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A Way Forward**

Nyree JACOBS

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ナイリー ジェーコブス

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The Effectiveness of Bilingual Education in Japan: A Way Forward

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Abstract

Japan favours English as their preferred language in bilingual education. However, access to programs can be limited, teaching methodologies have shown to be inconsistent, and revised curriculum guidelines for English education have proven problematic for educators. This report aims to discuss English as a global language and its position as a front-runner in bilingual education in Japan, highlight challenges for educators, and offer possible solutions for more effective English education.

概要

日本ではバイリンガル教育において英語が好まれる。しかしながら、教育プログラムに触れる機会には限りがあり、教育方法も一貫性がなく、英語教育のためのカリキュラム改正指針は教育者にとって問題であることが明らかにされている。この報告書の目的は、グローバル言語としての英語と日本におけるバイリンガル教育の最有力候補としての英語の地位について議論し、教育者にとっての問題点を浮き彫りにし、より効果的な英語教育のための解決法を提示することである。

Keywords: Bilingualism, English Education, Japan

Introduction

As a result of globalisation, English has become the world's lingua franca, and is considered a necessity to effectively engage in international economic, political, and social discourse (Sakamoto, 2012). As a result, Japan favours English as their second language of choice in bilingual education over languages from countries that are closer in proximity, such as Korea and China, in an attempt to raise their English profile (Sakamoto, 2012). However, in 2012, Japan ranked 29th out of the 30 Asian countries in Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (Sakamoto, 2012). Furthermore, in 2014, Japan ranked 26th out of 60 countries on the English Proficiency Index (EPI) conducted by EF (Education First), again ranking as one of the lowest among the Asian countries (Japan ranks 26th, 2014). These results have prompted widespread speculation that English language learners in Japan are failing to show improvement in contrast to other Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia, who have shown a significant improvement in English language proficiency, reflecting a lack of effectiveness in English language education in Japan (English skills of Japanese students, 2016). Although Japan is attempting to rectify their current position, several obstacles must be addressed for

them to provide effective English education and become a bilingual (i.e. Japanese-English) nation (Sakamoto, 2012).

This report will first look at English as an international language and a global language, followed by a discussion of the concept of 'bilingualism', including definitions and distinctions. Next, bilingual education in Japan will be considered, with a focus on historical influences, current policies and teaching methodologies, as well as student, teacher and public perceptions. The discussion section will address some of the major obstacles that Japan faces in moving towards more effective English education, and will provide some suggestions to help overcome these barriers.

English as a Global Language

As a result of globalisation, English has spread throughout the world and taken on many forms. In the 1970's, the concept of English as an international language (EIL) emerged, defined by Smith (1976, in Nakamura, 2002) as "a language that is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another" (p. 67). International business has been identified as the main reason for the emergence of EIL, and nowadays, competence in English is a common requirement for positions in large corporations (Samida & Takahashi, 2011). Another important reason English has become an international language is the influence of pop culture, through music, fashion, film, and fast-food restaurants (Samida & Takahashi, 2011). Several dialects of English have emerged in countries where English is used for business purposes, which can be attributed to the influence of culture, and the language users in those countries (Samida & Takahashi, 2011). For international business purposes, EIL evolved out of a necessity to communicate in international contexts, and to facilitate mutual understanding (Samida & Takahashi, 2011). EIL includes a reduced vocabulary, simpler sentences, and word choice based on cultural awareness to avoid miscommunications (Samida & Takahashi, 2011).

A global language has been described by David Crystal (1997, in Nunan, 2003) as one which is not only spoken as a first language by a majority of people in a number of countries, but a language that attracts recognition for having a special role in every country (Nunan, 2003; Samida & Takahashi, 2011). The concept of English as a global language is inconsistent throughout the world, and varies based on several factors including inter-ethnic relations, the local political situation, other languages spoken in the area, and cultural attitudes (Baker, 2011). English as a global language has been divided into three broad categories: countries where English is the mother tongue for the majority of the population (such as Australia or The USA), countries where English serves as the official language (India, Singapore), and countries where English is the priority foreign language, and is used in multinational communications (Japan, China) (Baker, 2011; Nunan, 2003). The spread of English throughout the world is sometimes perceived as a positive characteristic of globalisation that unifies cultures and enables multinational communication. Conversely, the spread has also been viewed unfavourably as contributing to the loss of minority languages, colonization, and linguistic imperialism (Baker, 2011).

Bilingualism: distinctions and definitions

Bilingualism is a term that encompasses many dimensions that often interact and overlap (Baker, 2011). Some suggest that bilingualism starts from knowledge of a few words and phrases in a foreign language, whereas others believe bilingualism begins from the production of “complete and meaningful utterances in a second language” (Edwards, 2004, p. 8). Edwards (2004) points out that “competence in more than one language can be approached at both individual and social levels” (p.7), which implies that bilingualism can be viewed as an individual’s possession (*individual bilingualism*), and as the possession of a group or community (*societal bilingualism*) (Baker, 2011).

At an individual level, a distinction is also made between a person’s language ability and language use in two languages, highlighting that bilinguals commonly use their languages in different contexts, with different people, and for a variety of purposes (Baker, 2011). The degree to which an individual is considered bilingual is a point of contention further complicated by the presence of four basic language skills: speaking, reading, listening, and writing, each requiring consideration in the assessment of bilingualism; strength in one skill is not an indication of strength in another (Edwards, 2004). Many tests have been developed to measure bilingualism. However, concerns have been raised about the validity of some forms of testing such as self-assessment procedures (Edwards, 2004). A group of bilinguals who have been identified as having equal competences in both languages across various settings have been termed *balanced bilinguals*, although it is recognized that these circumstances are rare (Baker, 2011; Edwards, 2004). In addition, it’s possible for the balance to exist at both high and low levels of competence in both languages, making this concept problematic (Baker, 2011). Other views of bilingualism include the monolingual or fractional view and the holistic view. The fractional view of the bilingual sees “two monolinguals in one person” (Baker, 2011, p. 9). In contrast, from a holistic perspective, bilinguals are seen as “a complete linguistic entity”, who demonstrate a degree of communicative competence across diverse contexts (Baker, 2011, p. 12). The term *semilingual* has negative connotations associated, and has been used to describe bilinguals who have under-developed competences in both their languages (Baker, 2011). More recent models of language competence, such as Bachman’s Model of Language Competence (1990, in Baker, 2011), identify both linguistic competence (ie. grammar and vocabulary), and pragmatic competence (language use across diverse social and cultural settings) as contributing factors to overall language competence.

Bilingual education in Japan

– Background

Although the largest percentage of foreigners living in Japan has historically been made up of Chinese and Koreans, Japanese junior and senior high schools, who since 2002 have been required to teach a foreign language, most commonly choose to teach English rather than Chinese or Korean (Sakamoto, 2012). This reflects Japan’s attitude towards English as a desired skill linked with socio-economic prestige (Sakamoto, 2012). Recently in Japan there has been a shift to communicative language teaching, which focuses on language function. However, traditionally English has been taught through the direct grammar method, which is largely focused on form (Negishi, 2009). The majority of teaching remains via the direct grammar

method due to a washback effect from university entrance exams, which are designed to test students' English grammar knowledge (Sakamoto, 2012). Consequently, Japanese students often display competence in English literacy skills, but have a deficit in their oral and aural skills (Ruegg, 2009; Sakamoto, 2012). To address this issue, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) introduced Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) who are native English language speakers, and implemented Super English High Schools (SELHi); schools that receive financial resources to facilitate English instruction in certain subjects (Iwai, 2009; Sakamoto, 2012). Furthermore, in 2011 the Japanese government introduced English language instruction in primary schools starting from Grade 5 (Sakamoto, 2012). However, in primary schools, English language is considered an 'activity' rather than a school 'subject', and unlike junior high and high school English teachers, primary school teachers are not trained in English language teaching (Sakamoto, 2012).

– Current policies, availability, and teaching methods

Bilingual education in Japan is diverse, including early English immersion programs, partial English immersion programs, ethnic schools for immigrants or descendants of immigrants, whose programs are taught predominately in their L1 (i.e. Chinese) in earlier years and transition to instruction in Japanese from Year 9, international schools that teach all classes in students' mother tongue (English, for example) apart from Japanese language, Arts, and Japanese social studies classes which are taught in Japanese, and English as a foreign language (EFL) classes which are taught in both public and private primary, junior and senior high schools, and universities (Kanno, 2003). However, in English education, access to programs can prove difficult due to high tuition costs (Kanno, 2003). In addition, ethnic schools and international schools are not always accredited by MEXT, creating a roadblock for students who wish to enter tertiary education in Japan, as many Japanese universities won't consider graduates of non-accredited schools (Kanno, 2003).

In 2013, the Japanese government implemented new curriculum guidelines for junior and senior high school English classes, stipulating that classes were to be taught entirely through an English-medium. As a result, publishers were required to redesign their textbooks to include a focus on communicative competence (Hashimoto, 2013).

To address students' deficits in oral and aural skills, some Japanese universities are moving towards using teaching methods that are more communicatively-oriented, and are introducing tests such as Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) that are designed to assess all four language skills to gain a more accurate measure of a learner's English proficiency and replace traditional grammar and translation-based examinations (Sakamoto, 2012).

– Public, teacher, and student perspectives

While competency in English is generally regarded as a valuable skill, the introduction of English to primary education in Japan has met with some resistance from teachers, parents, policy-makers and researchers (Sakamoto, 2012). Concerns have been raised regarding linguistic imperialism, attention taken away from subjects such as Japanese, and teachers being unprepared and untrained to meet new curriculum

demands (Ruegg, 2009; Sakamoto, 2012). According to a study by Sakamoto (2012), more than half the primary and junior high school teachers interviewed reported that they lacked confidence in their own English proficiency, and were not confident in providing English instruction. They also noted that lack of preparation time was a major obstacle. To investigate differences in students' attitudes towards learning English, Yoshida et.al. (2011, in Sakamoto, 2012) conducted a longitudinal study with students who received English instruction at a primary level and those who didn't start until Year 7. The study revealed that although students who started English earlier said they liked English, it did not necessarily translate into the acquisition of English (Sakamoto, 2012). On average, most junior high school students ranked English as second from the bottom in terms of their favourite subjects (Sakamoto, 2012). Yoshida et.al (2011, in Sakamoto, 2012) have attributed the shift in attitude to the lack of cohesiveness between primary and secondary English education and teaching methods, "the former being meaning-focused and the latter form-focused" (p. 414).

Discussion

At present, form-focused university entrance exams dictate methods of English instruction at junior high and high school levels. There is a lack of continuity between primary level education where learning English is described as fun and communicative, and junior high and high school education where English becomes a 'subject' focused on grammar and requiring extensive vocabulary knowledge (Sakamoto, 2012). To bridge this gap, Japanese university entrance exams need to be revised to be more inclusive of communicative-oriented test items such as short oral interviews in English. This would create a positive washback effect towards a more communicative-oriented approach to English teaching in junior high and high school classrooms, and address students' limitations in oral and aural skills (Sakamoto, 2012). Furthermore, adoption of a communicative approach to English education would reflect contemporary models, such as Bachman's Model of Language Competence, which considers both language performance and language competence (Baker, 2011).

In line with current English curriculum guidelines implemented by the Japanese government in 2013, junior and senior high school English teachers (particularly educators from a non-English speaking background) need to be provided with adequate preparation time and effective training and/or qualifications to assist them to successfully conceptualise and adapt curriculum to meet new teaching requirements. The majority of current Japanese English teachers are familiar with the traditional form-focused English curriculum; however, have expressed a lack of confidence in their aural and oral skills (Sakamoto, 2012). To alleviate fear and reluctance to new teaching methods, it's imperative that the Japanese government provides continual training programs at all levels, including primary level (Sakamoto, 2012).

Nakamura (2002) points out that English as an International Language "belongs to no single culture, but rather provides the basis for promoting cross-cultural understanding..." (p. 68). To help students at high school and university levels to develop their pragmatic competence in English to avoid potential miscommunications, it's important that they are made aware of cultural diversity in English use. The integration of cultural studies, including the study of Japanese culture through an English medium, can help

students to develop global awareness, alleviate tensions concerning linguistic imperialism, and offer opportunities for students to express and exchange their views on global issues using English (Nakamura, 2002). In addition, task-based language teaching could be adopted to facilitate the negotiation of meaning through contexts such as conducting an interview or making a presentation. However, studies in Taiwan and Hong Kong have again shown that adequate training needs to be provided to teachers, or the concept can be misunderstood, and materials used ineffectively (Nunan, 2003).

It would be plausible to argue that, in general, a fractional view of bilingualism exists in the Japanese education system. However, this could be taken advantage of by helping students to become aware of the concept of *language transfer*, or how a learner's performance in an additional language is influenced by languages they already know (Mitchell & Myles, 2001). When students become accustomed to 'noticing' their mistakes as overgeneralisations from other languages they are competent in (i.e. Japanese), they can exercise more control over their linguistic choices. As an example, Japanese grammar generally uses a subject-object-verb (SOV) word order, whereas English uses subject-verb-object (SVO). Consequently, students tend to overgeneralise grammar rules from their native language (Japanese) and create sentences such as "This movie I like" when using English. In these instances, rather than reprimanding students, by alerting them to the contrast between English and Japanese sentence structures, learners can potentially notice their own mistakes leading to more informed choices and less repetition of similar errors in future discourse.

Conclusion

Japan has attempted to implement several new innovations to their English language education over the past few years to raise its international profile (Sakamoto, 2012). These attempts include, earlier introduction of English education (Grade 5), in some instances, a shift to communicative language teaching, and new curriculum guidelines that see English teachers using English exclusively in the classroom (Sakamoto, 2012; Hashimoto, 2013). Although these changes appear positive in theory, difficulties have arisen concerning English educators across the board, who lack training and confidence in meeting teaching requirements. In addition, there are inconsistencies in teaching methods from primary to secondary education, and English sections on university entrance exams are out-dated and are not designed to test students' communicative competence in a complete sense. Bilingual and immersion programs are still limited in Japan, and many programs are provided by schools that are often not recognized as 'official' schools, reducing their graduates' chances of entering Japanese universities (Sakamoto, 2012).

Although the Japanese government has made attempts to be more inclusive of bilingual education, their methods of implementation appear rushed and naïve. Emphasis on learning non-English languages is very limited due to an assumption that proficient English skills alone will equate to a prosperous future for Japan (Sakamoto, 2012). Regardless of whether English or a non-English language is the main focus in bilingual education in Japan, steps need to be taken to ensure that teachers receive adequate training in language teaching methodology, and that the implementation of new curriculum guidelines promote achievable outcomes.

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