

# Recent Reform to the English Education System in Japan

## 日本における最近の英語教育改革について

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**Abstract:** *Japan's English education system is going through a number of attempts to change itself from both inside and outside. It is a well-known fact that Japan's central government is highly committed to and has a strong control over public education. Recently, the government has been asserting great pressure on universities to reform their English education curricula, announcing a series of policy changes one after another over the past several years. In this paper, I first look at government reform plans that have had an effect on the English education system in Japan, then briefly summarize the country's history of English education to better understand why such reform was necessary and finally consider some additional issues that need to be tackled to further improve the English educational system.*

**Keywords:** *language education system, language policy, native-speakerism*

### 1. Introduction

Currently, Japanese Government is attempting to make drastic changes to its education system. It is world-widely known that Japan's central government is very much involved and has strong control over public education. Especially, in terms of English Education, the government has been asserting great emphasis, announcing a series of policy changes one after another in many different aspects for these past several years. Among them, the 2013 Reform Plan serves as the basis (MEXT, 2014a). Targeting the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the full-scale development of English Education started in 2014.

Looking back, from 2001 to 2002, the Curriculum Guidelines were revised and Foreign Language Activities in Elementary School started. A Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese Abilities in English was implemented and English Activities in Elementary School as well as English Classes in English (Junior High) started in 2002. Then, in 2013, English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization was announced, in which English became a regular subject in elementary schools; English classes taught in English in senior high schools; followed by November 2013's National University's Reform Plan.

Understanding language policies of a country can be a difficult task, because it is deeply related to the country's ideology, political and economic situations, as well as policy makers' intentions, with a range of historical experiences of socioeconomic and political changes. I'll take a brief look at Japan's case, one by one.

### 2. The National University Reform Plan

First of all, I'll look at the National University Reform Plan that was announced in November, 2013. It states that "The Third Mid-term Plan starting FY2016 aims to reform national universities to maintain competitiveness

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and create new added-value ideas by building a structure in which each university makes optimum use of its strengths and characteristics and encourages independent and autonomous improvement and development.”

In Japan, as of 2015, there are 86 national universities, 89 public universities and colleges, and 604 private ones out of 779 universities and colleges nationwide (MEXT, 2015). All the national universities, and most of the public universities and colleges in Japan, were converted into so as to say “independent corporate entities” 12 years ago. Since then, globalization, the declining number of children, the aging population, and the lower economic position of Japan due to fierce competition among Asian countries, have been the cause of significant change in Japan, not to mention the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima melt-down in 2011.

In order to cope with the situation, MEXT announced a plan to redefine the mission of national universities in 2013 (MEXT, 2014b) and the years 2014 and 15 have been designated as the “accelerated reform period”, in which they are expected to make plans to carry out reform in terms of emphasis on 1) universities taking optimum advantage of strengths and characteristics, 2) implementing globalization, 3) creating innovation, and 4) strengthening human resource development.

In particular, the principles that govern the management expense grants for national universities and evaluations are scheduled to be examined by 2015, and will be radically revised. If universities are able to come up with effective plans, the allotment for their management expenses grants will be increased; if not, it will be decreased by roughly 30%.

As a result, the 30 top universities designated will be receiving 400 billion yen out of the total of 1.07 trillion yen budget. The plan includes the introduction of an annual salary system for 10,000 educators, as well as recruiting non-Japanese researchers, for 1,500 full-time positions.

### **3. Japan Vision 2020**

In September 2013, MEXT Minister Shimomura was appointed the Minister in charge of preparations for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Upon assuming his new post, Shimomura announced “Japan Vision 2020” (MEXT, 2014c), a strategy that sets 2020 as the target year for the nation to head down a new path of growth by creating measures to revitalize not only Tokyo, but the entire nation through the combined efforts of the country as a whole.

MEXT’s “Japan Vision 2020” was put together by incorporating the ideas of young and mid-level MEXT employees with the opinions garnered from discussions with young athletes, artists and researchers. In the plan, there are a lot of ideas being publicized. Among them, promoting and strengthening English education plays a very important role in the plan. In fact, “Let’s achieve this by the 2020 Olympics” are the magic words these days among English educators in Japan.

### **4. Globalization Measures**

Let’s take a further look at the globalization measures listed in the aforementioned National University Reform Plan. The previously mentioned reform plan says, in order to “develop international-level educational and research bases and actively assist exchange students,” there are four target areas; 1) focus on supporting universities resolutely proceeding with internationalization by inviting educational-units from foreign universities, establishing joint graduate schools, actively employing foreign faculty, and increasing courses carried out in English; 2) establish a new system of government-industry collaboration that assists Japanese students studying overseas; 3) strategically accept foreign students by defining priority regions; and 4) build a system that promotes the local selection of students, utilizing overseas bases equipped to grant approval of admission prior to student arrival in Japan.

For #1, the so called super-global universities were selected, and I’ll talk about them in the next part.

### 1) Super-global Universities

Last year in September MEXT selected and announced 37 super-global universities in the position to strengthen their international competitiveness (MEXT, 2014d). Over the next 10 years, the 13 top universities will each receive about ¥420 million in annual subsidies (that's 3 million U.S. dollars) and the other 24 universities, leading globalization, will get about ¥170 million, which is 1.4 million U.S. dollars.

The plan was set forth aiming at having at least 10 Japanese universities on the list of the world's top 100. Applications were submitted by 104 universities. The 13 top universities include the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, Keio University and Waseda University. The 24 universities leading globalization include Chiba University, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, International Christian University and Sophia University. This was launched because the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University were the only Japanese schools to appear in the rankings of the world's top 100 universities released last autumn by a British education magazine in a similar survey.

### 2) New Outbound Plan to Support Study Abroad “TOBITATE 留学JAPAN”

According to MEXT (MEXT, 2015a) the number of Japanese students going to study abroad is decreasing year by year with its peak at the year 2004 in the past. Compared to China and Korea, our Asian friends, as is often times quoted, the number of students from Japan who are studying in the U.S. is very low now (IIE, 2015). Among the reasons for this is that Japanese students are said to be growing more introverted, or “inward-looking.” (Nikkei, 2013)

There are many explanations for this trend, but lack of economic support due to the long-lasting recession, avoiding postponing graduation due to studying abroad, and lack of English competency are at the top of the list. Also, studying abroad is considered to be disadvantageous to job-hunting, which begins in one's junior year in Japan, which coincides with the time that most students tend to study abroad.

In order to implement #2 of the plan, the outbound one, this new program was designed to double the number of students going out of the country to study to 120,000 students by the year 2020, from 60,000 as of 2010. It was first introduced in 2013 to help students make individual student-driven plans for studying abroad. The plan is called “トビタテ！留学JAPAN,” meaning the Fly Away! Study Abroad Program. (MEXT, 2015b)

With financial support from renowned businesses like these, MEXT and JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization) recently launched this support system. Eligible applicants are full-time undergraduate and graduate students at universities, colleges, and technical schools. The first quota for applicants was 300 (nationwide); then it was expanded to 500 in 2014. The breakdown for 2014 fall was 220 grants to students planning to study natural science and complex related areas (with an emphasis on natural resources and alternative energy); 80 to developing countries, including volunteering and cross-cultural experiences; 100 to the world's top level ranking universities; and another 100 to a variety of areas including sports, art, politics, administration, education, entrepreneurial pursuits, etc., who are expected to play an active role in the future in new areas of the global arena.

Unlike the usual Japanese scholarship, all financial aid is in the form of a grant, so recipients will not be expected to repay it.

In a similar vein, new inbound plans to support international students coming to Japan are being designed to support this population. In addition, the government is planning to increase the number of acceptances of international students coming to Japan. The number will more than double, so that Japan will be bringing in 300,000 international students per annum, by the year 2020. The current statistics indicate that there are about 140,000 students per year, based on information from the year 2012. (JASSO, 2015)

Previously in 2013, there established Global 30 Project (Global 30, 2013). It is a funding project that aims to promote internationalization of Japanese universities trying to accept excellent international students studying

in Japan. In short, in the selected 13 core universities, degree programs conducted in English and strengthening international student support, while they are expected to enhance inter-university network for sharing educational resources which can be jointly used by all Japanese universities.

## 5. English Education History

Now let me go into a little bit of the history of English education and see why it requires such drastic measures in this contemporary age.

It all started shortly after Japan was defeated in World War II, in the 1950s. There were not many people visiting from outside Japan at that time; in fact, even in the 1960s, during my childhood in a local city like Hirosaki, the only foreigners I saw were a few sisters and preachers in the convents and other churches, in Japan on religious missions.

Not many audio-visual devices were available to study foreign languages in those days, compared to modern times. It was mostly the radio; and then televisions gained massive popularity at the time of previous Tokyo Olympics in 1964.

Naturally, English is taught through reading and writing only. The foundation of English education in Japan lies here. There were no MP3 players, CDs, PodCasts, YouTubes, nor DVDs. We saw movies at the movie theaters. It was in the 1970s when I started to listen to English radio programs to study English, because English classes began in junior high school. I used to wake up at 6 in the morning to listen to the radio. Then, my father bought me a compact tape recorder. I used it attaching a cable to the radio to record the program with a lot of noise.

In 1970, the Osaka Expo took place and a considerable number of people from outside came to Japan. It was the second English boom after the Tokyo Olympics. I remember my father listening to the high-level radio English program every morning, which was totally puzzling to me as a junior-high student. The ideal speaker of English for us was, of course, an American.

At that time, to many Japanese, everything from America was considered to be good, something to be sought out. The commercial products, lifestyles, overall culture, and the English language, were all imported from the United States. The word American was the equivalent pronoun for “foreigners” to many Japanese, and foreigners signified sophisticated, idealistic people, which is more or less, still true with younger generation now in Japan, just as McKenzie (2013) suggests in a number of surveys he or other researchers conducted in Japan, which indicates that “students evaluated the American variety of English more positively in terms of status than any of the outer-circle speech varieties.”

From the 1970s to 80s, the idea of “local English” was beginning to prevail. Before that, we tended to think that perfect pronunciation like native-speakers was what we had to achieve as the goal of English learning. However, with the world changing, a shrinking world and an expanding economy, we started to think that Japanese pronunciation was okay, and what mattered the most was to convey our thoughts to people outside Japan.

Also, in 1975, criticism against the existing English education in schools began, with people saying that it was not useful at all because people could not speak English, despite spending a number of years learning English at school.

In 1979, the TOEIC test was first introduced. The need for training Japanese people with English abilities became fierce, and speaking and listening, especially, were emphasized even more. Business English and international communication were the focal points to be cultivated in the generations to follow. At that time, the introduction of English to elementary school began to be discussed seriously at a government panel meeting on education.

In 1987, the JET program, The Japan Exchange and the Teaching Program, was launched, and the government started to invite young people from outside Japan as ALTs, assistant language teachers. This is an ongoing program

inviting about 4000 to 6000 people a year from abroad; and, as you can see here, people from various countries are coming to Japan to teach English, talk about their cultures, and promote cross-cultural understanding.

Likewise, in 1980s, people were striving to achieve even greater English abilities, as a nation, and this continued until the economy burst like a bubble in 1987.

The times that followed were difficult in Japan. In the bubble era, studying abroad was popular; Japanese business people were studying for MBAs in the States, and there were aspiring young people who were heading abroad in order to gain competency to contribute to society.

However, after the economic crisis, the so-called “inward-looking” trend has taken over with the younger generations. Studying abroad is not considered an advantage for college graduates in getting a job. Neither parents nor students themselves can afford to go outside the country. Compared to other East Asian countries like China and Korea, the number of Japanese students going abroad has declined sharply.

## **6. Why the Need for Reform?**

In 1999 Prime Minister Obuchi indicated that English should be the official second language of Japan and this attracted a lot of debate in the following year. However, with his sudden and unexpected death, his mission was never actualized.

In July of 2002, an English education policy called “A Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese Abilities in English” was released by MEXT, and it attracted so much attention that it got all of Japanese society involved. What’s more, this became the basics of all the reform plans that are being announced one after another now.

## **7. English Education Reform at Present**

Coming back to the present, based on the aforementioned 2002 principles, most of the reform plans are being carried out or are being planned now. In 2014 the Expert Government Panel on Improving English Education declared that Japan should strive to produce “students with among the best English skills in Asia.” It also suggested using TOEFL or other third-party tests as part of university entrance exams.

In elementary schools, the so-called “foreign language activities” started from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, English classes became regular classes. As far as goals for these classes, “making students able to understand fundamental English conversation” and “getting students used to writing the English alphabet” are the stated aims.

Third- and fourth grade classes are mainly taught by regular class teachers together with ALTs, while fifth and sixth grade classes are handled by regular class teachers with high-level English ability. The local boards of education provides teacher training using specialists in English teaching, although the issue of student grading must still be tackled. Students in elementary, junior high and high school need to be evaluated based on what they can do with English, not just test scores, using can-do statements like the CEFR.

As of October 2014, the Panel drafted a report on improvements to college entrance examinations, tentatively called the Standard Evaluation Tests for College Applicants (my own translation). In 5 years’ time, the Center exam (which is a common college exam right now) would be redesigned and college applicants are going to have 2 opportunities a year to take this standardized test, instead of the single chance in the existing system.

The second exams that students take following the Center test are given by each individual college and are written tests right now. The idea is to replace these with interviews, essays, and group discussions, in order for the applicants to demonstrate their abilities in ways that may be evaluated from various perspectives.

It was suggested that the English exam could be replaced by outside standard proficiency tests like TOEFL to examine applicants’ four skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The Panel intends to implement the plan in fiscal year 2021.

## 8. Issues to Be Addressed in the New Reform

I need to explain a little bit about why this reform has some issues to be addressed, although it may sound perfect. I would say, in most cases, the necessary budget is not yet allocated for these plans. Let's take an example in elementary school English Education.

Elementary school English has had a lot of issues up to now. Let me go over the background a little bit more.

### 1) Activities, not a subject

Before 2008 when curriculum guidelines were redesigned after about 10 years from the previous version, the subject of English was simply part of an Integrated Study Subject (総合学習の時間) in the elementary school in which pupils learn by projects, fieldtrips, etc. English was not a formal subject and was called "international understanding activities," which has been the stand point taken by MEXT for long.

We had to wait until 2011, when English was formerly introduced to be taught in the elementary school for the first time as a mandatory subject. However, there's a contradictory situation created by MEXT. In elementary school, "English is not a formal subject in the sense that qualified English teachers are not required to teach it, and, it is not graded in the same way as the other formal subjects, and there is no MEXT authorized textbook provided" (Yoshida, 2012). No teachers, no grading, and no textbook. MEXT has labeled elementary school English "English Activities," and is not teaching the language in order to "form a foundation for student communication abilities," as is still stated in the curriculum guidelines.

### 2) Teachers

Teachers who teach English are regular elementary school classroom teachers, who have never been trained to teach English. Teachers with qualifications to teach English have not been employed to teach elementary school pupils.

The regular elementary school teachers in charge of the class are expected to teach English without any prior knowledge nor expertise, in addition to a number of other subjects that they are required to teach in elementary school. Of course they learned English as a subject in their own school days, but, as you know, learning and teaching are two different things. Having knowledge and the skills to teach are two totally different matters.

It all started in this way. Of course, the teachers on the front lines have been very conscientious and managed to make time out of their busy schedule and strived to find a way to teach English through a number of ingenious attempts, even though it is not their specialty.

In the 2014 reform, this absence of expert teachers does not seem to be tackled because it states that regular class teacher will teach the English classes.

Now that it is a formal subject, the teachers are required to give grades without any formal technical knowledge, which I think makes it impossible to carry out like this.

### 3) Textbook

Usually all the textbooks used in the elementary school are devised by publishers but they have to go through the strict censorship by MEXT. However, English textbooks were not provided, until 2008 when there was one textbook to cover both 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, called "English Notebook," issued by MEXT itself. After that, in 2011, when it was determined to be a formal subject, the revised version called "Hi, Friends" was published. There is still only one textbook to cover grades 3 to 6. Although it was not mandatory to use this textbook, the non-existent curriculum coupled with the scarcity of specialists in public elementary schools created anxiety among the teachers to rely on this book in the early stages.



#### 4) Absence of Curriculum

As of now, there is literally no curriculum available for English in the elementary school. A very abstract curriculum states that English classes are foreign language activities, rather than language classes, because MEXT wanted to prevent young learners from starting to hate learning English at an early age. Therefore, familiarizing pupils with English sounds is the main objective of these foreign language activities. The curriculum guidelines say that the objectives are:

“To form the foundation of communication abilities through foreign languages while developing an understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages.”

However, it is confusing to the teachers on the front line, because it is almost impossible to teach a language without written words or letters.

The most recent reform seems to refer to this, adding: “getting students used to writing the English alphabet,” although I wonder whether students will be satisfied with learning letters only, as a considerable number of pupils are already learning English outside of school.

### 9. The Way to Go

Lastly I'd like to talk a little bit about the idea of Global Englishes and native speakerism in Japan and share my little idea about the future directions to take.

I used to work for a Tokyo-based American computer company and this multi-national company employed about 60% of its people from outside Japan at that time.

Because it was an American company our common language at the work place was English. In addition to the standard, American English, there were Japanese accents, Australian, New Zealand, Korean, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Chinese (at that time Hong Kong), just to name a few.

According to Jenkins (2015) the number of speakers of English is possibly as many as two billions in the early twenty first century. Currently there are 75 territories where English is spoken either as L1 or L2, and its total number of L1/L2 English speakers amounts to 329 million and 430 million respectively. Together, these speakers constitute almost a third of the total population of the said territories. Therefore, it probably is not an exaggeration to say that English is already not a language of native speakers any more.

Therefore, English for Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL, who use English for intercultural communication, are now arguably the world's largest English-using group, as Jenkins says. Most of its speakers are non-native, having other mother tongues, but using English as a common language.

I'd like to remind you the model diagram that explains the spread of English by Kachru; which Jenkins calls, “the most useful and influential model” (Figure 1).

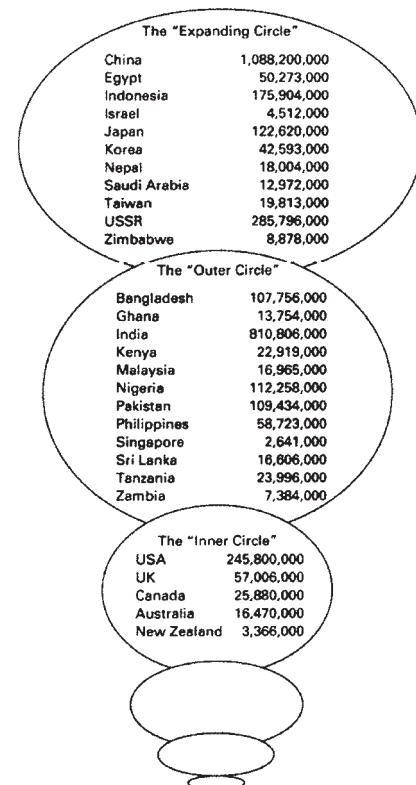


Figure. 1  
Kachru's three-circle model of  
World Englishes (From: Jenkins, 2015)

In this model there are inner circles for native speakers, like the U.S. and the U.K; and outer circles for ESL (English as a second language) countries, such as India or Malaysia, and expanding circles for people who speak English as a foreign language (EFL) like China or Japan. Especially in outer circle countries, there already exists a language considered to be the norm in its own society. Because they are developing their own standards, they don't necessarily have to conform to the norm of inner circles.

However, a country like Japan is still a norm-dependent country. Native-speakerism has its deep roots in the culture. Although this is very contradictory, I myself think that it is the best to follow the standard of native speakers and it is dead wrong to use English with Japanese accent despite making a lot of mistakes every day while speaking with students.

According to Houghton (2014), this native-speakerism has been depriving Japanese people of the power not to be afraid of making mistakes or speaking with a heavy Japanese accent. It is making us insecure when speaking English and unable to exert ourselves and speak with confidence.

Educators like us are also responsible for this kind of attitude by discouraging students to speak English with a Japanese accent. Here in this country, it is not too much to say that native-speakerism hinders EFL speakers from contributing to communication. Because it is nonetheless inevitable to be speaking differently from the native-speaker norm, it is taking away from international communication even more by our paying too much attention to trying to be the norm-speaker. It is high time for Japan to get out of this vicious circle and take a big leap into the world ocean of global Englishes.

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed English education reform that has been recently implemented at universities in Japan. I have also described the history and development of this reform in order to look for reasons why it was necessary and to address additional issues that may need to be considered in the next few years. Among these issues I have shown the following to be especially important for the overall improvement of English classes taught at elementary schools as a subject. First, I believe the lack of a formal curriculum and the lack of available training for English teachers impedes students' progress with the language. In addition, there also needs to be more varied and suitable textbooks for each level. As policy makers continue to look for ways to improve English education in Japan, they need to provide both structure to the classrooms and guidance to the instructors. For the overall success of English education in Japan, we must consider how globalization is closely linked to the expanding World Englishes and together they open our country's door to the world.

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