

TEFL in Japan: An Overview

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Japan is considered to be a typical monolingual-monocultural nation. Although there are opinions to the contrary (cf. Maher, 2002), the fact that the percentage of foreign residents amounts to just 1.6% of the total population (cf. Ministry of Justice, 2007) does suggest that the Japanese are, in fact, very much a homogeneous nation. In a way, being a homogeneous nation has its benefits in that it does not have to cope with problems inherent in multilingual/ multicultural nations in terms of racial and linguistic conflicts. On the other hand, however, the problem of language policy concerning foreign languages becomes a major area of concern because there is no imminent need for the Japanese to acquire foreign languages in order to survive in Japan, thus making the learning of foreign languages irrelevant to their livelihood. In this presentation, I will give an overview of the state of English education in Japan and discuss the ideas inherent in the revision of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Study Guidelines.

The teaching of foreign languages (especially English) in Japan has been a topic of concern for many years. The Japanese study English as their main foreign language for three years in junior high school, another three years in senior high school, and in the case of many people, at least another two years in university. Yet, when the results of the TOEFL are published by ETS every two years, they seem simply to show the inefficiency and 'failure' of Japanese English education—not once, until 1999, had the Japanese TOEFL average surpassed the 500 mark in the PBT (Paper-based test). Worse still, in terms of ranking in comparison with other Asian countries, the Japanese now find themselves last among the examinees from the 28 Asian countries who took the iBT (Internet-based Test) in the years 2005-2006. It was also found that the Japanese had the lowest average score in Speaking among the examinees from the 147 countries that took the iBT that year. (Table 1)

Table 1 iBT TOEFL (2005-2006)—Asia の結果

ASIA	No.	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total
Afghanistan	209	14	19	21	19	73
Azerbaijan	191	18	20	20	20	78
Bangladesh	649	18	20	21	21	80
Bhutan	15	*	*	*	*	*
Brunei Darussalam	9	*	*	*	*	*
Cambodia	134	16	18	18	19	71
China	20,450	20	19	18	20	76
Christmas Island	2	*	*	*	*	*
Cocos (Keeling) Islands	4	*	*	*	*	*
East Timor	1	*	*	*	*	*
Hong Kong	2,763	18	21	19	22	80
India	23,750	22	23	23	23	91
Indonesia	1,875	19	21	19	21	80
Japan	17,957	15	17	15	17	65
Kazakhstan	656	18	21	20	20	80
Korea,						
Democratic People's Republic of	1,270	16	18	17	18	69
Korea, Republic of	31,991	17	19	17	19	72
Kyrgyzstan	118	19	22	21	21	82
Lao, People's Democratic Republic	28	*	*	*	*	*
Macau	170	16	18	17	20	71
Malaysia	920	22	23	20	24	89
Maldives	11	*	*	*	*	*
Mongolia	438	14	18	17	17	66
Myanmar	98	17	19	18	19	73
Nepal	437	16	19	20	20	76
Pakistan	2,307	19	21	22	21	83
Philippines	5,882	20	22	22	21	85
Singapore	144	25	25	24	26	100
Sri Lanka	356	19	22	21	21	83
Taiwan	10,022	16	18	17	19	71
Tajikistan	35	15	21	21	20	77
Thailand	3,886	17	19	17	18	72
Turkmenistan	70	16	20	20	19	74
Uzbekistan	320	18	21	21	20	80
Vietnam	2,320	17	17	17	19	71

Granted there have been criticisms against the use of the TOEFL results to interpret the English proficiency of the Japanese—owing, for example, to the large number of Japanese who take the test in comparison with other countries—these results are slightly different. First of all, the number of Japanese applicants is not the largest, and second, the iBT was not yet administered in Asia in the 2005-2006 fiscal year. The assumption, therefore, is that the examinees were people who were most probably studying in North America with a firm intention of entering an American university.

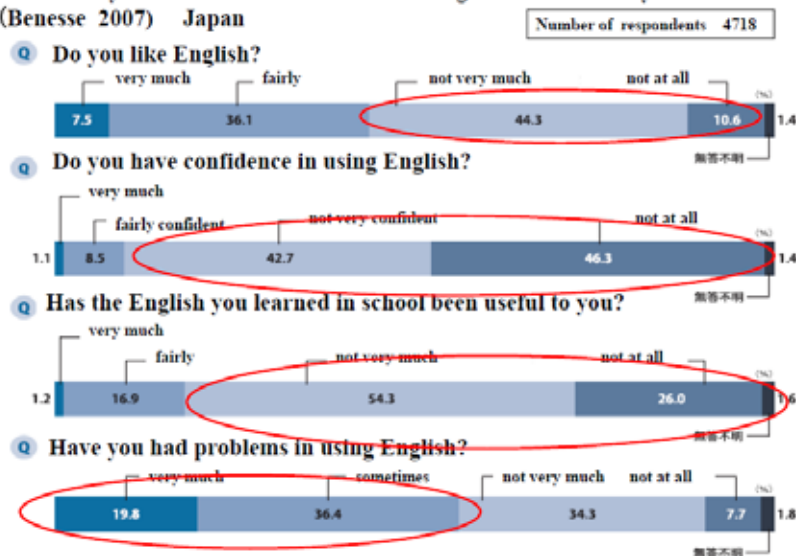
However, the results of the TOEFL do not necessarily reflect the needs of the business community to conduct business in English—which is a more important need for the Japanese community. The TOEIC test is considered to be a better measure for this purpose. However, as can be seen from the following (), the results of the TOEIC are also not encouraging. The Japanese average score is again the lowest among those countries and regions where the TOEIC is administered.

Table 2 2002–2003 TOEIC Score Comparisons
(TOEIC Newsletter No. 89, Jan. 2005)

Area	Applicants	Listening	Reading	Total
Europe	129065	346	327	673
Africa	7038	346	289	635
North America	26072	338	286	625
South America	21880	318	279	597
South Korea	305637	283	254	537
Asia	98738	282	236	519
Japan	1502235	251	200	451
South Pacific	197	–	–	–

In order to find some explanation for why the results of these standardized test are so low, we will now look at the results of a questionnaire administered to 4718 parents whose children were studying in elementary school by Benesse Corporation (Graph 1). The results show that 55% of the respondents do not like English, 90% are not confident in using English, and most troubling of all for English teachers, 80% say that the English they learned in school has not been useful. At the same time, however, 55% say that they have had problems with English in the past.

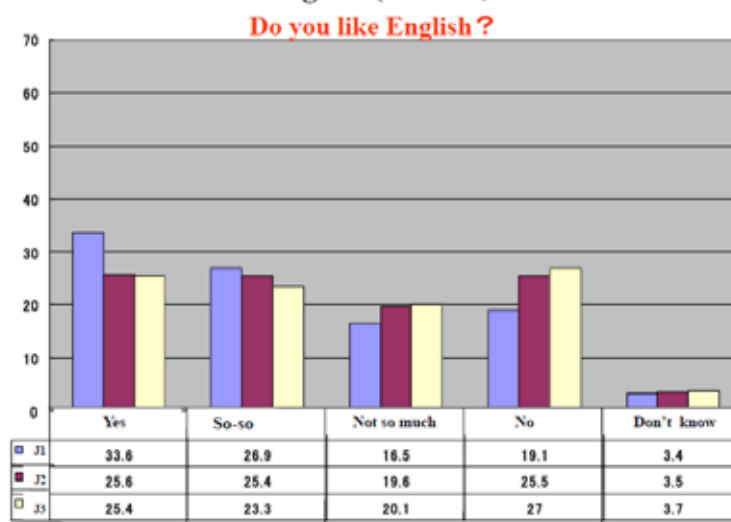
Graph 1 First Survey of Parental attitudes towards English in Elementary Schools
(Benesse 2007) Japan



If these results are any indication of the attitude towards English held by the general Japanese adult population, then it might be said that the inefficiency of English education is somehow related to the low scores on the proficiency tests which we have seen above.

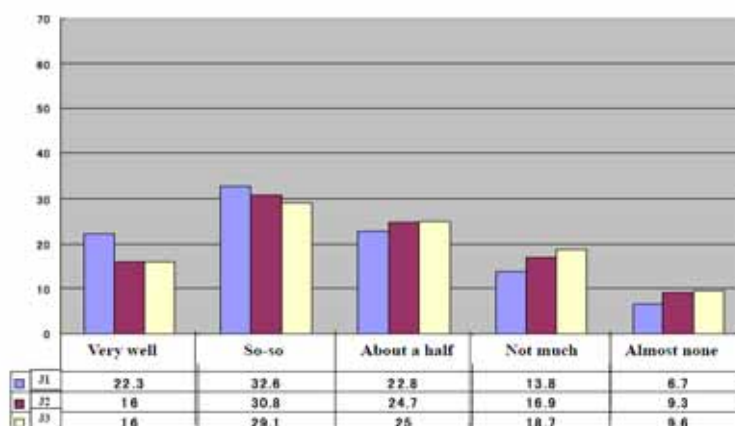
What, then, is the problem with English education in Japan? (Graph 2) The results of a survey conducted by the National Institute for Educational Policy Research in 2004 show that although 60% of the 1st year junior high school students say they like English, by the time they advance to 2nd year, the percentage drops by about 10%. Furthermore, 47% of the 3rd year students do not like English.

Graph 2 Survey of Junior High School Students' Perceptions about English (NIEPR, 2005)



More serious are the answers of the students to the question, 'Do you understand your English class?' (Graph 3) The results show that although 55% of the 1st year students answer 'Yes', less than 50% of the 2nd year students understand their English classes very well, and by the time the students are in 3rd year, about 3 out of every 10 students say that they do not understand what is being taught in the English class. It was also found that the percentage of students who do not understand their English class was higher than any other subject the students were studying.

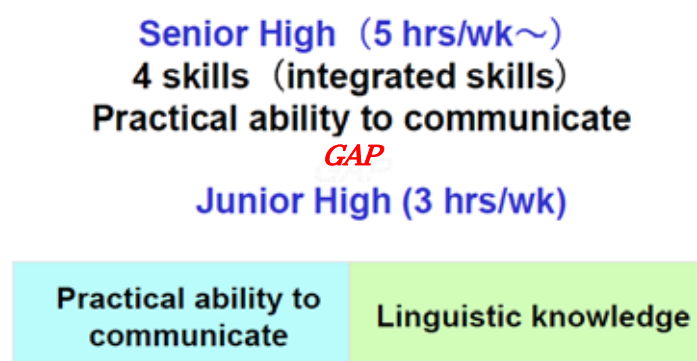
Graph 3 Do you Understand the English classes ?



These results suggest that one reason why Japanese adults have negative feelings about the English education they received in school—as we saw above—may have its roots in English education in junior high school. In order to investigate the validity of this assumption, let us briefly look at the present system of

English education in the secondary schools. (Figure 1). Although the new study guidelines which include the introduction of English at the elementary school will be put into effect in 2011, under the present study guidelines, English education in Japan begins in junior high school. However, in junior high school there are only 3 hours of English per week, amounting to just 105 hours per year and 315 hours in three years. In these three years, teachers are expected to teach the basics of ‘communicating in English’ (mostly everyday conversation), as well as teach the basics of grammar and vocabulary, which are essential in acquiring reading and writing skills. In other words, junior high school teachers have the unenviable job of getting their students to acquire not only the ability to ‘perform communicatively’ in English (BICS) , but also to acquire enough ‘knowledge’ of the grammar of English necessary to read and write as well (CALP) within the small number of hours allotted for English education.

Figure 1 Problems with Secondary English Education



The results have been noted above, showing the high failure rate of 3rd year junior high school students in English. This has further created a ‘gap’ between junior and senior high schools, forcing many senior high school teachers to teach ‘remedial English’ courses in the first year. As a result, although the objectives set for the senior high school subject, Oral Communication II, require students to be able to give their opinions, conduct discussions, debates and give presentations in English, we can probably assume that 99% of the Japanese high school seniors have not reached these goals.

Figure 2 Goals of High School English Education



The revision of the study guidelines is based on extensive discussions in the Central Education Committee which has spent several years to analyze the present state of education in Japan, and has come up with proposals for possible strategies to remedy the situation. (Figure 3) One major revision policy change can be seen in the introduction of English (foreign language) activities in elementary school. However, the purpose of English activities in elementary school is not to ‘teach’ English as a language system, but to provide opportunities for the pupils to communicate in English, without having to worry about learning grammar and

memorizing vocabulary. The objective is to create a ‘foundation’ on which later ‘structural knowledge’ of English can be based. In other words, the objective is to experience and raise an awareness of the cultural, communicative and linguistic differences which exist among the languages and cultures of the world through the medium of English.

Figure 3 Main Points of the Report from the Central Education Committee

1. Introduction of English in elementary school does not mean objectives for secondary school will become higher. **Real reason: help reach present objectives**
2. Introduction of English in elementary school should **make objectives for teaching English in junior high school clearer and more focused.**
3. Goal of teaching English in elementary school: acquiring an international way of thinking
 - a. Not FLES, but FLEX
 - b. Build ‘**foundation**’ for communication in FL
4. Introduction of written English is okay so long as it **is treated as a support for understanding oral English.**
5. Goal in junior high school: Build ‘**basics**’ of English for communication
6. Number of new words in junior high school: **1200** (however, of this number, **approximately 300 are words introduced in elementary school**)
7. Number or hours of English in junior high will be increased to 4.
8. Senior high school English subjects will undergo a big change. There will now be ‘**Communication English I, II, III**’

Another important point to note is that even though English will be introduced in elementary school, the objectives for junior and senior high school English in the present study guidelines will basically remain the same. In other words, the purpose of introducing English in elementary school is not to raise the level of objectives for learning English in secondary schools, but to provide a better foundation for the students to reach the goals and objectives which already exist—but very few have been able to acquire. The present goals and objectives are assumed to be appropriate, but the fact that so few students are able to reach them is seen as the problem. Let me take an example from the junior high school study guidelines to explain this point a little further. At present, the number of new words introduced in junior high school is 900. However, in the new study guidelines, the number has been increased to 1200. At first sight, it might look as though the level of English in junior high school has been raised. However, actually, the number of words assumed to be necessary in elementary school to conduct its English activities is considered to be about 300, and these words are included in the 1200 words to be taught in junior high school. In other words, the introduction of 900 new vocabulary items in junior high school has not changed. The extra 300 words are assumed to have been used already in elementary school.

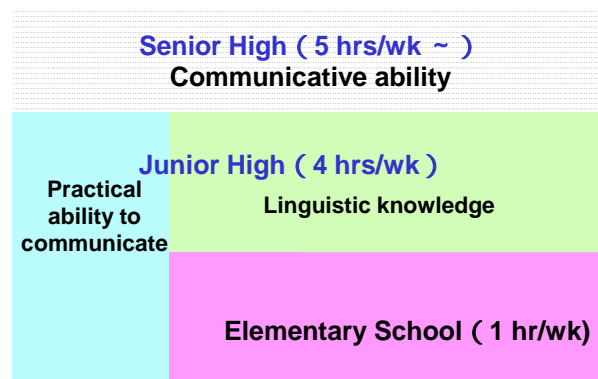
Another important revision can be seen in the changes in the English subjects to be taught in senior high school. Presently, the English subjects in senior high school are Oral Communication I and II, English I & II, Reading, and Writing. Although English I & II are supposedly ‘integrated skills’ courses which require the teacher to teach them using multiple skills, in reality, less than 10% of the teachers teach these subjects using English more than 50% of the class time. Most teachers treat these subjects as if they were meant for grammar-translation instruction. The main reason why English I & II are treated this way is because of the existence of Oral Communication I (BICS level everyday conversation) & Oral Communication II (CALP level presentation, discussion and debate). Many teachers tend to think that the use of English as a medium of instruction is the responsibility of the Oral Communication subjects, and since Oral Communication is very often taught by the Assistant Language Teachers (mostly native speakers of English), they feel that they do not have to use English to conduct their classes.

Therefore, in order to remedy this situation the new guidelines will introduce Communication English I, II and III as the main subjects, with English Expression I & II, which will be optional subjects emphasizing the self-expression skills of presentation, discussion, debate, and writing. There will also be an optional subject called Communication English-Basic which will be created to bridge the gap that presently exists between junior and senior high school. Also, despite the efforts of the curriculum supervisors of MEXT and the

committee members of the foreign language sub-committee of the Central Education Committee to do away with the distinction between Oral Communication and English I & II, a senior member of MEXT has reintroduced 'English Conversation' into the curriculum, claiming that the Japanese lack the ability to 'converse' in English. This is unfortunate because, 1) high school English teachers might again relegate the use of English to the English Conversation course and teach Communication English in the same way they have been teaching English I & II in the present curriculum, and 2) it goes against the basic philosophy of the new study guidelines which is to concentrate on everyday English conversation (BICS) in the elementary and junior high school level, and to put more emphasis on cognitively demanding (CALP) communication activities in senior high school and university.

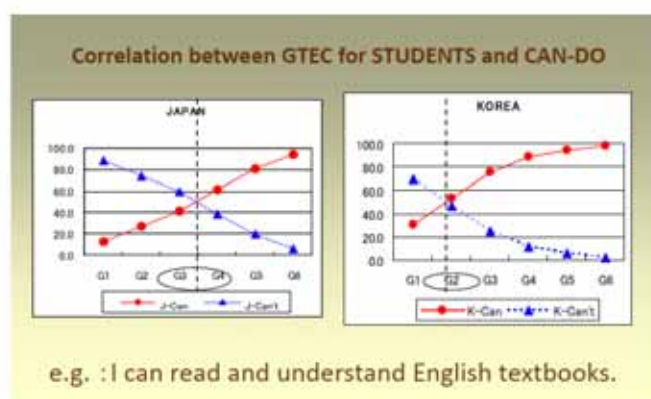
Let us now summarize the main points of the new study guidelines (Figure 4). The most important revision is the introduction of English in the elementary school. By introducing oral communication in elementary school, and with the number of hours increasing to 4 hours a week, junior high schools should be able to teach, not only everyday oral communication skills, but also the knowledge of English structure and vocabulary necessary in acquiring the reading and writing skills essential in the development of the more cognitively demanding (CALP) language communication activities which will be required in senior high school. It is hoped that this revision will help to fill the gap which presently exists between junior and senior high school English education.

Figure 4 New Study Guidelines



Besides the revisions being made by MEXT, there is something else which must be considered for English education in Japan is to succeed. For several years, the Benesse Corporation has been conducting an international comparative survey of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese high school students to see how they differ in terms of English proficiency, not only on the basis of standardized test scores, but also on the basis of CAN-DO criteria (Graph 4). In this presentation, I will note only a very conspicuous difference which can be seen between the Japanese and Korean high school students. The students from both countries were administered an English proficiency test called G-TEC for Students, developed by Benesse Corporation. They were also given a set of CAN-DO statements to which they were asked to answer whether they could do what was written in the statement or not. They were asked to give a subjective response based on a 4 point scale. The results of the G-TEC test were subdivided into 6 levels, ranging from the lowest scores (level 1) to the highest scores (level 6). Then the students' responses to the CAN-DO statements were plotted to see where the percentage of students who gave a positive response (Yes, I can) would become higher than those who gave a negative response (No, I can't.)

Graph 4 Results of CAN-DO Survey



To the example statement, 'I can read and understand English textbooks.' the results showed that the G-TEC level where the Japanese students' positive responses surpassed the negative responses was generally higher than that of the Korean students. This shows that, despite the lower scores on the objective tests, the Korean students showed more confidence in 'reading and understanding English textbooks' than the Japanese students.

One issue related to this problem of 'confidence' is what conditions underlie the development of confidence. People might talk about differences in national character, or government policies towards English education. However, one thing we found was the difference in the 'experience' in using English between the Japanese and Korean students (Graph 5). The students were simply asked whether or not they had any experience using English—either YES or NO. As can be seen from this slide, the Korean students seem to have from between 2.5 to 3 times the experience in using English outside the classroom. The experience in using English as well as the exposure to English in everyday life most probably creates a readiness for the creation of a stronger basis for feeling confident in using the language. Research in anxiety shows that experience in speaking English, for example, can very often reduce the students' anxiety towards speaking English, leading the way for the development of more confidence in using English in general.

Graph 5 Experience of Using English in Japan



The results show, however, that the Japanese students do not have as much opportunity to be exposed to English in their everyday lives as the Korean students. What will be essential for the revised objectives of the new Study Guidelines to be attained, and English education in Japan to succeed, will be to provide more opportunities for the students to be exposed to and to experience English, not only in school, but also in the real world outside the classroom as well. Education is the responsibility, not only of the school system, but also the family as well as the society as a whole. How much that is acknowledged and acted upon could very well determine the success or failure of the new Study Guidelines.

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