

English Language Policy and Practice in Japan

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日本の英語教育方針

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Abstract

This article examines the present and past policies and practices undertaken in Japan with regard to language education from societal and educational perspectives. Further, it will be discussed how English language policy in Japan relates to theoretical perspectives in the literature. It is argued that there has been a historical and continuing disparity between official goals and implementation that have rendered English language education less effective than otherwise might be. Although a reform of foreign language education policy in 2003 signals a positive move towards more effective communication methods, failure to re-imagine the university entrance exam system and continuing to take an egalitarian approach are evidence that language reform was never the underlying objective of foreign language policy. Rather, English education has always been pursued for national economic goals rather than any individual linguistic needs.

Key words: language policy, MEXT, JET programme, bilingualism

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抄 録

この論文では日本での言語教育が過去から現在に至るまで、社会にそして教育においてどのように取り入れられ、実行されてきたのかを様々な実例を挙げながら述べられている。特に英語教育がどのような形で社会に浸透していったか、またその教育方針の本来の公的な目的と過去から現在に至るまで続く現状との差も説明されている。英語教育がもたらす社会そして個人への影響や、日本経済へおよぼす効果などをこれまでの研究に基づいて指摘している。

キーワード: 言語方針、文部科学省、JET プログラム、バイリンガリズム

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Language is an important part of national culture and self-image. The policies and practices concerning language, whether explicit or implicit reflect the zeitgeist of the times. Official language policy is "... intertwined with national self-image and the image to be projected to the outside world" (Carroll, 2001, p. 21). Japan's language policies (both foreign language and Japanese language) have always "been driven by imperatives ranging from modernization to imperialism to democratization to conservationism" (Gottlieb, 1994, p. 1195). I define 'language policy' in the broader sense that Carroll uses in that it "includes any involvement by governmental or quasi-governmental bodies in any aspect of language ... [including] language education and promotion of language awareness" (Carroll, 1997, p. 2). The current agenda of the Japanese government reveals the underlying political, social and economic concerns of the country. This paper will discuss the past and present foreign language policies and practices in Japan, arguing that the misalignment of policy and practice needs to be considered and corrected.

At present English is taught at the vast majority of schools in Japan. Moreover an important part of the university entrance exam is an English test. Most official policies and common assumptions equate 'foreign language' with 'English'. This has been the case since the first Ministry of Education was formed. Some schools do teach another language, and some practices are directed at non-English language promotion. However, since English is the *de facto* foreign language in Japanese policy it will be the focus of this paper.

Examining language policy historically, a few key characteristics come to the fore. Firstly, foreign language interest and promotion evidences a series of pendulum shifts from eager interest to absolute rejection. Secondly, even during times of great interest in English language learning, it has always been held at arm's length. In fact, policies and practices involving English education have been contradictory and arguably hinder greater second language acquisition.

The following anecdote may serve as a metaphor for the approach Japan has taken to foreign language education time and time again. In the early 1800's the Bakufu (the ruling military government of Japan during the Edo period) sent six 'interpreters' abroad with orders to learn English and Russian and gain intelligence about those imperial powers. However, due to fears that those six might transmit ideas to others they were ordered on pain of death to not become literate in those languages. This incident highlights a theme within Japanese foreign language policy that continues to this day. There was, and continues to be, a tension between the desire for useful foreign ideas, along with the desire to avoid foreign influence.

Historical Background

Over the past 400 years the Japanese archipelago has varied between extremes of utter isolation to openness. In order to understand present day foreign language policy it is useful to first understand past foreign language policies and set them within greater historical events.

The first contact between Japan and the English language was when Englishman William Adams. Reesor asserts that the life of Adams, his interaction with Japanese rulers, and correspondence from the British King are evidence of early positive Anglo-Japanese relations (Reesor, 2002). However, soon after that Japan became wary of foreigners and the spread of European imperialism.

From 1638 Japan adopted an isolationist policy to keep out 'dangerous influences' and isolated itself from the rest of the world. Foreigners were expelled and foreign language study and books were both banned. All contact with foreigners was limited to Dejima island off Nagasaki. The literature ban was lifted in the following century, in order to gain knowledge from the West. However, it was not until Commodore Perry entered Tokyo harbor in 1853 and proclaimed that Japan be 'opened for trade or trampled' that the isolationist policy ended. Inoguchi (1999) claims that Japan still pursues an implicit 'Dejima island' foreign language policy in trying to keep foreign influence both at a distance and close at hand. Both in subsequent history and in modern times the policy and practice regarding foreign language has been filled with contradictions.

Meiji Era

The Meiji era (from 1868) was an age of openness and reform. Western ideas, culture and goods were welcomed into the country. A new ministry of education was formed and introduced the first compulsory education system, modeled on French and German systems. Foreign language policies were also reformed. The government sent scholars overseas to learn foreign languages and science, and brought foreign experts into the country to teach languages.

In 1871 English was adopted as an integral part of the national language curriculum. In the same year universities initiated an entrance exam system that tested English grammar and advanced translation skills. As we shall see, this system has continued with only minor changes to the present day, and has a far greater impact on societal bilingualism than any official policies have had.

Throughout history there have been some incongruous suggestions that Japan adopt a foreign language. The first of those proposals was made in 1872 by Mori Arinori, the first Japanese ambassador to the USA. Mori advocated that the nation switch entirely to English for reasons of international trade.

The spoken language of Japan being inadequate to the growing necessities of the people of the Empire, and too poor to be made, by a phonetic alphabet, sufficiently useful as a written language, the idea prevails among us that, if we would keep pace with the age, we must adopt a copious and expanding European language. The necessity for this arises mainly out of the fact that Japan is a commercial nation; and also that, if we do not adopt a language like that of English, which is quite predominant in Asia, as well as elsewhere in the commercial world, the progress of Japanese civilization is evidently impossible. Indeed a new language is demanded by the whole Empire (Mori, cited in Tukahara, 2002, p. 8).

Mori became the Minister of Education within the new Meiji government in 1885. He was something of a radical in his day, advocating equal rights for women, freedom of religion and education rights. He also proposed a thorough reform of English, expunging the language of all irregular verbs, regularizing the spelling system, etc. Thus his suggestion that Japan adopt English is part of his ideas on language use and reform globally. He went on to write a book emphasizing education for the sake of the nation, rather than for personal success, a doctrine which is still reflected in present day policies. It can be argued that Mori's ideas on education for state aims have grounded Japanese language policy ever since.

Mori's proposal might seem a curious historical footnote were it not for the fact that there have been subsequent suggestions for granting a foreign language official status. There has also been a long history of debate over script reform. This has mostly dealt with limiting or expanding the number of *joyo kanji* (official kanji characters), but at various times it has been suggested that kanji be abandoned altogether to be replaced by hiragana/katakana, or even by romaji. The common thread that links all of these ideas is viewing foreign language as a tool. Mori was criticized for being a statist – subsuming the good of the individual for the state's benefit. His argument for replacing Japanese with English as the official language of Japan is based on an appeal to commercial progress. This is a theme which runs through the history of language policy and practice in Japan.

Although Mori's proposal was not enacted, the idea of using language policy as a political tool was certainly taken up. The leaders undertook policies refining and reforming the Japanese language and script in order to modernize the country and catch up with the West (Carroll, 1997). Thus, Japanese language policy is also influenced by competitive goals.

Nationalist Era

In 1922, the Japanese government hired linguist Harold Palmer to study ways to improve English teaching. He stayed in Japan until 1936 conducting research on the state of language education. His research criticized the grammar-translation methods used in secondary schools and advocated an oral-aural method instead. His methods and techniques proved to

be successful in trial runs at select schools. Indeed, his methodologies gained acceptance by junior high school teachers and students' English proficiency improved. Yet Monbusho (The Ministry of Education) did not follow up on the research by reforming the existing curriculum or disseminating his ideas throughout Japan. After recognising deficiencies in the foreign language education system, paying for a specialist to research effective means of reforming the system, setting up an institute for research into English language teaching, and having those new methods prove both effective and popular, the Ministry of Education did nothing and allowed the status quo to remain in effect. Reesor sums up this situation thusly: "This is a reflection of the ambivalence felt by the Japanese towards foreign languages that was plain 100 years earlier when the Bafuku sought non-literate translators" (Reesor, 2002, p. 44).

In the early 1900's strong anti-Western and anti-English sentiments were the norm in Japan. Many people advocated changing educational policy to make English an elective subject in secondary schools. By the 1930's the pendulum had swung fully to nationalism and English language instruction was officially ceased.

Post-World War II

After Japan's surrender to the USA, most Japanese turned their back on extreme nationalism and welcomed the chance for reform. English language teaching was again set as a compulsory subject in secondary schools. In 1946, the same year that the new constitution was promulgated, novelist Shiga Naoya suggested that the country abandon the Japanese language altogether and adopt French instead, reflecting the upheaval of language, culture and self-identity in Japan at that time. Equally tellingly, Shiga's proposal prompted novelist Kindaichi Haruhiko to write the bestseller *Nihongo* as a defense of the Japanese language. As we shall see in the section below on the modern era, more recent suggestions to adopt English as an official language similarly caused many to rally in defense of Japanese.

In this brief historical overview it can be seen that popular feeling and official policy have swung from embracing foreign language and culture to repelling the same. Butler & Iino (2005), Carroll (1997), Carroll (2001), Morrow (2004), Reesor (2002) and Tukahara (2002), have all noted that there is a continuing theme in Japanese foreign policy and language policy that reflects a tension between conflicting ideologies. Official policy has always looked at language learning as a 'mere instrument' (Tukahara, 2002, p. 9) while trying to avoid the 'sting' of foreign influence.

The Japanese view of foreign languages has historically been ambiguous and contradictory. The simultaneous desire to embrace and repel foreign influence is a recurring theme ... There is a desire to learn about the outside world, but at the same time, this is tempered by a genuine fear of the consequences that such knowledge might bring. {This pattern} has become entrenched in Japanese foreign language policy (Reesor,

2002, p. 42-43).

Reesor (2002) uses an apt metaphor of 'The Bear and the Honeycomb' to describe Japan's approach to foreign languages. Japan is the bear which has a sweet tooth for honey (foreign knowledge). At times it bears the sting involved in getting the honey. At other times it forgoes that pleasure for self-preservation.

Modern Era

Organizations Involved in Language Policy

There are a number of government organizations currently involved in language policy in Japan. Monbukagakusho (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, previously Monbusho, hereafter called MEXT) is the most important organization with wide responsibilities including formulating education policies, setting curriculum standards, and approving university entrance exams. Various sub-agencies are responsible for policy, research and publication with regards to language. The National Language Subdivision of the Council for Cultural Affairs handles issues involving the Japanese language. CLAIR (the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations) promotes the use of English and other foreign languages. The National Institute for Japanese Language and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are involved with teaching Japanese as a second language domestically and abroad respectively. The Agency for Cultural Affairs promotes Japanese language education abroad and interest in the importance of the Japanese language domestically. NHK radio and TV has also had an enormous influence on providing a standard language model, as well as dispersing English educational programming

Kokusaika

Following a popular interest in nihonjinron (literature on Japanese uniqueness) in the 1970's there was a pendulum shift in the other direction and the modern age of foreign language policy was ushered in with the popular and official concern with *kokusaika* (internationalization) which ushered in foreign language education reform. *Kokusaika* is a loaded word which reveals much about Japan's attitude towards foreign language. The term began to appear in official policy in the 1980's under Prime Minister Nakasone's leadership. The word has similar connotations to globalization used in the West. McConnell writes "*kokusaika* affirms the urgent need for Japan to emerge from cultural isolation and assimilate a set of Western values" (McConnell, 1996, p. 447). However, it would be a mistake to equate *kokusaika* with globalization since it is more focused on communicating Japan's uniqueness abroad rather than taking part in Western cultural imperialism. Kubota recognises the give and take of *kokusaika* saying that it "embraces both Westernization through learning the

communication mode of English *and* the promotion of nationalistic values” (Kubota, 1999, p. 300). Hashimoto states that the term “amounted to the promotion of “Japaneseness” in the international community” (Hashimoto, 2009, p. 22). Thus *kokusaika* represents a continuation of the practice of being open to the outside world while protecting and promoting the national culture. It is against this backdrop that the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme was conceived, which I will discuss in the following section.

JET Programme

Monbusho carried out a study of English teaching as part of a larger reform movement in 1984-1985. The subsequent report was highly critical of the current system. It criticized insufficient contact hours, poor teaching techniques, poorly trained teachers and class sizes that were too large. They recommended a more communicative teaching approach and hiring native English speakers. On the basis of this recommendation the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme was begun, placing foreigners into secondary schools throughout the country. There are presently over 4,000 JET participants working in Japan (down from a high of over 6000 in the early years of this decade), over 90% of those being ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) teaching English. The JET home page states that it:

...aims to promote grass roots internationalisation at the local level by inviting young overseas graduates to assist in international exchange and foreign language education in local governments, boards of education and elementary, junior and senior high schools throughout Japan. It seeks to foster ties between Japanese citizens (mainly youth) and JET participants at the person-to-person level (JET, 2009).

Many people have viewed this as proof of the government’s dedication to improving the standard of English education in Japan. However, many have noted that students’ English abilities have not improved very much.

Some have viewed the JET programme negatively as buying into English cultural imperialism. Others criticize the policy of hiring young, inexperienced, uneducated (in ESL teaching) participants and expecting that the mere presence of a native speaker will make for more effective language education. One further criticism is that the JET programme belies what Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) calls the ‘native speaker fallacy’, the ‘scientifically false’ belief that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker. Additionally, since most of those participants are monolingual speakers it raises additional questions on the aptness of the programme. According to Skutnabb-Kangas “monolingual ESL teachers are per definition incompetent to teach ESL” (2000, p. 37).

Reesor points out that the JET programme was set up primarily in response to international trade considerations and not as a part of language policy. During the mid 1980’s Japan suffered a backlash from Americans who looked at Japan’s large trade surpluses

and condemned the nation as an 'economic animal' feeding off of others. Under those circumstances the Japanese government looked for a way to promote positive international understanding. Nose Kuniyuki, the Home Affairs Ministry official who wrote the original proposal for JET, made it clear that the programme was undertaken to placate the US over trade frictions rather than linguistic reasons:

The purpose of the JET programme was never focused on the revolution of English education or changing Japanese society. Frankly speaking, during the years of the trade conflict between Japan and the US ... what I was thinking about was how to deal with the demands of the US that we buy more things such as computers and cars. I realized the trade friction was not going to be solved by manipulating things, and besides, I wanted to demonstrate the fact that not all Japanese are economic animals who gobble up real estate (McConnell, 1996, p. 456).

The JET programme's stated goals continue to be the promotion of international exchange and foreign language education. There is, therefore, a gulf between the hidden objectives of the policy-makers and publicly stated goals. Thus one should re-evaluate the successes of the JET programme. It is not surprising that students' English abilities have not improved greatly since this was not the primary intention. The JET programme has been a success in its original objectives of exporting Japanese culture and promoting understanding.

English Education as Economic Engine

Following the collapse of the bubble economy in 1989, Japan experienced a recession domestically referred to as the 'lost decade' (Hashimoto (2000) jokes that it was a decade consisting of 15 years). The economy has been and continues to be a hot-button issue. Numerous proposals have been made, and various policies enacted to stimulate growth. Information Technology was singled out as an area in which Japan had fallen behind. Politicians and business leaders bemoaned Japanese workers' poor English skills for being the main reason for this situation. Continuing the tradition of foreign language policy being an instrument to advance state goals, new proposals were made for the adoption of a foreign language. In 1999 respected journalist Funabashi Youichi wrote an article recommending English be defined as the country's second official language. In the same year, Prime Minister Obuchi's advisory council, driven by fear over the 'English Divide' (that individuals with English knowledge have a superior economic status), proposed declaring Japan a bilingual country and giving English official status.

It will not be easy to ride the waves of the information technology revolution and globalization. The only way to cope will be to expand domestic use of the internet and of English as the international lingua franca. People should be familiarized with both on a mass level in childhood. ... It is a fundamental fallacy to believe that cherishing

the Japanese language precludes studying other languages or that caring for Japanese culture requires rejecting foreign cultures.... So long as English is effectively the language of international discourse, there is no alternative to familiarizing ourselves with it within Japan. Even if we stop short of making it an official second language, we should give it the status of a second working language and use it routinely alongside Japanese (Advisory committee proposal cited in Tukahara 2002, p. 8-9).

Clearly language policy in this case is continuing to be pursued as a tool for national goals rather than any concern over linguistic rights. The formula is once again 'English = internationalization = modernization'. This report echoes in spirit Mori's proposal of adopting English wholesale for commercial benefit. An article published in the same year in *The Japan Times* further channels Mori's spirit. In *English Can Save Japan*, Kobayashi argues that "[a] serious 'intellectual crisis' is besetting the entire nation ... the entire educational system in Japan is on the verge of collapse" (Kobayashi, cited in Lo Bianco, 2002, p. 8). His thesis is that adopting English as an official language will somehow make Japanese more "flexible" and "forward looking", making Japan competitive on the international stage and bringing about much needed social reform (Lo Bianco, 2002). However, English alone, without accompanying reforms cannot work wonders.

In 2006 Japan scored at the very bottom of the rankings of average listening scores on the TOEFL tests and the last overall in Asia. A decade earlier Japan had also scored last in Asia. Some years have seen improvements in the average TOEFL score of Japanese test-takers, but Japan has consistently been found near the bottom of the rankings. Why is it, many wonder, that a wealthy, well-educated country that invests so much time and money in English education is compared so unfavorably in standardized tests?

The dormant economy and the continued embarrassingly lackluster English proficiency of Japanese students have led MEXT to look at reforming foreign language education and providing greater societal benefits. MEXT released a report entitled *Developing a Strategic Plan to Cultivate "Japanese With English Abilities"* (hereinafter Strategic Plan) in 2002 followed in 2003 by a strategic document called *Regarding the Establishment of and Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities"* (hereinafter Action Plan). These two documents layed out a 5-year plan to reform the foreign language education system. The first sentence of the Strategic Plan gives the objectives for the plan. "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" (MEXT, 2002). The Action plan introduction mentions globalization and the "progress in the information technology revolution" as rationales for retooling foreign education and stating English is essential in furthering national goals.

"For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication

abilities in English as a common international language. In addition, English abilities are important in terms of linking our country with the rest of the world, obtaining the world's understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence and further developing our nation" (MEXT, 2003).

Thus English is presented again as an instrument for furthering commercial and national competitiveness. In fact, the strategies and programs described in the Strategic Plan come under Section 2, titled "Strategies to Stimulate the Economy". Hashimoto (2000) puts it bluntly; "it is obvious that economic factors constitute the single most important reason for implementing the action plan." Regardless of the statist objectives, on its face the Action Plan appears to be a positive, long overdue reform to the foreign language education in Japan. It enacts many measures stakeholders have been advocating since Palmer's research. It promotes the oral-aural communicative teaching approach over the grammar-translation method that has been the norm for decades. The first goal of the Action plan is for all Japanese people to acquire English abilities. In order to reach that goal the Action Plan lays out 7 areas where action is to be taken:

Improve English classes

Improve the teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading the teaching system

Improve motivation for learning English

Improve the evaluation system for selecting school and university applicants

Support English conversation activities in elementary schools

Improve Japanese language abilities

Promote practical research

Unlike previous education reform, criticised for lack of implementation strategies and specific targets, the Action Plan is replete with them: Junior High School graduates should be able to "conduct basic communication" in English. University graduates should be able to use English for their work. 100 schools will be designated "Super English Language High Schools". All English teachers must attain a minimum score on one of the standardized tests. Advanced secondary school teachers will be sent for overseas training. 10,000 high school students will be sent abroad to study English every year.

Butler & Iino (2005) view the 2003 Action Plan with cautious optimism, pointing out that the current policy allows far more autonomy to teachers and boards of education. They also note that the plan emphasises 'practical English', creates concrete goals based on test measures, and retools university entrance exams to include a listening component from 2006. They note that "English education in Japan is changing gradually". However, at the same time they bring into question the motivations and objectives of the Action Plan. "It is once again an outside force (namely, globalization) that has focused attention and resourced in Japan on the presumed need for its citizens to obtain a practical communicative command of English" (Butler & Iino, 2005, p. 33).

Criticisms of the Action Plan

Now that the 5-year plan has run its course there are a number of criticisms that can be made as well as conflicting ideologies and disparity between the stated policy goals and actual practices. Butler & Iino note that the Action Plan contains tension between 3 conflicting ideologies:

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|
| Multilingualism | vs. | The spread of English |
| Emphasize international understanding | vs. | English education alone |
| Egalitarian education | vs. | Individualized education |

They state that it is unclear which of the ideological orientations is actually being forwarded.

The Action Plan brought about the addition of a listening component to the Center Test (national university entrance exam) but in other ways MEXT practices run counter to their policies rendering the Action Plan less effective. One such conflict exists within the entrance exam system.

The importance of university entrance exams (both national and private universities) cannot be underestimated. It is the sole criterion on which students' acceptance is based. Students feel great pressure to do well on the exams. As a result teachers have tremendous pressure from parents to prepare their children for the exams. Thus, regardless of what strategic goals MEXT sets out in 5-year plans the immediate needs of students to do well on the entrance exam takes precedence for teachers and schools. The university entrance exam system has been a target of criticism for its influence on language education. (Butler & Iino, 2005; Inoguchi, 1999; Reesor, 2002; Tukahara, 2002) Entrance exams continue to include a heavily-weighted English component which stresses grammar, translation and reading abilities, along with the listening component added in 2006. It must be noted that the English component is for all students regardless of their future area of study. English ability is thought to be indicative of one's overall mental abilities, much like Latin was once considered a mental exercise by English speakers. More than half of all Japanese students go on to tertiary education so it cannot be overemphasized how important these exams are. For these reasons, despite teachers and schools being given more autonomy and increased use of communicative teaching, the overall focus of English education continues to be *juken eigo* (English for exams).

The reforms necessary to truly promote the communicative teaching laid out in the Action Plan are solely within the purview of MEXT. MEXT sets the curricula for schools, approves all textbooks (still not communicative), provide teachers with detailed lessons plans (still emphasising translation and drill-focused techniques), creates the Center Test (decidedly non-communicative, still emphasising the fruits of the grammar-translation method), and regulates teacher training (still little formal language training available). The Center Test with its mandatory English component is the largest impediment to effective language education

in the country. There has been much criticism of this exam. Some call for MEXT to abandon its egalitarian mores and make the English component elective for those wishing to go on to further language study. Others call for scrapping the entire English component or even restructuring the entire university entrance procedure to counter the understandable pressure to teach-for-the-exam.

There is a popular internet meme that has evolved from the TV show *South Park* often used to satirize or ridicule the business scheme of a startup company, political party, etc. In the *South Park* episode a group of gnomes starting up an underpants company explain their business model as follows:

Phase 1: Collect Underpants

Phase 2: ?

Phase 3: Profit(IMDB, 2009)

That is, the entity in question glosses over the essential step of how to proceed from a basic idea to commercial success. It seems that the MEXT approach to English education can be summed up in similar satirical terms as follows:

Step 1: ?

Step 2: English-speaking Japanese

Step 3: ?

Step 4: Profit

Although the 2003 Action Plan contains discrete goals and implementation details it has contradictory ideology and ineffective practices that effectively make the question of how Japanese will become bilingual a question mark. Likewise, much of the literature from policy makers, government panels, and pro-English education Japanese linguists seem to take it as a matter of faith that there is something inherent about using English that will bring about commercial gain. Thus this stage as well is effectively a question mark.

Conflicting Ideologies

The tension between Multilingualism vs. English Education in the 2003 Action Plan represent the conflict between the Diffusion-of-English and Ecology-of-Language paradigms of language policy (Tsuda, 1994; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996). The Diffusion-of-English paradigm is characterized by capitalism, monolingualism, ideological globalization, Americanization (homogenization of world culture) and linguistic and cultural imperialism. At the other end of the continuum, the Ecology-of-Language paradigm is characterized by a human rights perspective, multilingualism, maintenance of culture and protection of national sovereignties. Although MEXT policies deal with 'foreign language' education, in practice foreign language means English. As a result of the ubiquitous and heavily-weighted English test on university entrance exams, this situation is a forgone conclusion.

Part of this is a wide-spread belief that Japanese people need to be able to better communicate in English, the *lingua franca* of the world. This evokes Phillipson's criticism that "the projection of English as the 'world language' *par excellence* is symptomatic of globalization processes" (Phillipson, 1996, p. 439). Phillipson writes that "in the postcommunist states, English is being vigorously promoted as the royal road to democracy, a market economy and human rights" (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996, p. 431). Similarly, in Japanese policy, English has been seen as a tool to modernize the country in the Meiji era, and to turn around a moribund economy in the present age.

MEXT is vague on the relationship between foreign language education and international understanding / culture studies. Some take the policy as meaning students should be taught about international understanding, while not requiring language learning. Others interpret it in the opposite way, or as a mixture of both (Butler & Iino, 2005).

Morrow notes the discrepancy between widespread English education and societal need, "in Japan, English is clearly the number one foreign language... [however] its use within Japan is quite limited in range and depth" (Morrow, 2004, p. 5). Although there is a 'general and official acceptance of English' (Morrow, 2004, p. 7) in Japan, policy is clearly predicated, as Mori advocated over a century prior, on state goals rather than individual needs. As well, foreign language use continues to be instrumental rather than communicative.

Egalitarianism

There is an ideological conflict that while language policy remains egalitarian, it promotes individualized education. MEXT has not adequately clarified how it can promote equality in education while also supporting innovative schools and programs. For Inoguchi the egalitarian ideal of Japanese education has resulted in a systemic failure in English education. He is damning in his appraisal of the status quo saying Japan is a 'failed state', which has 'flunked', is 'falling further behind' other countries, and 'comes up short in terms of people who can make swift and appropriate decisions in an English milieu' (Inoguchi, 1999, p. 8). He advocates that rather than the current system where English is a required subject, it be made into an optional subject for students who are interested in civil/ foreign service careers.

Competence in English, the *lingua franca* of the world, is indispensable in order to achieve a bright and lively future for Japan. But to demand this ability of every single citizen would be totally impractical (Inoguchi, 1999, p. 11).

Suzuki (1999) and Butler & Iino (2005) likewise propose that English be an elective subject. Inoguchi further recommends abolishing the English component on entrance exams and overhauling the civil service to emphasise English ability for high-ranking bureaucrats. He claims that in the present situation people with foreign language ability are accorded a low social status of assistants to high-ranking officials, which he parallels with the Meiji era *Dejima*

island policy of keeping foreign-ness apart. Instead, upper ranking officials ought to be fluent in English in order for the country to prosper in the global economy.

Indigenous Languages

From the earliest days of foreign education policy, foreign language education has implicitly been English language education. It has been shown that this is largely related to positioning Japan advantageously. Yet, there are other languages which might be more appropriate for second language education from the viewpoint of linguistic rights.

Japan is often viewed as a homogeneous country where all people are from the same racial background and all speak the same language. However as David Suzuki and Oiwa Keibo point out in “The Japan We Never Knew” this is not an accurate view of the population. There are four groups of people that are often glossed over in the assumption of homogeneity: the Burakumin, Ainu, Okinawans and Zainichi. The Burakumin were a hereditary low caste of people which remains in many people’s consciousness today. The other three are distinct linguistic as well as cultural groups. Ainu are native people who inhabit the northern parts of the country. Okinawans live in the southern islands of what was once the kingdom of Ryukyu. Zainichi refers to Korean and Chinese nationals who are permanent, foreign residents of Japan (As opposed to rainichi – referring to recent or short-term residents.) The majority of Zainichi are Koreans who were brought to Japan to work as forced laborers during Japan’s colonial era.

Japan has two native languages besides Japanese; the language of the Ainu people and that of the Ryukyu islands. However, the matter of indigenous languages (other than Japanese) and indigenous cultures has historically been a non-issue. It is estimated that the native language of Okinawa may die out in the next few decades. The Ainu language has no more hope of longevity. The implicit and explicit policy of the past 400 years has stressed the homogeneity of the Japanese people, and leaves no room for the existence of minorities. Tukahara advocates a linguistic census to prepare a linguistic policy that protects the rights of these minorities, and perhaps lessen the Diffusion-of-English ideology. In recent years there has been more support for these distinct cultures. Okinawan food and culture have been much featured in media in recent years. And yet, the efforts to boost the two languages seem half-hearted at best. Alexander Akulov describes visiting an Ainu school in Hokkaido that teaches “Ainu by [sic] Japanese”. Words and phrases are written in Ainu but then discussed solely in Japanese. Neither the teacher nor the students can speak Ainu.

Korean, Portuguese and Chinese are other languages which might deserve more support in foreign / second language education. These three groups make up a small percentage of the population of Japan, but oftentimes the people from these cultural groups live in close proximity to others making them a significant presence in their local communities. Moreover,

for historical and geographic (for Korea and China) reasons there are strong links between Japan and Korea, China and Brazil. Interest in Korean and Brazilian culture among the general population (in TV and music, respectively) also points to the applicability of such non-English education. There is no good reason for English to have such an exclusive position in foreign language education in Japan. Japanese speakers of Korean, Chinese or Portuguese would be equally likely to contribute to the economic development of Japan.

Immersion Schools

If Japan's goal is truly to have the entire population (or even some small fraction) become bilingual, MEXT should adopt education policies that have proved effective in other countries. Canada would be a fine example to follow in this regard. Starting in the mid-1960's, Canada started a program of French immersion schools within Anglophone communities to promote bilingualism nationally. Starting in grade 1, students typically have all classes except for English Language Arts taught in French. Students rapidly acquire the language and are able to function effortlessly in their second language with native ease by the time they graduate from high school. However, in Japan, the school curriculum and textbooks must be approved by MEXT. In accordance with its egalitarian ideals MEXT does not accredit such a curriculum for public schools. There do exist immersion schools within Japan (instructing in English or Korean typically) but most are outside of the national education system. (For example, the Canadian Academy in Kobe or Osaka Chosen Koukyuu Gakko in Osaka instruct students in English and Korean respectively but are not accredited by MEXT. Katoh Gakuen in Shizuoka is a rare exception, becoming the first English immersion school to be accredited by MEXT.) Thus, for the most part, immersion schools are private (and often expensive) institutions which do not cater to the general population. Presently roughly 6% of the English student population in Canada study at a French immersion school. If immersion schools were widely accredited in Japan and even a similar small percentage of students enrolled in immersion education, it would lead to millions of bilingual speakers in the succeeding decades.

Conclusion

It is widely believed that Japanese are poor at learning English. There has been much hand-wringing over the fact that Japan is outperformed by most other nations on English tests, despite the fact that polices have been formed and reformed and great effort has been put into English education and promotion. By examining past and present policy regarding English it becomes clear that there are great contradictions between stated objectives and actual practice. Moreover it is obvious that English education has been consistently used as an instrument to further economic development while being held back by a fear of outside

influence.

... ambiguity and contradiction have been (and remain) the focus of policy initiatives and that these characteristics are the result of a conscious effort by policy-makers to ensure access to foreign ideas without sacrificing Japanese identity (Reesor, 2002, p. 41).

From the Meiji era through the post World War II era foreign language study has been intimately linked with 'modernization'. In 1872 Mori suggested Japan adopt English as the sole official language to ensure the commercial success of the nation. Present day language policies and practices have similar motivations, focusing on commercial over linguistic concerns. This theme continues into the present day. The make-English-an-official-language idea floated in 2000 and the MEXT 2003 Action Plan are blatant in using economic modernization as a rationale. "It appears that the main objective of language learning has become economic competitiveness" (Hatori, 2005, p. 45). There has been a tension between accommodation to foreign ideas and language, and a repulsion of all foreign influence.

Japan's links with the rest of the world are ... [a] continuing theme of the country's history and language planning. The tension between developing these contacts on the one hand, and maintaining Japan's 'uniqueness' and identity on the other, has long been a factor in language policy (Carroll, 2001, p. 7).

For all of the effort that has gone into foreign language education, individual bilingualism has not been greatly affected by policies. Education policies have been implemented purely for the use of foreign language as a means to knowledge, trade, and internationalization. The various bilingualism proposals have also been predicated on state rather than individual needs and aspirations. Meanwhile, the rights of distinct cultures within Japan have been largely ignored.

The current official agenda reveals the underlying political, social and economic concerns of the country. Japan continues to be concerned about its economic future and has enacted a policy that is open to foreign language to address this. However, the continued practices of English education suggest that Japan is also still wary of 'foreignness' and is still protecting its culture by not carrying out practices that would make foreign language policies effective.

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