. As there are no graduates from this course as of yet, there are no employment statistics, however, over 50% of the current students have already secured either full-time employment or post-graduate study places.

Faculty of Letters Dual Degree Course

Another program offered at the university aiming to develop globally minded bilingual speakers, with either Chinese or English as their second language is Faculty of Letters Dual Degree Course. Students who enrol in the Dual Degree Course spend their freshmen and senior years studying at Soka University, where they take either EFL or Chinese as a foreign language courses, although not intensively, but study abroad in their second and third years. They can choose from one of two institutes: Beijing Language and Culture University for those who seek proficiency in Chinese, or England's University of Buckingham for English-language learners. Those who complete the program are eligible to earn degrees from both Soka University and the foreign university.

Due to spending two years studying in the foreign language, most, if not all of these students graduate with high level proficiency in the second language which they have chosen to focus on. Again, very high numbers of these students gain either full-time employment or post-graduate study places by graduation; approximately 85%.

Faculty of International Liberal Arts

In 2014 a new faculty, Faculty of International Liberal Arts (FILA) was set up at Soka University with the help of considerable financial support from MEXT. FILA aims to "prepare students to meet the demands of a fast-changing global environment. An international liberal arts education will prepare Soka University students for participation in a global society, developing 21st century job skills." (Soka University, Faculty of International Liberal Arts, 2014). This program involves intensive EFL study combined with multiple basic content classes in the first semester. Then students study abroad in the U.S., the U.K., or Australia for one academic year during their second and third semesters. Then, upon returning from overseas, the remainder of their studies in the second through fourth year are carried out solely in English. Therefore, it is clear through the mission statement above, and the curriculum design that this program aims to develop learners with very high English skills as well as global perspectives. Again, according to the faculty website "Student outcomes will include the development of English language and cross-cultural skills, philosophical foundations, interdisciplinary awareness, analytical skills, and effective communication skills. Initial language gains show that students made an average of 15 point increase on the TOEFL iBT test over one semester, with the lowest level students increasing from an average of 20 to 40 points. It is aimed for all students to have an iBT score of 80 by the end of the fourth semester.

Summary of Soka Programs

As seen above, Soka University has put a lot of time and effort in developing various programs and faculties that aim to develop bilingual individuals who have a international perspective and globally desired skill set. Also, as seen in the mission statements of the programs, the goals are very much in line with the goals of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Technology as stated in the various documents and announcements cited earlier in this paper. Soka University is not unique in its focus given that, as mentioned earlier, as of 2008 over 190 universities had offered English-medium content courses in 2008 (Miichi, 2010), and that there have been widespread developments of English curricula in Japan of late (Mondejar et al., 2012).

3. Conclusion

As noted above, the Japanese Ministry of Education is pushing through fundamental and widespread reforms to its English education system and university environments in order to remain globally competitive. However, not enough training is taking place, there is a lack of concrete advice, and the issue of English as a Lingua Franca or English as an International Language have not been considered enough. With financial assistance from the government, Soka University has developed a number of innovative and successful programs that are helping students reach high levels of proficiency in English, and gain international experience and cultural knowledge. If other universities can do the same, which many are, and if the changes take place in the school system as planned, it can be expected that the level of English proficiency in Japan will be raised significantly in the future.

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