Reforming The Japanese English Education System:

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日本の英語教育の改革：２００３年行動計画

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1. Introduction.

In the 2003 Action Plan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) outlined guidelines for cultivating Japanese with English Ability. These recommendations are partly in response to Japan’s poor showing on English proficiency tests, such as TOEIC, and the need for employees who are able to work in an increasingly borderless economy (MEXT 2002; MEXT 2003; Mizui 2005). The current education system, introduced during the American Occupation, was “mostly based on the principle of equality of opportunity and provision of a uniformly high quality of basic education (Okada, 1999, 173).” Since its introduction, there have been attempts to reform it to include such things as more diversity and flexibility in secondary school education. Opposition to this reform has come in particular from the Japanese Teachers’ Union (Nikkyouso) and the Japanese Socialist Party because of a belief that changes to the current system “would lead to the danger of a return to the class-based multi-track system of pre-war Japan (Okada, 1999, 175).” As a result of this opposition and the nature of the policy-making process in Japan, few significant changes have taken place (Schoppa, 1991a). One area that has enjoyed broad support is the internationalization of the education system. English Education, in particular, has seen some notable changes. The government has recently been promoting progressive English Education programs emphasizing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The most visible of these schools have been designated as Super English Language High Schools (SELHis) for three years in order to promote practical research and disseminate findings regarding the improvement of English language education. Although these programs have received a lot of media attention (Matsuzawa, 2005a, 2005b), their apparent uniqueness is questionable. Schoppa (1991b) argues that entrance exams have exercised enormous influence, and “in the absence of examination reform, however, teachers are unlikely to be able to resist parent pressure and take advantage of any new flexible guidelines.” This paper will examine whether CLT has been incorporated into regular and innovative English programs as proposed in the 2003 Action plan. In order to do this, concepts used in discussing and evaluating educational reform will first be introduced. This will be followed by an examination of the degree to which CLT has been adopted into classroom practice and the factors which have prevented its adoption. The paper will end with a discussion of whether the current direction should be continued.


Educational reform in Japan has, for the most part, been discussed in terms of the need for more school choice (Liberalism), decreased uniformity between schools (Diversification), and a relaxation of MEXT regulations (Flexibility), and evaluated in terms of Equality of Educational Opportunity and Meritocracy. In
order to maintain continuity with other research in this area (Schoppa 1991a; Hood 2001b), the terms used in those studies will also be used here. Definitions will be based upon Schoppa (1991a).

**Liberalism** (jiyuka) and educational reform are concerned with providing students with the ability to choose from a wider range of schools. One justification for this is that schools would, in turn, need to improve as they come into competition with other schools. Currently, unless one chooses a private elementary or junior high school – a relatively expensive option for most – the only real choice is which high school or university to attend. Due to two recent changes, however, students can choose from a wider range of high schools. First, many prefectures have merged school zones, thereby increasing the number of schools to choose from. Second, as of 2004, admission based on recommendation has been expanded to include ‘self-recommendation’ (jiko suisen). In special English or International Culture (IC) (Kokusai Kyouyou) programs, approximately 20% of the spaces are filled through recommendation. Therefore, even if a student is not accepted initially to one school, he can still take an entrance examination at another. As a result, it could be argued that a degree of liberalism, albeit small, has been introduced into the system.

**Diversification** is the decrease in uniformity between schools. Conservatives, for example, feel “the reintroduction of multiple tracks at the secondary and university levels (Schoppa, 1991a, 27)” is necessary to meet the needs of the economy. As mentioned earlier, this idea has been met with resistance, but the introduction of innovative English programs with a higher concentration of specialty subjects does appear to segregate students at an earlier age.

Increased flexibility (junanka) in the application of MEXT’s regulations would allow schools to cater to students’ interests, motivation and needs. The impression I was left with after attending the MEXT conference concerning SELHis in March 2005 is that SELHIs, 100 as of April 2005, have been granted a lot of flexibility in implementing their programs. Two aspects that differentiate them from regular programs is the number of hours devoted to English and class content. It appears that most of these schools have increased the number of classes related to English and International Culture at the expense of science classes. These schools are also able to deviate from the Course of Study for Foreign Languages. Based on some of the presentations at the conference, a wide range of programs have been implemented.

The following principles are commonly used when evaluating the education system. **Equality** concerns the removal of any barrier preventing students from taking advantage of educational opportunities. A stronger form of this is **Egalitarianism** - a belief that opportunities are equal only when results are equal (Coleman, 1966, quoted in Okada, 1999, 175). **Meritocracy** in Japan is predicated on the belief that what distinguishes students is the amount of effort they put into studying and not differences in abilities (Cummings, 1980, 129, quoted in Hood, 2001b, 87). The strong form of Egalitarianism, that insists that students’ achievements should be equal, is in direct contrast with Meritocracy. In Japan, the balance between these two principles has varied according to how Article III of the Fundamental Law of Education (Figure 1) has been interpreted. Initially, opposition to a return to the pre-war system meant that equality of opportunity was emphasized, a position favored by Nikkyousou and the now non-existent Japan Socialist Party. But these concerns have given way to economic concerns. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party and **Zaikai** (business representatives) have been working towards producing an education system that is diversified enough to meet the needs of the economy, which has meant a move towards meritocracy (Okada, 1999). A good example of this trend is the schools with unique English programs. Students are typically admitted based on grade point average, a listening test and interviews conducted in both English and Japanese. Since admission is determined
through achievement, one could argue that these programs pave the way for the most significant departure from egalitarianism.

All the people shall have the right to an equal education corresponding to their abilities (noryoku ni ojite) and shall not be subject to educational discrimination on account of race, creed, sex, social status, economic position, or family origin.

Figure 1: Article III of the Fundamental Law of Education.

I will next turn to an analysis of the 2003 Action Plan, examining three recommendations for improving English Classes.


The recommendations outlined in the 2003 Action Plan to improve English Classes are (1) to conduct a majority of English classes in English and utilize communicative activities, (2) small-group teaching and ability streaming and (3) form progressive English education programs in junior and senior high schools. I would next like to explore whether these recommendations should be pursued further as well as the factors that have impeded their implementation so far.

3.1 Recommendation 1: Communicative Language Teaching.

The first recommendation put forward by MEXT has been the promotion of CLT, not just in the special English and International Culture courses, but also in regular courses since 1989 (Taguchi, 2005, 3). Interestingly, this direction was taken without first seeking teachers’ opinions and its impact has been limited by “yakudoku, an entrenched traditional method of instruction; high stakes university entrance exams, and inadequate pre- and in-service teacher education programs (Gorsuch, 2001).” My own personal observation of three general English high school classes in which the same textbook was being used revealed that each teacher employed a very different method, only one of which I would argue could be described as communicative. Furthermore, the focus of research at this school is task-based learning, an approach within CLT in which the central pedagogic unit is an activity that emphasizes student production without prescribing the language necessary to complete the task itself. At this school, however, there was some confusion over what constitutes a task, and as a result, almost all pedagogic activities were referred to as tasks. Although this school is making a concerted effort to employ a communicative approach, there is still a gap between this goal and classroom practice. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise as Lamie (1998)’s survey of 100 Japanese high school teachers showed that “a significant number of teacher trainees received no training in communicative language teaching methodology (77%) (Lamie, 1998, quoted in Lamie, 1998, 521).” On a positive note, this problem has been addressed in the Action Plan. Junior and senior high school English teachers must attend intensive in-service training focused, at least in Nagano Prefecture, on CLT.

In addition to a reliance on traditional methods and a lack of training to date, university examinations continue to exert a strong influence on teacher practice. Known as the ‘washback effect (Brown, J.D., quoted in Leonard, 1998),’ this manifests itself in a majority of class time being spent on grammar (Guest, 2000, 23; Taguchi, 2005, 10). Unfortunately, grammar, as taught in high schools, accounts for less than 15% of the
university entrance examinations (Guest, 2000, 27). An examination of the in-service training material for high school teachers used in Nagano Prefecture in August 2004 reveals that this is common knowledge (Shiokawa, Sakai, Urano, 2005, 120). Although the general nature of the problem is understood, at this point in time, there is a gap between the 2003 Action Plan recommendations and current practice.

3.2 Recommendation 2: Ability Streaming.

The streaming of students according to their ability represents the second main recommendation. Innovative programs provide students who excel in English with an alternative to regular programs. Although there are a limited number of choices, this choice comes at the expense of equality. In Nagano Prefecture, for example, less than 8% of the schools offer such a program and class size is limited to 40 students. If the program I observed is representative of other programs, then the ability of the students admitted to these programs is not solely due to their junior high school education. There appears to be a tendency for the students to be from socio-economically advantaged families. At this school, a teacher estimated that 40% of the students have participated in home stays or have studied English outside of junior high school. These are costly options therefore it is unlikely that socio-economically disadvantaged children have access to these programs to the same extent as more privileged children. At the same time, this problem is not limited to these programs but is common to all schools with academic tracks (Okano and Tsuchiya, 1999, 241; Hood 2001a). So, although some schools have the flexibility to offer innovative programs, the programs themselves are not truly meritocratic as the English ability of the applicants is not reflective of their public junior high school education.

3.3 Recommendation 3: Promoting Innovative English Programs.

The final recommendation concerning improving English classes involves the promotion of innovative English language programs. Schools with these programs have more flexibility in the application of MEXT regulations. A greater number of English and International Culture courses are offered at the expense of science courses. Furthermore, teachers have more flexibility in what is taught compared to the regular program in which teachers must follow the Course of Study for Foreign Languages. These unique programs have, however, lost some of their initial appeal as the lack of science courses means it is almost impossible to gain admission to science universities. In Nagano Prefecture, of the eight schools that offer such programs, at least two are unable to fill their 40-student roster and an examination of two successful programs reveals that, 80% of the students are female. Although increased flexibility has lead to diversification, it appears that this choice, in Nagano Prefecture at least, is primarily limited to female students interested in non-science majors.

Another criticism is that the SELHi program has been compromised by the government’s policy of maintaining equality between schools through the regular transfer of teachers. This automatic rotation greatly affected the implementation of the SELHi programs as teachers were transferred in the middle of the three-year research program (Matsuzawa, 2005b).

For students unable to enter these special English or IC programs, they have many choices, but there is less flexibility within the regular program. The Course of Study must be followed and there is little time to deviate from this (Cummings, 1980, 128 quoted in Hood, 2001b, 87). In an interview with a university professor responsible for in-service training for high school teachers, it was his opinion that innovative programs were popular among second tier schools as a means to attract students. The top academic schools, in his opinion, were less likely to adopt such programs as they have no shortage of applicants who are willing to
study the current MEXT curriculum. The primary focus of the top-tier schools was getting students into the best university possible, which means a focus on entrance examinations. It is difficult to know how this focus has affected classroom practice but in a personal conversation with a teacher at one top-tier school, there was resistance to his implementation of CLT by other subject teachers as a result of a drop in the students’ mock test scores. This drop was attributed to his change in methodology. Despite MEXT’s approval of CLT, this example is illustrative of the resistance English teachers face. This is not to say that choosing a special English program is a decision not to attend a top university. 70% of the 2005 graduating class of one International Culture program was admitted to public universities through the self-recommendation system. A result attributed to the students’ ability to express themselves in front of others – a skill emphasized in such programs.

4. Conclusion.

This paper has examined the recommendations concerning Communicative Language Teaching contained within the 2003 Action Plan as proposed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

Before discussing whether the move towards CLT should be continued, it is necessary to first investigate the obstacles that have prevented the adoption of CLT within schools themselves. Of primary concern is the issue of how to test students. It has been argued that there will be little change if the university entrance examination system is not changed. Even though grammar is no longer a central focus of these exams, it appears that classroom practice has not altered significantly to account for this change (Guest 2000; Taguchi 2005). Furthermore, although MEXT promotes CLT, it continues to quantify attainment levels through external examinations (MEXT 2003). Whether these levels are an indication of communicative ability is questionable, at this point in time, however, they probably are the most realistic measures. Tests of communicative ability, such as the Oral Proficiency Index, are too time-consuming to administer on a nationwide scale. It is also important to point out one promising change to the testing system. In 2006, a separate listening section will be added to the University Center Examination and could account for 20% of the total score. It is unclear whether universities will require this for admission, but if so, this is likely to necessitate a positive change in classroom practice towards CLT.

The next major obstacle is classroom practice that remains focused on grammar and vocabulary to the exclusion of fostering communicative ability, and results from a lack of appropriate support for teachers. The goals prescribed by MEXT are unrealistic given the amount of time allotted to English in the curriculum (Hato, 2005). Japan has set the same attainment goals as Canada has for French as a Second Language in bilingual immersion programs, and although French and English are linguistically similar compared to Japanese and English, there is more than twice as many class hours devoted to French in Canada as there is to English in Japan. Furthermore, it is difficult to expect teachers to adopt the CLT approach given the amount and nature of teacher training (Lamie 1998). Training is now mandatory but it is still too early to evaluate whether this training is effective in changing classroom practice.

In light of the above discussion, the question that remains is whether the flexibility enjoyed by special English and IC programs should be extended to regular programs. Those opposed may argue that the introduction of special programs has come at the expense of equality. Socio-economically advantaged children are more likely to attend cram school and, by extension, more likely to be accepted to special English programs. This problem, however, also plagues the competition to get into a top academic school.
On the other hand, provided the goal is to teach English for communication, it is hard to argue against increased flexibility. Even though MEXT has been promoting CLT since 1998, teachers and schools have been slow to take advantage of it due to the influence of entrance examinations and a lack of training in CLT. A more relevant question perhaps is whether increased flexibility will be sufficiently supported. To date, this support has come in the form of the introduction of the listening test and mandatory training seminars but it remains to be seen how much this affects classroom practice.

References.


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要旨
平成１５年３月、文部科学省は「英語が使える日本人」の育成のための行動計画を提示した。その主な狙いは、英語の授業を改善し、授業中に積極的に英語を使用することによりコミュニケーション能力の育成を図ることであった。
本論文の目的は、この狙いが特に SELHi で、どの程度達成されたかを検証し、その結果によって、一般の高校の英語教育においてもこれらの狙いが達成可能か否かを予測しようとするものである。
上記の文科省の計画は、英語科や国際科などで特別プログラムを実践している高校ではある程度成功している。これらの学校では、カリキュラムや教育の方法等についてある程度の柔軟性が許されていながらである。しかし、このような柔軟性は他の学校でも許されるべきではないだろうか。もし普通の高校の英語教育に対してこれらの柔軟性が許されないのであれば、教育制度の中に、ある程度の不公平さが残るであろう。特別プログラムの導入が教育の平等性を損なう恐れがあるのである。社会経済的に豊かな家庭の子どもは、塾に行くなど学外教育の機会に恵まれ、結果的に特別プログラムをもつ高校に入学しやすくなっている。この問題は、レベルの高い学校への入学においても同様である。
また、文科省は 1998 年から CLT を強力に導入しているものの、学校現場には未だ十分浸透していない。これは、受験のための授業が優先されたり、CLT の研修が十分なされていないためである。
（注：CLT は、コミュニケーション能力の育成を目標とする指導法）柔軟性が高い文部科学省の狙いが成否するか否かは、実際の授業に当たっての支援がどれだけ得られるかが課題である。大学入試センター試験における listening test の導入や、英語教員の強制的な研修によって、2003 年の行動計画に盛られた教育改革が推進されるであろうが、このことが日常の教育実践にどの程度の影響を与えるかは、今後に待たなければならない。

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'The Self-Appropriation of the Knower'
and the Meaning of ‘Teaching’

Ryoko TAMURA

『認識者の自己同化』と『教える』ということの意味

田村亮子

Introduction

In the past years, I have been searching for the academic field, the problems, in which, Bernard J.F. Lonergan’s cognitional theory can help to solve. If I can find such a field, the field can be a path through which Lonergan’s idea may be recognized and its ever-increasing importance can be acknowledged. There seems to be one such area; that is, the area of education.

Education in Japan has been facing a serious crisis over the past twenty years. The entire structure of education, which has been accepted as an ideal for the past sixty years, has begun to collapse, and the problems, which have been developing and spreading slowly in all areas and levels of education system, has been brought to the public attention. Two among those problems have had the undivided attention of many Japanese. They are the increase of the number of pupils and students who refuse to go to school and the rapid decline of their academic level and learning ability. Those problems led us to gradual recognition that it is the educational system itself and the general idea concerning education that is at the root of the crisis.

In order to sew up these rips in the educational system which have been ignored for a long time, various attempts have been made. Those attempts themselves, however, have become the cause of further confusion. For example, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of the Japanese government proposed various changes in terms of the structure, method and contents of education from elementary schools to graduate schools and put those changes into practice in rapid succession. Some of those changes may be helpful, but many of those have been aggravating the confusion among teachers, students, and parents.

Yutaka Saeki, a leading scholar of educational theories, confessed in one of his recent writings as follows.

I feel as if I am waking up from a bad dream I have kept dreaming for a long time…. The bad dream is misunderstanding of the meaning of ‘understanding.’…. What is rooted in this misunderstanding is misunderstanding of other terms like ‘learning,’ ‘teaching,’ ‘learning ability,’ ‘intellect,’ ‘thinking ability,’ and all the rest.