

〈 論文 〉

## **English Language Teaching and Study Abroad Challenges in Japanese Education: A Brief Review of Relevant Literature**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents an overview of the main reforms and currently debated issues on English Language Teaching (hereafter ELT) in Japan. With more focus in higher education in the aspects discussed, it can be observed that inasmuch as English is the main foreign language that is taught in Japan from elementary school, language curriculum reforms have focused on English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes and Communicative English. Moreover, the issues discussed below reveal that as a lingua franca, English has begun to play a role within the internationalization of education in many countries. This has been implemented not only through academic exchange, research and study abroad, but through the introduction of English medium courses that allow students to learn the language while learning content- subjects of different disciplines. The points discussed constitute key aspects that should be considered when designing curricula in all educational levels, but more importantly at the university level, this being the immediate stage before students begin to obtain employment in different fields in the society at home or abroad.

### **Challenges encountered as educational reforms continue**

In the last few decades the Japanese government has been making great efforts not only to keep modernizing the education, but also to internationalize it. This paper focuses on the main issues of English Language Teaching (ELT) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Japanese education system. It draws from recent research carried out by English teachers and researchers in Japan in the last decade. The situation of English language learning in Japan deserves careful study as it is a peculiar one. Many studies have focused on the origins of the difficulty for Japanese students to learn and acquire proper English ability (Makarova, 2004; Motohisa, 2004; Oyama, 2011).

Among the earlier reforms we find the establishment of the Japan Exchange Teachers (JET) program in 1980s. This was a period in which many native speakers came to Japan to teach English. This program emerged to respond to the increasing demands for internationalization of education in the country; then the number of people learning English increased considerably. Later, in 2000 there was a governmental proposal to make English the second official language in Japan. This has not been generalized, but there are some Japanese companies such as Lawson and Rakuten, business

organizations such as IBM Japan, Nissan and Marubeni that have given English a priority in their meetings and transactions requiring their employees to know English (Gottlieb, 2005, 2011).

Currently in Japan, English is necessary to communicate with the rest of the world. However, the majority of Japanese do not require the language in their jobs and their daily lives. As Seargeant (2009) notes, “English language proficiency is not a prerequisite for finding stable work and good wages in Japan” (p. 121). In a section entitled “Identifying the issues” scholar Seargeant (2009) explains how in 1978, the editor of *The Teaching of English in Japan* outlined the state of foreign language education in Japan at that time as cited below.

In general, reading comprehension skills are fostered, while hearing and speaking skills are less stressed. This can be partially explained by the history of Japan’s relative isolation from English-speaking peoples...English usage within Japan was largely limited to the translation and critical study of foreign works. Even today, because university entrance examinations require English reading comprehension, high schools often neglect the development of hearing and speaking skills. Recently, however, there has been growing concern that Japan must actively exchange ideas and culture with other nations through international communication... Some Japanese teachers of English specially recognize their lack of communication with teachers, linguists and school administrators of other nations. This communication gap stems partially from the dearth of English publications that deal with English teaching trends inside Japan...(as cited in Seargeant, 2009, p. 45).

These issues (although slowly disappearing) are still recurrent in many Japanese universities. I emphasize that the above mentioned situation is still seen especially in students who enter university with good reading and writing skills, as well as translation, however their listening and speaking skills remain at a very low level. Hence, the need to emphasize the communicative approach in ELT in universities in Japan increases. Improvements can be seen, although slowly as it is difficult for students to apply in speaking the intermediate level vocabulary they have acquired in reading. This then leads to a whole process of skills’ level transfer or balance from reading and writing to listening and speaking.

Regarding English language education in Japan from high school level, Kimber (2009) conducted a thorough research focusing on the attitudes and effects on students of the immersion programs. This kind of research not only evidences the need for Japanese students to get involved in more communicative English practice, but also shed light on important issues that ELT in Japan faces from the high school level. Thus, the Japanese government has had to look for various responses that explore possible ways of improving English Language Education at the primary and secondary levels.

A recent proposal that has raised controversies on ELT issues since high school level and

below is the launch by 2020 of a plan to begin activity-oriented classes in English once or twice a week from third grade in Japanese primary schools. Then by fifth or sixth grade, English would be an official subject to be taught three times a week. Research has further revealed that poor English language ability in Japanese students has its origins in the pre-university level English language education (Kameda, 2013). Consequently, many efforts and reforms have been made at university level. English is not only a requirement to enter university, but most students continue to study the language at some point during their four years at universities, as they have a language subjects credit requirement to fulfil before graduation. Nearly all tertiary institutions require their students to study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) within the foreign language program (Aspinall, 2003, 2013, Goodman, 2011; Poole, 2005). Additionally, students in some institutions have a choice to study other specific English classes, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and Business English. At international universities, English courses are a requirement for Japanese students, even though they are enrolled under the “Japanese-based” curriculum.

As an application of linguistic theories to the ELT issues, the Ministry of Education has promoted the “Communicative Approach,” which consists in learning through communicative methods (O’Brien, 2013). I argue that the use of communicative approach can be effective especially at university level as one of the ways to transfer students’ reading and writing proficiency levels to listening and speaking (as mentioned above). An important observation to take into account in curriculum evaluations is that discussions of the reforms in Japan often only consider what should be done to cause teachers to change their current practices (grammar-translation, drills and practice) and implement the “Communicative Approach.” They should rather consider examining what combination of methods they might employ which would encourage actual communication (O’Brien, 2013). Among this combination of methods we can include the integration with outside-classroom self-study and practice in ELT not only at universities, but from the high school level. A development of language self-study skills in language learners since primary and high school can have a notable positive effect in their proficiency improvement.

One of the most comprehensive volumes on ELT in Japan compiled in the last decade is *English Language Teaching: The Case of Japan* (Makarova & Rodgers, 2004). The studies present results from ELT case studies on all skills since high school level to university, including teacher training and development. There are six positive aspects of the ELT system in Japan as stated by Neustupny and Tanaka (2004) that cannot be ignored and should be brought into careful analysis as reforms continue to be made in the system, as well as in curriculum evaluations in different institutions. These are seldom mentioned in the body of literature in English on Japanese education, as many references focus on the problems and failures. It is necessary to examine the improvements and strong points in order to further improve the weak points.

Firstly, it is acknowledged that there is a good “survival communicative competence” (p.

18). Most Japanese are able to achieve a level of communicative survival in English in order to communicate in urgent situations or solve simple tasks. Secondly, ELT has strengthened the “provision of translators.” Once Japanese learners acquire the appropriate competence in English, the translation work becomes efficient, especially when translation and interpretation takes place from English into Japanese. Due to the difficulty of Japanese language, when it comes to translation, it can be said that Japanese is one of those languages that can only be well spoken by Japanese native speakers.

A third aspect is a “‘personalized’ contact with the world” (p. 19). Thanks to ELT in Japan and the introduction of cultural elements in language teaching textbooks and materials, each individual has been connected somehow with the world. This has been increasingly the case, as internationalization policies and study abroad take place. In the fourth place, there is a “starting point for the study of other languages and cultures” (p. 19). English language education in Japan has provided opportunities to encourage the study of other languages and cultures. It provides a linguistic framework through the similarity of English writing, grammar structure and vocabulary with many other languages that makes language learning easier.

Aspects five and six are the above mentioned Japan Exchange and Teaching Program and “attempts at extension” (p. 20). The JET program has provided excellent opportunities for development of classroom management strategies of language teachers. Through the Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), Japanese high school students have the opportunity of listening to native speakers and interacting with them. This contributes to the improvement of their pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Regarding the sixth aspect, as part of the ELT reforms, there has been extension of ELT to primary school level. Due to the low exposure that Japanese usually have to English language in their daily life (especially if they do not live in the bigger cities of Japan), it is important to start ELT as early as possible for good development of productive skills (Neustupny & Tanaka, 2004).

### **Study abroad and English language learning**

Some of the solutions for improvement of ELT in Japan, and as part of the internationalization of higher education have been done through the increase of language immersion education in the K-12 school system and study abroad programs (Kimber, 2009). Apart from these programs we find short and long term exchange programs, collaborative programs and intensive language programs. In the case of immersion programs, even though the term immersion in foreign language education specifically refers to the well-documented approach lying within the broader category of bilingual education, of using a foreign language as a medium of instruction, normally within the public school system, in this study, the term will also encompass its usage by some universities which apply the label immersion to intensive language programs.

Studies such as the above demonstrate that language immersion programs during high school

(which is an important period in Japanese education ELT) have been successful in the development of students' communicative English skills. Thanks to these programs students have been able to experience using the language among them in a meaningful way. In this respect, students have acquired a positive attitude towards English language learning since high school, which results in higher motivation to continue studying the language upon enrolment in higher education (Kimber, 2009).

In international universities in Japan, there are two main areas through which Japanese students can practice their English ability outside the classroom: 1. Interaction with international students at the facilities on campus, at the dormitory or in exchange and culture events; and 2. Participating in study abroad/ immersion/ exchange programs. Other research on study abroad in higher education has analyzed various aspects of this experience. Among these we find the development of linguistic abilities (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004; Isabelli, 2007; Ramsay, 2009); the experience of language anxiety during the learning process due to the change in environment among other factors (Amaldas & Mani, 2010), and social interactions and language gains (Magnan & Back, 2007; Regan & Bayley, 2004). Thus, it has been argued that the question remains unresolved regarding "which aspects of the study abroad experience create the best conditions to support linguistic and cultural learning?" (Ramsay, 2009, p. 164). On this issue, studies conducted so far have generally not included evaluations of the quality of host academic programs.

Although many of the study abroad programs focus on the preparation of university students to be more active and successful in a multicultural environment, students often go to the programs overseas without the appropriate pre-departure preparation. Thus, Root and Ngampornchai (2012), in one of the few studies on this issue, identified the need to study what students have learned from study abroad programs and how their stories show the need for pre-departure and post-departure follow-up.

Research such as Freed's et al. (2004) and Ramsay's (2009) on the effects of study abroad in students' language proficiency have focused on different skills in which improvement has been found. Some programs are more effective than others depending on their nature and the pre-departure preparation that students receive at their home university. However, we find a lack of deeper inquiry on how the gains have been followed-up upon students' return and integrated in their ongoing language learning at home in their regular English classes.

On examining Japanese students' language learning strategies in study abroad contexts, Adams (2006) found that as students saw the need to communicate with native speakers, this increased the pressure of not wanting to fall behind in their group. This then raised their motivation to use more learning and communication strategies on their own. Moreover, Adams' study revealed that students' use of learning strategies was considerably influenced by their experience in the Japanese educational system. I consider that these results point to a need of examining what aspects of students' inside-classroom language learning are most effective during their study abroad

experience and vice-versa, thus searching for an effective integration in each university. I have tackled the above mentioned issues, as well as pre-departure preparation, in a broader analysis of outside-classroom language learning and practice in my recently completed dissertation (Savon Meras, 2015).

I emphasize that long term study abroad programs provide students with a more thorough and useful advising sessions and pre-departure courses to prepare them for their stay abroad. Some of these sessions focus on development of learning attitudes, skills and cognitive development; EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and English proficiency. These classes are more focused and intensive. Some aspects on which the training focuses include: English proficiency test, preparing for studying abroad, teacher's role/student's roles, learning how to learn together, in class reflection/personal reflection, building a learning community reflection, how to become an independent learner, cultural perspectives and cultural diversity reflection, presentations. An essential part of any English program is the encouragement of students to communicate and practice the language (L2) outside the classroom. This is what will help them to acquire more vocabulary, fluency and improvement of their pronunciation. Some services offered at universities such as self-access learning centers contribute to this essential part of the program. This area has encouraged scholars to study the use, deficiencies and effectiveness of self-access learning facilities, writing centers, English speaking cafes, and Language advising (Freed et al, 2004; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Kato & Carson, 2009).

### **Concluding remarks**

After reviewing the literature on the main problems faced by the context being examined, the next step would be to conduct thorough curriculum evaluations in universities of inside-classroom and outside-classroom language learning towards identifying how/if both are being integrated, as well as how effective this integration is for students' improvement of language proficiency. Similarly, the examination of linguistic and cultural gains from students' study abroad experiences will help considerably in further development of language curricula. At the same time, the above review indicates that despite many challenges in ELT, improvements are also visible. Moreover, as internationalization of higher education policies are put into practice, this will bring positive changes in ELT inasmuch as English is one of the aspects that make this process more tangible.

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