

〈Research Note〉

Critical views on the aspirations and tensions in implementing the 2020 English Education Reform Plan

Mico Poonoosamy

Abstract

In 2014 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) initiated an English Education Reform Plan for elementary, lower and upper secondary schools. The central aim of the reform is to establish an educational environment where Japanese students develop communicative competence in English as well as intercultural skills to become global minded world citizens. A full-scale implementation is planned in June 2020 to coincide with the Tokyo Olympics. This article presents critical views of the author on the aspirations and tensions in enacting the reform. Research about foreign language education in Japan also informs the debate. MEXT has also selected a few schools across Japan where curriculum development and innovations in pedagogy are monitored. The views of a highly experienced high school teacher who is currently teaching in one of those investigated schools are discussed, together with those of one junior high school teacher and senior high school teacher in another school.

1. Introduction – Issues and perceptions about English education

English education is currently compulsory in junior and senior high schools in Japan. However, when MEXT conducted a survey on the English abilities of 70,000 upper secondary school students in 480 national and public upper secondary schools, it found that “students have problems in all four skills in English - listening, speaking, reading, writing” (MEXT, 2015, p. 5). In the EF English Proficiency Index which recorded data of English proficiency across 88 non-English speaking countries and regions, Japan was rated two (low) on a scale up to five (very high) for three consecutive years (from 2016 to 2018). In 2018, Japan even ranked 49th, just behind Taiwan and just before Pakistan. The report even states that, in comparison to the rest of the world, in the last five years, “Japan did not experience significant changes and remains in the Low Proficiency band” (EFEPI, 2018, p. 6).

There are a few reasons that can explain why Japanese generally lack communicative abilities in English. First, there are issues with the way English is taught and learnt. English teachers in primary

and secondary schools in Japan generally focus on reading, translation and grammar. The latter is taught in Japanese and without context. The mentioned foci are currently the foundations of university entrance exams. From primary school up to lower secondary school, teachers do not yet have the pressure of preparing students for university entrance exams. So, they may include in their lessons listening and speaking activities aiming at developing communicative competence. Prior to the English Education Reform Plan, communicative competence was not mentioned as one of MEXT's objective for foreign language study. Neither was it a clearly articulated desired learning outcome. The second reason is framed within a political and ideological logic that defines socio-cultural norms about Japanese identity. Japanese are a homogeneous people who practice one culture. Some researchers go as far as to suggest that a common feature of being Japanese is to speak only Japanese (Liddicoat, 2007). The Japanese language, culture and identity are based on uniqueness and distinctiveness. Throughout centuries Japanese have assimilated the ideological rhetoric that Japan is unlike any other country and that Japanese people are unlike any other people. There is also the common assimilation between English language and the cultures and values of the western English-speaking world, which are often perceived as incompatible with unique Japanese values, traditions and identity.

2. Japanese identity and English education

Since the Meiji period, Japanese policy makers had to balance national interest with international concerns. But the knowledge economy, technology, international trade, and increased movement of people globally either for work or studies emphasize a sense of global interconnectedness in many spheres of human activity, including education. This necessitates a process of internationalizing school curriculum in all developed countries, through what Knight (2005) for instance defines as the “the inclusion of an international, intercultural, or global dimension in the curriculum and the teaching/learning process” (p. 2). But educational sociologists, Takehiko & Rappleye (2010) explain Japan's ambivalent attitude towards the internationalization of education. They note that in Japan,

the discourse on educational reform has been largely dominated by a belief in the need to strengthen Japanese identity and love of country. Operating under the surface usage of the term ‘internationalization’ we find not the anticipated permeability but an immune response along Japan's cultural-cum-political borders (p. 45).

Aspinall (2010) also notes that “the conundrum for education policymakers is how to put in place mechanisms whereby Japanese students can become good at English while still remaining immune to deeper cultural contagion” (p. 138). This contagion would come from the western world. But the global

interconnected education is actually deeply western; it can promote educational beliefs that do not always correspond to the cultural practices, traditions and needs of non-western countries. Japan's resistance to what it perceives as the westernization of its education is legitimate. The philosophical frameworks of this education often come under the pretext that English is a global language and that every country needs to have its population speak English as a condition to become global citizens.

3. The ambitious reform

In 2014, MEXT English Education Reform Plan Expert Council identified five reform items in the form of improvement of:

- 1) Contents of education
- 2) Teaching and evaluation at school
- 3) English proficiency evaluation and entrance examination at high schools and universities
- 4) Textbooks and educational materials
- 5) Education system at school (MEXT, 2015).

From 2014 to 2018, an Expert Education Council of MEXT conducted professional development sessions in schools across Japan to help teachers implement those five reform items. Teachers were empowered with the knowledge and skills to redesign the English curriculum and select textbooks that would help develop skills in reading, listening, writing and speaking in students across all levels of primary and secondary school. Learning outcomes for each level of schooling have also been clearly established by MEXT. In elementary school, English teachers must “nurture the foundations for communication skills (and) basic English language skills” (MEXT, 2015, p. 4). Lower Secondary School should “nurture the ability to understand familiar topics, carry out simple information exchanges and describe familiar matters in English” (MEXT, 2015, p. 4). MEXT (2015) also highlights that at Lower Secondary School “classes will be conducted in English in principle” (p. 4). This is likely to pressure on the teachers who have been used to traditional methods like translation and who have been teaching English grammar in a decontextualized way using the Japanese language. MEXT (2015) further states that Upper Secondary School teachers are expected to “nurture the ability to understand abstract contents for a wide range of topics and the ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons” (p. 4). MEXT (2015) further stressed that for Upper Secondary School, “classes will be conducted in English with high-level linguistic activities (including) presentations and debates” (p. 4). An expert level of teacher training would be required in knowledge content and pedagogy to realize this objective at Upper Secondary School.

4. Teacher`s voice

Three teachers completed a questionnaire with multiple choice answers with a section for comments and elaborations between August and October 2019, after which a 30-minute follow-up interview was conducted. The teachers were asked about:

- i) their understanding and views of the 2020 English education reform,
- ii) any change in lesson content and teaching approaches because of the reform,
- iii) whether the reform successfully develops communicative competence in students,
- iv) the potential of the reform to develop in students intercultural awareness and skills to become *Japanese global citizens* – term which is to be understood as Japanese people (by nationality and by culture) who are also capable of engaging with a wider world beyond their nationality and culture.

4. 1 The teachers

Mikiko sensei (a pseudonym) is the Head of English at one of the schools monitored by MEXT. She has received extensive training by MEXT to understand and implement the reform. For the last five years she has been leading professional development about English education in schools in Chiba prefecture. She has been a high school teacher for 32 years. She currently teaches General English (Sogo Eigo) at Upper Secondary Level. Hiroko sensei (a pseudonym) had been a high school teacher for 14 years. He is currently teaching Grade 3 Intensive Listening for Centre Exam at Lower Secondary School in Chiba prefecture. Abe sensei (a pseudonym) has been a high school teacher for seven years. He teaches 5th (Grammar) and 6th year students (Grammar and Reading) at Upper Secondary level in the same school as Hiroko sensei.

4. 2. 1 Teachers` views about the 2020 English education reform

The direct quotes from the teachers are italicized.

In the questionnaire and interview, Mikiko sensei explains that the *2020 English Education reform is the most comprehensive I have ever experienced in my years of teaching*. She also notes that, in the different professional development sessions and meetings organized by MEXT,

the need for the reform has been emphasized many times [...] The way English was taught before focused on grammar and translation. It was boring and did not develop fluency in students [...] Now the reform expects teachers at high school to conduct classes in English and encourage students to

communicate in English.

Hiroko sensei finds the reform *necessary and timely*. For him the various MEXT publications he accessed were very useful in understanding the reform. He comments that,

The English teachers at my school understand the concept of good English education which focuses on the 4 skills and communication aspects.

Abe sensei is less enthusiastic than the other teachers about the reform. He notes that,

My priority is to make sure that my students succeed at university entrance exams, which focus on reading skills and grammar [...] As long as the university entrance exams do not change and evaluate students' oral fluency, the reform does not affect me.

Abe sensei's pragmatic comments raise the issue whether the pressure of university entrance exams makes communicative competence and grammatical knowledge almost mutually exclusive. Japanese know about the technicalities of the English language but generally have not had sufficient opportunities to foster the ability to use it.

4. 2. 2 Changes in lesson content and teaching approaches

Mikiko sensei explains that *because of the reform I changed my teaching way a lot, and many other teachers did, too. Before, I taught mainly in Japanese and there was little interaction in English between the students and myself [...] The lesson content is more or less the same but now have discussions.*

Abe sensei notes that, *I teach English in almost the same style as my English teachers used to do when I was a high school student [...] I continue to teach grammar in Japanese because it is efficient.* Abe sensei also explained that,

The lesson content can change because I give the students new reading materials all the time. But the overall system of university entrance examination has not changed for many years despite the reform.

But Hiroko sensei explains that, *the reform has the potential to break away from teaching and learning methods that have not allowed Japanese to communicate in English. My approach has*

always been to encourage students to communicate. In a way MEXT is validating my own teaching philosophy.

He also explains that, *MEXT is expecting classes to be conducted in English but I can choose the topics that my students find interesting. There is flexibility.*

But Abe sensei notes that *we are criticising too much the traditional way of learning and praising too much this communicative approach to language learning. Japanese are practical. They study to get good scores.*

The denominator common to the three teachers is the flexibility they have in conducting the classes. As noted in Section 4.2.1, an Upper Secondary school teacher's focus is to make students pass university entrance exam and they choose their approaches based on what they think is best for the interest of the students.

4. 2. 3 Developing communicative competence

Mikiko sensei highlights some of the differences that the reform has already brought regarding communicative competence,

I think the students who enter high school now have dramatically changed; they don't seem to be awkward in speaking English, and the pronunciation has been more natural than before because they have learned English in elementary school.

But Abe sensei disagrees and comments that,

I personally did not see in my students any major difference in their language abilities since 2014. I doubt that this will change in 2020 and beyond [...] My role as an upper secondary high school teacher is to highlight the grammatical mistakes of my students, so they don't make these mistakes for the entrance exams [...] Making mistakes makes the Japanese students anxious.

But Hiroko sensei notes that *the reform is actually starting in 2020 [...] the effects of a major improvement in the communicative competence of Japanese will become significant in about ten years from now.*

Hiroko sensei explains that grammatical accuracy is not a priority in his class. *I want the students to leave aside their anxiety and be confident in their speaking and listening abilities.* Mikiko sensei argues that, *it is acceptable to make mistakes when studying a foreign language but in the Japanese culture, when students make mistakes, they feel ashamed and they sometimes would rather not try than make mistakes.* She also explains that, *as a teacher I have to make a choice between accuracy and fluency. I think both are important, but it is important for students to speak, even if they are not accurate.*

All three teachers commented on student *anxiety*. Burden (2002) reports that 75% of a sample of 1,057 middle school, high school, and college students have been embarrassed (*terekusai*) while speaking English in front of others. Matsuda & Gobel (2001) also point out that in Japan “oral classroom activities are some of the most problematic and anxiety-provoking activities for foreign language students” (p. 230). This is a dilemma for teachers as oral fluency development clearly involves an element of risk-taking and dealing with the possible embarrassment of (temporary) failure. Teachers need to tread carefully; their desire to encourage Japanese students to communicate might result in a refusal to participate, and be content with sitting at the back of the classroom doing grammar and translation exercises.

4. 2. 4 Japanese values and global citizenship education

MEXT (2019) states that the “English Reform Plan corresponds to changes brought about by globalization” (p. 1). Globalization affects education by setting requirements about the development of communication skills in English language for teachers and students across the world. But it also advocates the development of intercultural awareness - the ability to understand and engage with people from diverse cultural referents. This is the premise of global citizenship education.

Hiroko sensei explains that,

Learning English in a global world can open a door for Japanese people to be exposed to. English can be a starting point for us to think about globalization rather than only a practical communication tool. The opportunities Hiroko sensei referred to were *travelling to other countries, going on long-term exchange programs, even working overseas when the students finish university.* Hiroko sensei was asked whether the exposure to different values (other than Japanese) can develop in Japanese students, through comparison of those cultures and their own, an overly critical perspective of their own culture, values, and identity. Hiroko sensei explains that *globalization or being global citizens*

has nothing to do with changing our ways of living or thinking. It is about broadening our ideas or mind, being aware of people from other cultures or variety of value senses. According to him, the fears that globalization may have a negative influence on Japanese students are exaggerated. He further comments that *the Japanese identity is strong [...] while we teachers expose students to the cultures of the countries where English is spoken, we don't see the risk that students will give up their Japanese values and embrace the values of the western world for instance.*

Mikiko sensei is also favourable to the potential of the English reform in educating for global citizenship. She explains that,

Japan is an island which has been isolated from the rest of the world for a long time [...] Now with globalisation, the students must communicate in English to connect to the rest of the world. [...] With the English language, we can also explain our Japanese culture and identity to other people. It is good that students interact with foreigners and teach foreigners about Japanese history, food, culture and values. This will benefit the foreigners and the Japanese.

When asked whether there are dangers for Japanese students to be exposed to other cultures, Mikiko sensei explains that *students are already exposed through technology and the Internet. They learn a lot through songs and movies in English. Being exposed does not mean they will stop being Japanese.*

There is a strong sentiment in Hiroko sensei and Mikiko sensei that the sense of being Japanese is strong. They are not envisaging the dynamic nature of culture, whereby people for instance may change their way of thinking and cultural identity while being in contact with people from other cultural referents.

When asked whether students have learned that both Japanese and foreign cultures have advantages and disadvantages, Abe sensei notes that,

I don't think out students are that deep and critical yet in their thinking. At the moment, probably because of global media networks, the students retain mainly the positive things about America.

When asked whether he thought that globalization was a threat to Japanese value system, he explained that,

It is a mistake to associate globalisation with America [...] Global citizenship education should mean

considering the perspectives of many countries, not only America and the western English world. It is true that English is the language of western world but learning about English does not mean that we need to focus only on the cultures of the English-speaking countries.

Even if there may be slight variations between the views of Mikiko sensei and Hiroko sensei about global citizenship education and Japanese identity, none of them perceive globalization as a threat to Japanese values. Abe sensei's views are more nuanced though; he warns against the assimilation between globalisation and westernisation, especially Americanisation in considering what is global citizenship education. Takehiko & Rappleye (2010) also note that Japan's modern national identity is often based on its imagination of the West. From Abe sensei's comments, one can understand the students' fascination for the West, especially, America and its values of, freedom and assertiveness as opposed perhaps to the more conservative Japanese values of national consciousness, uniformity and group mentality.

5. Conclusion

While the internationalization of education is luring Japan into modernity, the reality is that Japan only accepts this modernity if it is perceived to be in harmony with traditional values. Aspinall (2010), for instance posits that "through the logic of its approach to internationalization, the (Japanese) Ministry of Education is able to present nationalistic policies as part of an internationalization package" (p 8). Yamagami and Tollefson (2011) also note that the Japanese government emphasizes that individuals and the nation must develop new English and intercultural skills in order to meet the challenges and reap the benefits of globalization, but that Diet (parliament) discourse continually articulates the threats that globalization presents, which they note are "violent crime, reduced personal and national security, and a sense of loss and uncertainty about the future" (p. 34). It seems though that MEXT is aware of that dangers of the negative perceptions associated with the English culture. It clearly insists that English education will "enrich educational content in relation to nurturing individual's sense of Japanese identity (with the) focus on traditional culture and history" (MEXT, 2019, p. 2). Indeed, school education in Japan has long functioned as a means of transmitting the unique culture the Japanese people have developed over the centuries.

Seven years have passed since the reform started. So far there has not been any conclusive research evidence that can affirm or negate whether teachers across Japan have been following MEXT's guidelines in implementing the reform. Hopefully, when this larger research project will be completed in April 2020, closer to the June 2020 final implementation of the reform, it will be able to develop even

more insights into teachers' views about the reform and the extent of its success.

References

- Aspinall, R.W. (2010). Education Reform in Japan in an Era of Internationalization and Risk. Retrieved 18 August 2019, from: <https://www.econ.shigau.ac.jp/risk/10/2/3/res.9/DPA3Aspinall201012C2.pdf>
- Burden, P. (2002). A cross sectional study of attitudes and manifestations of apathy. *The Language Teacher*, 26 (1), 3-10.
- Education First. (2019). English Proficiency Index 2018. Retrieved 25 September 2019 from: <https://www.ef.com/~/media/centraleftcom/epi/downloads/full-reports/v8/ef-epi-2018-english.pdf>
- Kariya, T. & Rappleye, J. (2010). The twisted, unintended impacts of globalization on Japanese education. In Hannum, E., Park, H. & Goto Butler, Y. (Eds.), *Globalization, Changing Demographics, and Educational Challenges in East Asia* (Vol. 17, pp. 17-63). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Knight, J. (2005). An Internationalization Model: Responding to New Realities and Challenges. In De Wit, H., Jaramillo, I. C., Gacel-Avila, J. & Knight, J. (Eds.), *Higher education in Latin America* (pp. 1-39). Washington D.C.: World Bank Publications.
- Liddicoat, A. (2007). Internationalising Japan: Nihonjinron and the Intercultural in Japanese Language-in-education Policy. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*. 2(1). 32-46.
- Matsuda, S., & Gobel, P. (2001). Quiet apprehension: Reading and classroom anxieties. *JALT Journal*, 23(1), 227-47.
- MEXT. (2019). English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization. Retrieved May 19 2019 from: http://www.mext.go.jp/en/news/topics/detail/___icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/23/1343591_1.pdf
- MEXT. (2015). Plans on the Promotion of Improvement of Students' English Abilities. Retrieved May 10 2019 from: http://www.mext.go.jp/en/news/topics/detail/___icsFiles/afieldfile/2016/10/19/1378469_001.pdf
- Yamagami, M. & Tollefson, J. W. (2011). Elite discourses of globalization in Japan: the role of English. In Seargeant, P. (Ed.), *English in Japan in the era of globalization* (pp. 15-37). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.