

# Implications of Research on the State of English Education in Japan

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce some of the results in summary form of research we have been conducting on English teaching and learning in Japan. The main research was commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (hereafter, Ministry of Education) as a part of the ministry's efforts to "cultivate Japanese who can use English," and a corresponding research was conducted with the help of Benesse Corporation to supplement the main research. Since we have only attempted to show the summary results of the researches, for more details of the survey, we ask you to refer to the references given.

## Emphasis on Communication

English education in Japan has traditionally emphasized form over meaning, and learning English as knowledge over acquiring the ability to communicate in it (cf. Miller, 2001). However, the present Course of Study (Ministry of Education, 1998/1999) emphasizes the importance of teaching English for the purpose of communication. More specifically, the Course of Study states the overall objectives of studying foreign languages as follows:

*(Objective of senior high school)*

To develop students' practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. (Ministry of Education, 2003.)

Although the Ministry of Education emphasizes the importance of inculcating our students with the ability to communicate in English, the actual practice of teaching English, unfortunately, does not seem to reflect the objectives set by the Ministry of Education very well (cf. Miller, 2001; Gorsuch, 2001; Saito, 2000).

## Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese With English Abilities

In July of 2002, the Ministry of Education—following government directives—created the Strategic Plans to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities. The objectives

stated were as follows:

With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language [...] for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation.

At present, though, the English-speaking abilities of a large percentage of the population are inadequate, and this imposes restrictions on exchanges with foreigners and creates occasions when the ideas and opinions of Japanese people are not appropriately evaluated....

Accordingly, we have formulated a strategy to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities" in a concrete action plan with the aim of drastically improving the English education of Japanese people. (Ministry of Education, 2002)

As can be seen from this quote, the Ministry of Education has imposed on itself the task of not simply creating 'abstract' guidelines, but the more formidable task of creating concrete plans to implement them, and in order to realize this objective, it has set up five research groups (Ministry of Education, 2003)

Group one has the task of conducting research to provide support for the target-level English-language abilities required at each school stage. It is also given the task of conducting research into the relevance of adopting external tests (such as STEP, TOEIC etc.) as indices for the required English-language skills, as well as to conduct research into ways of utilizing the results of external tests in entrance examinations, etc.

Group two has the task of conducting research into effective English teaching methods, and the creation of model teacher training programs to support the Ministry of Education's proposal to (re)educate all 60,000 junior and senior high school English teachers in the next five years.

The task of the third research group is to conduct research to ascertain what level of English proficiency is needed for Japanese teachers of English to be able to teach English more effectively—e.g. to teach English in English. The issue of the level of English necessary for non-native teachers to teach English is an important one as can be seen in the following quote from the TIRF (TESOL International Research Foundation) call for proposals for the academic year 2003-2004.

[T]he vast majority of English language teaching in the world today is [...] carried out by nonnative speaking teachers of English with varying degrees of proficiency in English. Furthermore, we do not know what minimal levels of English

proficiency are necessary among teachers for their students at various levels of instruction. Given the importance and impact of this sizable group of professionals, the 2003-04 TESOL International Research Foundation Priority addresses the role of nonnative-speaking teachers in English language teaching and/or the effective delivery of other curricula through English as the medium of instruction. (TIRF, 2003)

The task of group three, therefore, is not only relevant to the Japanese English teaching situation, but also to the field of TEFL as a whole.

The task of research group four is to conduct research into a model for English education at universities. English-language abilities demanded of those Japanese active in the international community should ultimately be attained at universities. In other words, university English education should produce Japanese who can discuss, debate and negotiate in English equally with their counterparts from countries around the world.

Finally, the task of research group five is to conduct research into the English educational policies of other countries to see what is being done to produce successful English learners in those countries.

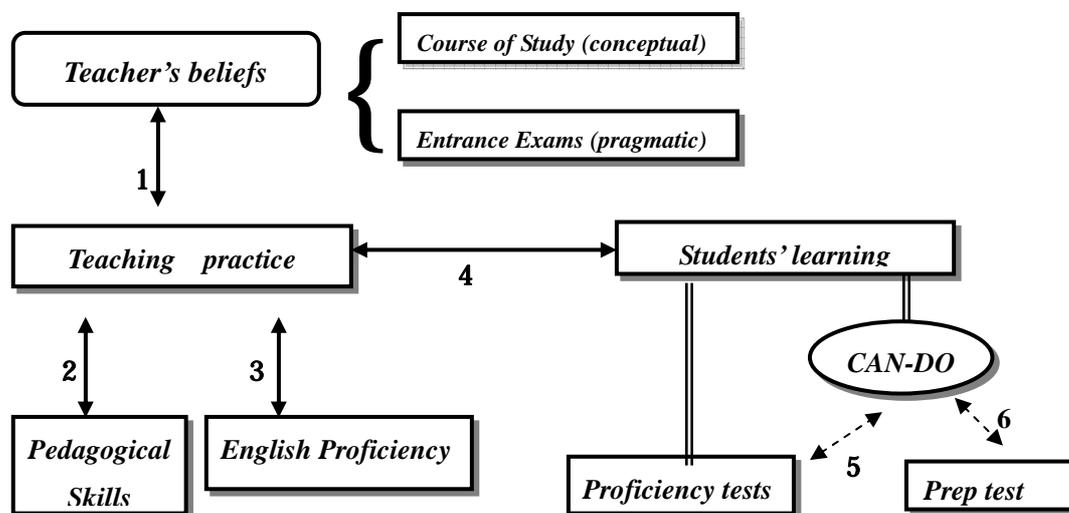
### **Overall Objectives and Research Questions**

In this presentation, we will look at the results to date of the research being conducted by group one (cf. Yoshida et al. 2003; Yoshida, et al. in progress) and a concurrent research which was conducted by Yoshida and Naganuma (2003). One of the major problems we encountered in conducting this research was that, to date, the “target-level English-language abilities” supposedly required at each school stage has always relied on non-empirical idealized descriptions of what people believed students should be able to do in English. There has never been any empirical research to verify the validity of those descriptions. As a starting point, therefore, we believed that it was important to find out what was actually happening in the English teaching classroom, and to see how much of what the teachers were actually doing were being reflected in the students’ acquisition of English. In order to determine the anchor point of the research, we took the Course of Study, because it is what the Ministry of Education bases its standards for teaching English on, and it is also what the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (2003) bases its criterion in developing its national assessment standards—standards hopefully attainable by all students in the secondary schools (which should theoretically reflect the “target-level English-language abilities”).

The following figure shows the various relationships existing among the variables we believed to contribute towards the improvement of foreign language teaching and

learning. In relation to the research themes assigned to the five research groups by the Ministry of Education, the figure encompasses the themes of the first three groups. The research conducted by group one has tried to cover relationships 1 and 2. In other words, do teachers' beliefs about the need to teach/learn English in Japan correlate with their teaching practice (correlation 1), and does the experience of having taken part in teacher training programs correlate with the teachers' practice (correlation 2) The relationship between the teacher's English proficiency level and its relationship to teaching practice (correlation 3) is the research question of group 3, and therefore, is not included in our research We will, however, also report the results of a different research in which the author took part. This research looked at correlations 4, 5, 6 and 7 (Yoshida & Naganuma, 2003). Does the teachers' teaching practice correlate with how much the students learn? (correlation 4) Do the results of students' achievement as measured by CAN-DO criteria correlate with their scores on English proficiency tests? (correlation 5) Finally, do the results of a university entrance examination prep test reflect students' achievement as measured by CAN-DO measures? (correlation 6)

*Figure 1 Relationships existing among factors related to the teaching and learning of English*



Although the ultimate aim is to determine the target level of English abilities attainable by Japanese students, it was assumed that unless we could ascertain how well teachers were actually able to implement the content of the Course of Study—the theoretical target—we could not determine if a certain target was practically attainable or not. Thus, we created a questionnaire based on the contents of the Course of Study, and administered it to 395 junior high school teachers and 386 senior high school teachers covering all forty seven prefectures in Japan.

The questionnaire was divided into the following three sections (cf.

<http://cgi.jrc.sophia.ac.jp/~tfujita/cgi-bin/questionnaire/>).

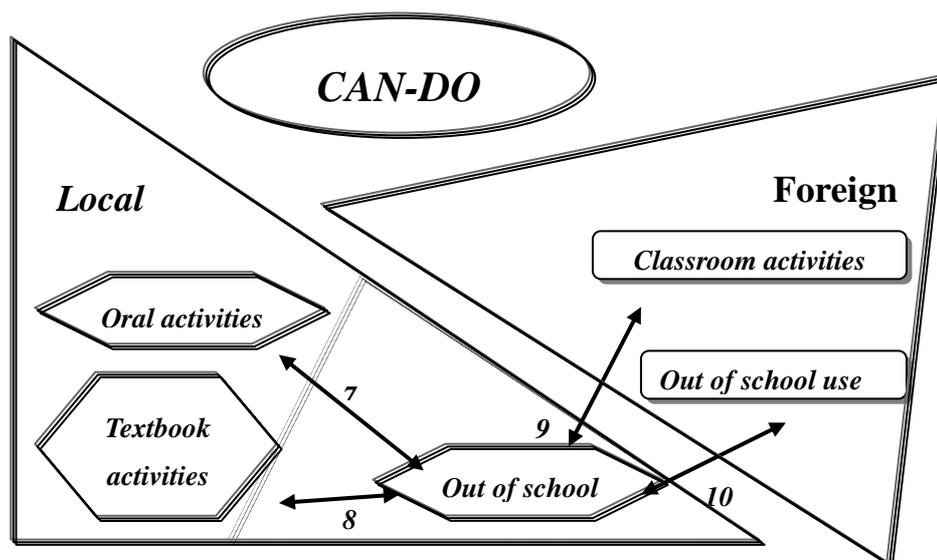
- 1) Section one consisted of questions about each respondent, such as age, number of years as a teacher, participation in teacher training programs, the amount of emphasis the respondent's school placed on preparing students for entrance exams, etc.
- 2) Section two consisted of statements concerning the respondents' "ideals" and "objectives" for teaching English to which they were asked how much they agreed or not. For example:
  - a) Practical ability to communicate in English entails not only listening and speaking, but also reading and writing ability as well.
  - b) In order to declare Japan's position in the international society, the practical ability to use English is essential.etc.
- 3) In section three the respondents were asked to answer how much they were actually implementing the pedagogical tenets listed in the Course of Study
  - a) Get students to listen and understand the contents and main ideas of spoken English by having them listen to natural English.
  - b) Get students to organize their own ideas and thoughts about what they've heard, and write/talk about them.etc.

Whereas the above questionnaire looked at factors related to teachers and their teaching practices, Yoshida & Naganuma (2003) looked at student factors as well as the relationship between teachers' teaching practices and students' sense of achievement, using the same teacher questionnaire and a students' CAN-DO questionnaire developed by Benesse Corporation. This research was conducted with 9309 senior high school students and 168 senior high school teachers from fifty-eight high schools. The students were administered the following CAN-DO questionnaire and the teachers were administered the same questionnaire as the one used in the group one research above. The student CAN-DO questionnaire consisted of the following three main sections:

- 1) What students CAN-DO in class
  - a) CAN read aloud passages of English textbooks.
  - b) CAN ask and answer questions about the contents of textbooks in English.
  - c) CAN discuss in English what you have learned in class.etc.
- 2) What students CAN-DO outside of class
  - a) CAN read newspaper articles that interest you.

- b) CAN write e-mail on simple topics.  
etc.
- 3) What students CAN-DO when in English-speaking countries
  - a) CAN order food at fast-food restaurants in English-speaking countries.
  - b) CAN understand lessons in school in English-speaking countries quite well.  
etc.

**Figure 2. Types of CAN-DO activities and their relationships**



As can be seen from figure 2, on the basis of a factor analysis, section 1 was further subdivided into activities related to oral activities and other more textbook-based activities, and section 3 was subdivided into classroom activities in foreign schools and other out of school social activities in the foreign country. The following relationships were researched within this scheme. Do oral activities in the classroom correlate with what students CAN-DO outside of school? (correlation 7) How much do other textbook-based activities correlate with what students CAN-DO outside of school? (correlation 8) Does being able to use English outside of school in Japan correlate with what students CAN-DO in foreign classrooms? (correlation 9) Does being able to use English outside of school in Japan correlate with what students CAN-DO in foreign social situations? (correlation 10)

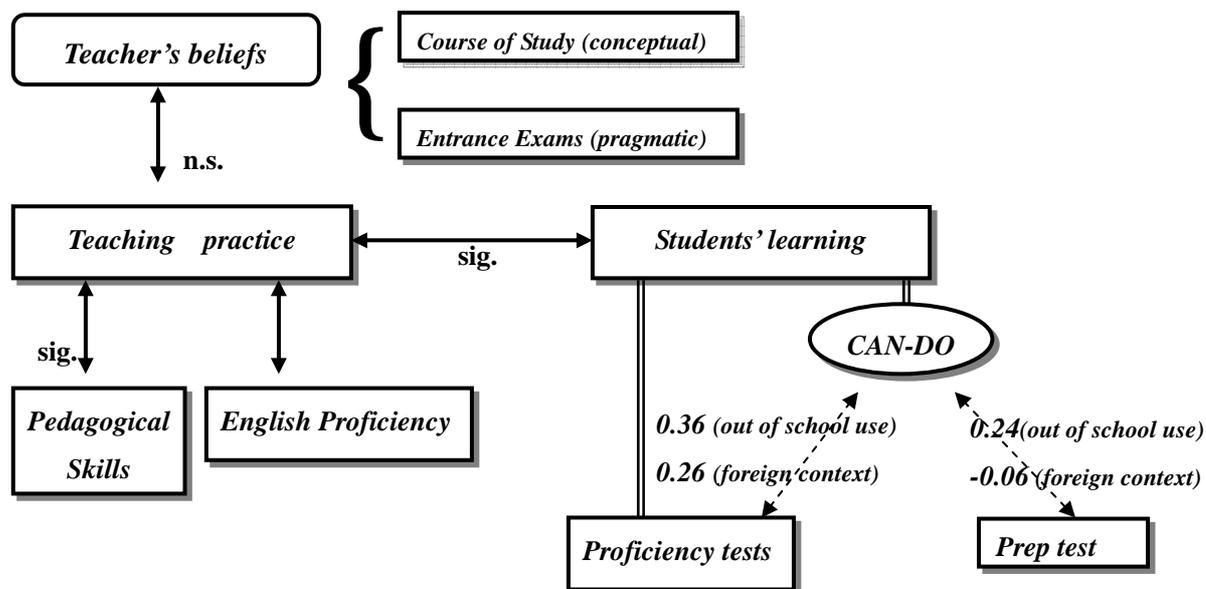
An important point to note here is that the target English proficiency as it is given in the Course of Study, can, theoretically, be more specifically expressed in terms of the ability to conduct oneself in English in foreign school and social contexts. In other words, the end result of English education in Japan should result in the ability of the Japanese to be able to go abroad and use English as a tool for daily conversation as well as for academic and other formal functions with confidence and without a feeling of inhibition. This ability to use English in foreign contexts, therefore, could be

considered the ultimate target-level English ability required of the Japanese.

### Results to Date

Although the research is still in progress, the following results are beginning to appear.

**Figure 3** *Correlations among factors related to the teaching and learning of English*



Let me just note that where no correlational co-efficients are shown, only the overall results (significant or non-significant) are given because multiple correlations were taken on depending on the number of independent variables involved. For the actual results of the survey confer Yoshida et al. (in progress).

The results show that, overall, teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching English and the way they actually teach do not correlate significantly. This concurs with the results shown in Gorsuch (2001). In other words, it seems that teachers have ideals but have difficulties realizing them because of the more practical problems of, for example, entrance examinations, that must be dealt with. If we consider the three essential factors in evaluating language teaching methodologies (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) we see that the 'approach' determines the subsequent 'design' and teaching 'procedure.' In other words, the 'approach,' which is the basic philosophy or ideal of language learning, should supposedly be realized in the design (curriculum, syllabus) as well as the actual teaching procedure employed in the classroom. However, if the ideal of language learning that a teacher professes and the actual way he teaches is inconsistent, it can be hypothesized that the teaching itself will not be as effective as when the teaching practice is consistent with the approach adhered to by the teacher. The result of our research shows the case of the Japanese teacher to be the former.

The results also show that teacher training is significantly correlated with the way

the teachers actually teach. In other words, those teachers who have taken part in teacher training programs in the past five years show a higher tendency to follow the Course of Study than those who have not. This provides support for the Ministry of Education's efforts to (re)train all 60,000 junior and senior high school teachers.

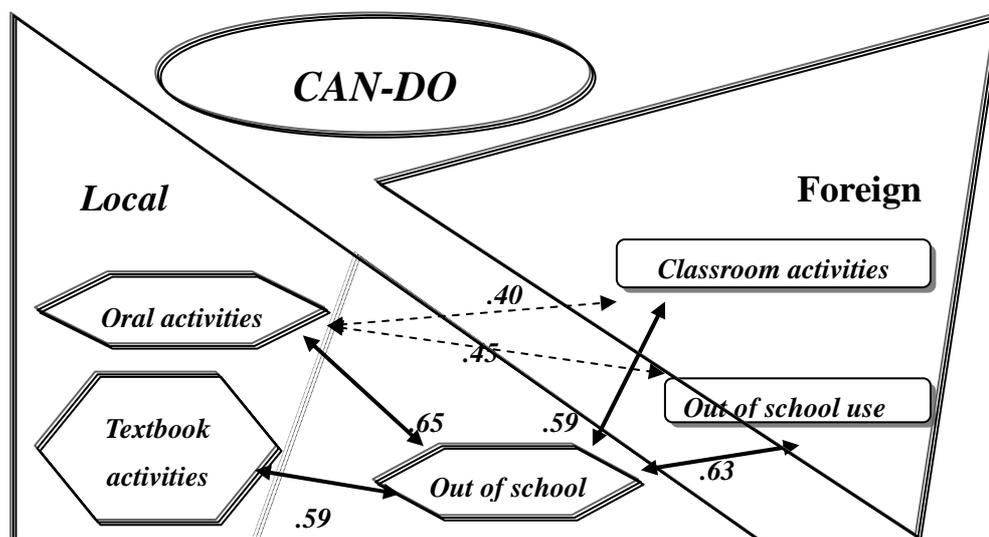
Although it is not apparent from the figure above, the results also showed that senior high school teachers who said that they worked in a school which emphasized preparing students to pass university entrance examinations were actually following the Course of Study more than those teaching in schools which did not. (cf. Yoshida et al., 2003; Yoshida et al., in progress, for a discussion about this phenomenon)

The results of the Yoshida & Naganuma study (2003) show that there is a correlation between the way teachers teach in a certain school environment and the students' perceptions of how much they CAN perform in English. We might venture to say that this indirectly implies that the more a teacher (and the school) follows the Course of Study in his/her teaching, the better the students will become in terms of what they CAN-DO in English. This is a significant finding in that it implies the importance of teacher practice in the development of the students' attainment of English ability.

Yoshida & Naganuma also found that the students' proficiency in English as measured by a proficiency test (the English Communication Proficiency Test) and their answers to both the 'out of school' authentic use of English and the use of English in the 'foreign context' show significant but moderate correlations. However, when the responses to the CAN-DO items are compared with the results of a university prep test (Shinken Moshi), the correlations become much weaker—with the correlation becoming zero for use of English in the 'foreign context.' This implies that simply studying English for entrance examinations will not guarantee the development of communicative ability.

The next question we asked ourselves was whether language activities in the classroom can be generalized to out of school, real-life language use, as well as to language use in authentic foreign contexts. The results of the correlations among these factors were as follows:

**Figure 4. Correlations between classroom activities and out of school, foreign context language use**



The results show that both oral activities and textbook activities in the classroom correlate highly with what students CAN DO outside the classroom. The results could be said to imply that the results of communicative and meaningful language activities in the classroom lead to the development of more authentic language performance in real life—although ‘oral activities’ has a higher correlation than ‘textbook activities.’

Furthermore, it was found that if a student replied that s/he could use English outside the classroom—in more authentic and meaningful language situations—then this ability was shown to correlate with classroom activities as well as out of school social activities in foreign contexts. The implication here could be that if a student acquires the proficiency to use English in real life (reading English newspapers, writing e-mail in English, etc.) then this ability will transfer to performance in English in foreign contexts of communication. The importance of using English in real life situations was further highlighted when we compared the correlation between classroom oral activities in Japanese contexts and classroom activities in foreign contexts, oral activities in Japanese contexts and foreign social situations, both correlations being lower than the between out of school real life language use in Japan and foreign contexts (correlations between textbook activities and foreign contexts were even lower).

### **What the Results Suggest**

The results of the two researches combined gives us a fairly comprehensive image of how English can most effectively be acquired for Japanese to reach the target-level

implied by the Course of Study—and most practically exemplified in the ability to actually perform efficiently and comfortably in contexts where English is the essential means of communication (i.e., foreign contexts).

The overall picture shows that teaching practice does have a significant effect on what students CAN DO in English. The problem therefore, is how can we raise the quality of the teachers' teaching practice to bring about better results in our students. Since it was also shown that raising the quality of English teachers' pedagogical skills is significantly correlated with teaching practice, the importance of teacher training must be taken more seriously. The present government scheme to re-educate all 60,000 junior and senior high school teachers is a good start.

The next question is what constitutes true proficiency in a language. The measurements normally used are those provided by so-called proficiency tests (e.g. TOEFL, TOEIC, STEP, etc.). However, the question of whether simply getting a high score on these tests guarantees one's ability to actually perform in that language in real communicative situations, is not very clear. Proficiency tests merely 'predict' what should happen. Therefore, we employed a CAN-DO questionnaire to see what the students said they could really do in English.

Our findings show that 1) students' subjective evaluations of their proficiency in English as measured by the CAN-DO questionnaire correlate relatively well with proficiency test scores, but does not with so-called entrance-examination-oriented prep test scores, showing that simply studying for entrance examinations will not enhance one's ability to communicate in English. 2) It was also found that conducting communicative activities in class can have an effect on what the students will be able to do outside the school using English. There is, however, one factor that has not been considered in this research. That is, in order to get our students to want to use English outside the school, the issue of how to motivate them to do so cannot be bypassed. Providing students with more opportunities to actually use English (i.e., use of IT, exchange programs, English camps, etc.) and looking into their effects on the development of students' English proficiency must be considered. 3) The results also showed that the ability to use English in foreign contexts—the ultimate practical target—correlated highly with the ability to use English outside the school in Japan.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the research introduced in this paper are interesting in that they confirm many of the 'beliefs' we have had about the importance of teacher training, the importance of communicatively conducted classes, the need to go beyond simply getting students to acquire high scores on entrance-examination-oriented tests, and the role of out of school English uses in the acquisition of the ultimate ability to perform well in foreign contexts where English is required for the purpose of communication.

Although these results do not tell us exactly what level of English—as measured by proficiency tests—should be attained by junior high, senior high and college students, respectively, I believe that they do provide us with a start in the quest for more concrete targets to be attained at the various school levels.

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