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## A Comparative Study of English Language Education, Part 2: Japan

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## &lt;Abstract&gt;

This paper is the second in a series that examines English language education in different countries. While the previous paper explored the Ukrainian system of education, this paper looks at the Japanese system, discussing the current situation and its background within a cultural context.

English language education in Japan has long been criticized for its focus on grammar, translation, and textbook study, while failing to instill in students a sense of the culture and vitality of the language. This has resulted in perceptions of weakness in students' abilities to actively use English, and has consequently led to movements to reform the system. However, such criticisms tend to ignore both the cultural elements behind the current system, and the successes of innovative educators and programs already in place.

This paper explores these issues and concludes that, while the current system of language education is flawed, it would be better to adapt what is already in place to fit this Japanese cultural context than to adopt a system that might well work elsewhere, but which could fail here.

Keywords : comparative study, Japan, English language education

The famous metaphor of the *cultural iceberg* (Hall & Hall, 1990; Oxford, 1996) indicates that many aspects of culture – such as certain beliefs, perceptions, and values – are below the surface of consciousness (as in the submerged part of an iceberg). Other aspects of culture, such as clothing and TV-watching habits, are in the conscious area (above the waterline). These less conscious cultural aspects often influence how people learn languages. Research by Yang (1992) suggests that culture clearly includes beliefs, perceptions, and values which affect language learning, including *general learning styles* – visual, auditory, hands-on; intuitive, sensing; global, analytic (see Reid, 1995); and *specific learning strategies* – the particular behaviors and steps learners use to improve their learning, such as note-taking, finding conversation partners, and analyzing

words. Oxford, Hollaway, and Horton-Murillo (1992, p. 441) emphasize, “Although culture is not the single determinant, and although many other influences intervene, culture often does play a significant role in the learning styles [and strategies]... adopted by many participants in the culture.”

Thus, in the foreign or second language classroom, activities and cultural influences cannot be separated from what is learned. Language learning is fully situated within a given cultural context. The student becomes enculturated – apprenticed into a particular learning culture that in many ways reflects the general culture through classroom activities and through the modeling and coaching of the teacher and many others (Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Rather than just the teacher/learner dyad, there exists “a richly diverse

field of essential actors and, with it, other forms of relationships of participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56). In this view, learning is never a mere process of transmission or transfer, but is instead nothing less than a process of transformation.

Culture tends to influence the development of overall learning style, and learning style helps to determine specific choices of learning strategies (Oxford, 1990b). The present study, conducted in two parts, aims at describing the learning strategies of Japanese language learners as compared with Ukrainians who have different cultural and educational backgrounds (Swanson, Maksymuk, & Woolbright, 2008).

### Comparison criteria

This study focused on specific areas of institutions, groups, materials, and methodologies for comparison.

1. *Host institutions*: From public to private language institutes or universities, as well as the whole educational environment, including governmental ministries or institutions responsible for language education in each country.
2. *Peer and cultural reference groups*: Students, colleagues, families, and other related groups. Also, attitudes and expectations brought to the classroom, socio-economic status, preferred learning styles, learner independence and motivation, teacher-learner roles and models, and desired outcomes.
3. *Materials, content, and methodologies*: What is taught, what materials are used, and how it is taught.

### Education in Japan

#### *The Paradox of Language Education*

Japan already has the highest literacy rate in the world, but along with its rapid

economic growth and consumer wealth has come the desire to be better educated. In its goal to improve internationalism in the next generation, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), formulated the *Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities* in March 2003, which has among its major pillars “improving the teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading the teaching system.” Based on this action plan, MEXT has implemented a variety of policies, including the designation of *Super English Language High Schools*, which conduct practical research and development contributing to the future improvement of English language education, improvement of the quality of English language teachers, and support for English language activities in elementary schools.

Paradoxically, there appears to be an almost foreign language malaise among students as reflected in their fear to speak, adding weight to the infamous “I’m poor at English” syndrome. Moreover, students often display what McVeigh (2001) has referred to as an apathetic attitude, which manifests itself in a loss of academic interest once students pass through academic gates and enter English language classrooms.

The Japanese reputation for being unsuccessful ESL learners has been acknowledged by both Japanese and foreign language educators and scholars (including Ike, 1995; Matsumoto, 1994; Miller, 1982; and Ota, 1994). Matsumoto, for example, stated that English education in Japan is troublesome. It is a source of much criticism, blame, and debate. Although English teachers have been doing their utmost to improve and respond to criticism, student attitudes and proficiency remain negative and criticism has not diminished.

Whether right or wrong, the judgement of inferior quality is often attributed to the fact that teaching is basically oriented toward helping students pass college and university

entrance examinations, with their focus on grammar and text translation, instead of toward promoting oral communication.

According to McVeigh, a lot can be explained by the roles people play in this society. The distinction between two sides of the individual (manifestations of *expressed* or intimate, and *performed* or theatricalised selves) is more explicitly distinguished and keenly felt in Japanese society. This is due to the strong collectivist ethos created by corporations to make dedicated workers. Many Japanese students, then, bring with them into the classroom a rather theatricalised self. This results from being socialized to perform a student role intended to please the educational authorities and, more specifically, to pass tests. Ultimately, the idea is for them to become diligent workers, and anything associated with an expressed self, like opinions, personal views, or spontaneity, while not wholly absent from the Japanese educational experience, is not encouraged. Rather than just being themselves and making mistakes as they learn, students are implicitly taught to play a role designed to please the teacher.

#### *Ethnocentrism, cultural traits and beliefs*

Obviously, the problems mentioned above are not only of administrative character, but also the cultural and traditional sets of values that determine their attitudes toward learning and teaching.

The uniqueness or distinctiveness that characterizes Japanese-style ethnocentrism seems to be limited to a feeling that there is something positive about being Japanese, or, at the very least, that being Japanese is a focal point from which all things are to be viewed or interpreted. This manifests itself in different ways. The Japanese scholar, Watanabe, (as cited in Ike, 1995) stated that the purpose of learning English should also be regarded as an opportunity to bring out the realization of the value of the learner's mother tongue and culture. This statement may illustrate an ethno-

specific feature, characterized by viewing everything through Japanese eyes. Thus, the purpose of learning English is viewed, not only as gaining another means of expressing themselves, but also as gaining another means by which the Japanese can appreciate their mother language and culture, and nurture the values held in Japanese society.

Perfect grammatical accuracy is often the objective of language learning and, consequently, learners avoid participating in classes so as to avoid any chance of making mistakes. According to van Wolferen (1990, p.379), a tendency towards perfectionism can be said to be a characteristic of Japanese culture in general. This is believed to stem from early Shinto influences that include beliefs about the perfectibility of human beings.

In a culture that views questions of clarification as a means of showing disapproval, and perhaps also of implying that there is confrontation between co-participants, it is understandable that Japanese learners shy away from anything other than monosyllabic responses to their teacher's display questions.

Students are not only apprehensive about making mistakes in public. They may also be concerned about standing out and appearing to show off their abilities. While obviously related, these are distinct motivations. As McVeigh (2001) notes, wanting to avoid standing out cannot be the sole reason students refuse to speak in class when asked to, because by remaining silent they stand out just as much as if they had spoken. It should also be noted, however, that a student's silence will be evaluated differently by his or her peers than their mistakes, and additionally, silence requires no effort, while speaking does. Immodest people are generally viewed as less likeable, and students who want to be liked by their peers tend to understate or even deny their capabilities (Kudo & Numazaki, 2003). Students are caught in a double bind: if they make a mistake, they risk ridicule; if they answer correctly, they risk social rejection. It

is small wonder that many prefer to remain silent.

Japanese have been reported to hold various beliefs or mythical understandings concerning their language learning abilities. According to Miller (1982), there is a widespread belief among the Japanese that the distinctiveness and sincerity of their language, largely supported by *kotodama*, or the “spirit of the language”, makes them assume that their language is exceptionally difficult to learn. According to this belief, not only is the language complex and intricate, but also it is so spiritual that no one except the Japanese can truly understand it. Another interesting theory is that the Japanese brain functions neurologically in a different manner than those of other peoples; it is specially adapted to the Japanese language and emotions (Tsunoda, 1978) and not to any other language. These myths are often used as an excuse for why the Japanese are unsuccessful in learning English (Miller, 1982)

#### Motivation

Considerable research has been done in the areas of student attitudes and motivation. Gardner and Lambert’s (1972, p. 132) pioneering research categorized learner’s motivation into two types: *instrumental*, which stresses “the practical value and advantages of learning a new language,” and *integrative*, which stresses “a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other group”.

In addition to Gardner and Lambert’s integrative and instrumental classifications, Cooper and Fishman (1977) added a third type of motivation they termed *developmental*. Developmental motivation refers to motivation relating to personal development or personal satisfaction. This includes such activities as watching movies and reading books in English. This kind of motivation involves a positive orientation towards the target culture, but not involving integration with this culture.

In a Japanese setting, previous research suggests that motivation prior to university entrance motivation is predominately instrumental. Morrow (1987) and LoCastro (1996) both found that for junior and high school students in Japan, the purpose of studying English is strongly instrumental—namely passing a university entrance exam. However, what happens to student motivation once this goal has been achieved? Berwick and Ross (1989) studied a group of ninety 1<sup>st</sup>-year students in a compulsory English course at a Japanese university. The instrumental motivation possessed prior to writing the entrance exam diminished once it had been passed. Although some students remained enthusiastic, many attended classes solely because they were compulsory, a situation described as a motivational wasteland. They state instrumental motivation peaks in the last year of high school, after which, “there is little to sustain this kind of motivation, so the student appears in the freshmen classrooms as a kind of timid, exam-worn survivor with no apparent academic purpose” (p.206).

Despite Dörnyei’s (1994) findings that integrative motivation will be inhibited in a foreign language-learning environment, and that motivation will be predominately instrumental, research amongst Japanese freshmen contradicts this. Widdows and Voller (1991) and Kobayashi, Redekop, and Porter (1992) found that in a university environment, motivation—if it exists at all—tends to be integrative. Students in these studies were most interested in speaking, listening, and learning about foreign cultures. The researchers suggested the rejection of instrumental goals to be symptomatic of the students’ boredom with their high schools’ exam-focused, grammar-orientated English classes. Benson (1991) also found that although there was not a clear difference between levels of the different motivation types, as “integrative and personal reasons for learning were preferred over instrumental ones” (p.34).

Motivation is complex and consists of various subscales, and thus it is often difficult to determine an over-riding motivational factor. The lack of any single factor, however, may be evidence of the difficulty many teachers report in motivating Japanese EFL learners. Reid's (1990) study indicated Japanese language learners' lack of predominant learning styles supported the implication that Japanese learners may not be so easily motivated to learn foreign languages.

In a recent study on foreign language learners (Tani-Fukuchi & Sakamoto, 2005), even relatively short overseas experiences of less than a month seemed to enhance motivation and different learning styles. For example, overseas experience impacted their Japanese identity, and native speaker teacher experience and overseas experience impacted both learner style and motivation.

In a cross-national study comparing 11 nations, Littlewood (2001) reported that Japanese students in foreign language classrooms scored slightly under the mean for all countries in their attitudes towards working in groups, questioned the traditional authority structure of the classroom, and saw themselves as active participants in the learning process. These results are contrary to many widely held assumptions of Japanese learners, and differ from those of some emotional and cultural studies that report more interdependent or socially engaging emotions in Japanese (Kitayama, Markus, & Kurokawa, 2000; Kitayama, Misquita, & Karasawa, 2003). On a large scale, however, this research suggests that the learning context makes a very important difference.

#### *System of education*

After the defeat of Japan in 1945 by the allied forces, the education system of Japan was in ruins and a foreign system of education was introduced during the period of military occupation by the United States. In 1946 the United States Education Mission made an effort

to democratize Japanese education. Prior to World War II, higher education was usually limited to the elite. After the war, a 6-3-3 grade structure was introduced that extended compulsory schooling to nine years. The United States Education Mission replaced the prewar high-secondary school with high schools. The nationalistic morals course was replaced with social studies, and local school boards were introduced. To offer higher education to more students, university or junior college status was granted to many technical institutes and normal or advanced secondary schools.

After regaining its national sovereignty in 1952, Japan began to revert back to Japanese ideas about education and educational administration. At that time, the Ministry of Education regained its power and school boards were appointed instead of elected. A course of moral education was reinstated in the curriculum. The postwar recovery and economic growth caused an increased demand for higher education, which in turn caused an increase in the cost of education.

Even with the many educational changes that have taken place in Japan since 1945, the education system still reflects the ideas that learning and education are important and should be taken seriously, and that moral and character development is the foremost goal in education.

Settings of English language education in Japan can be divided into six types—secondary schools (junior and senior high schools), universities, private language schools, *juku* (private “cram” schools), companies, and classes for children.

In Japan, all children start primary school at the age of six, and junior high school at the age of 12. Primary school lasts for six years and junior high school for three. Both are compulsory, and almost all students complete junior high. Many children also go to kindergarten for one, two, or even three years before primary school. More than 95% of all junior high students go on to senior high school

for three years at the age of 15. Senior high school is not free, but public schools are not very expensive. More than half of the senior high school graduates go to university or technical college when they are 18 years old. Many students spend one or even two years after high school trying to pass entrance exams to good universities, studying at a preparatory school or at home. University education lasts for four years. Japanese education is becoming more flexible these days, but the length of education and the ages of students are very rigid, and there are extremely few exceptions (Kitao & Kitao, 1995).

Universities are ranked according to the average *hensachi* (standard deviation scores) of the applicants who have applied to university. All this information is published and read by prospective students who then carefully consider their own *hensachi* and their chances of successfully passing a certain university's examination. This particular type of evaluation of higher educational institutions has built and solidified the pyramid of universities.

A lingering problem is the "escalator system," or automatic progress, in which students are given credit for courses even though their competency doesn't merit it.

In his study, McVeigh (2002) states that the education-examination system shatters knowledge into a vast number of unrelated bits and pieces of information useful only for filling in exam sheets and proving to the authorities that one has persevered through the ordeal of ingesting large amounts of data. In other words, for those wishing to become bureaucrats, it is very appropriate training. But for those without such ambitions, the educational experience becomes not just boring, but distressing. Education in Japan works "provided one thinks of it as an enormously elaborated, very expensive intelligence testing system with some educational spin-off, rather than the other way round" (Dore, 1976, pp. 489). Mosk and Nakata (1992, p. 52) write, "In general Japanese education is more

of a screening, sorting device differentiating students by motivation and learning capacity rather than by what they actually know."

Another important factor here is the administrative guidance. In the current atmosphere, although each university is in charge of its own curriculum, it must be approved by MEXT, and there are still perceptions of graft and cronyism in the system.

In McVeigh's view, the fact that MEXT sets the educational standards, regulates accreditation, and monitors operations encourages bureaucratization while discouraging innovation and improvement. Given the social atmosphere created by Japan's capitalist developmental state, the overriding goal of education is employment, not learning. Indeed, many employers do not expect universities to teach students since they often expect to train graduates in company-run programs, and some corporations are wary of new employees with too much outside knowledge and attitude (McVeigh, 2001).

## Curriculum planning

English is offered as an elective foreign language course in junior high school, senior high school, and at university. Only a couple of years ago have primary schools begun to offer English classes, and secondary schools do not offer foreign languages other than English. Therefore, comparatively few primary school students take English classes, while almost all junior and senior high school students (more than 99%) take English classes. Most universities have an English section as part of their entrance examinations, so it is very difficult to go to a university without having taken English classes in secondary school.

Most universities have a department of languages which emphasizes English classes. Non-English majors have to take two to four English classes in the first two years, but this

is gradually becoming less stringent. On the other hand, more universities are emphasizing oral English classes, though the majority of English classes are still traditional reading classes.

MEXT is still clearly in charge of what happens with education in Japan. In 2002, it issued a new goal for English education in Japanese schools. In their plan to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities,” MEXT stated that:

“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. ... Through instruction, basic and practical communication abilities will be acquired so that the entire public can conduct daily conversation and exchange information in English” (MEXT, 2003, pp. 1-2).

The main parts of the 2003-2008 implementation plan include:

- a. Urging education boards to hire English teachers with the equivalent of STEP semi-first level, TOEFL 550 points, or TOEIC 730 points,
- b. continuing the JET program, with the goal of having 11,500 foreign assistant language teachers in elementary and secondary school classrooms,
- c. a target of 1,000 full-time foreign English language instructors in secondary schools,
- d. intensive training for 60,000 English teachers, including 100 teachers in overseas training for 6-12 months and 200 teachers for 2 months,
- e. partial scholarships for 10,000 high school students to study overseas annually, as

well as for a smaller number of university students,

- f. establishment of 100 Super English Language High Schools,
- g. establishment of sister schools and foreign exchanges, and
- h. dissemination of handbooks of effective instruction examples and research results from Super English Language High Schools by the Information Center for Educational Resources of the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (MEXT, 2002).

Nevertheless, in spite of MEXT’s emphasis on the development of speaking and listening skills, there is evidence that Japanese students remain reluctant to speak English in classes (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001, Kurihara, 2008).

Sato (2002) did a yearlong qualitative study of 19 high school English teachers. He found that despite teachers’ awareness of the new goals and guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education, all of the teachers in this study continued to teach English in the traditional manner, emphasizing grammar and translation without attempting to develop their students’ communicative skills.

Another difficulty in the curriculum planning is the common argument that teachers should simply teach their specialty. This approach to teaching is perhaps one reason why the grammar translation approach to teaching remains somewhat resistant to attempts at educational reform (Blight, 2002). Another consequence is a reluctance to interfere with what goes on behind closed classroom doors. The result, in many language programs, may be a veneer of organization provided by a curriculum with no underlying basis, as each teacher is left to do essentially as they please. Gatton (1999) noted “this superficial collection of titles” and argued that the current increasingly competitive environment in Japan has established a context in which meaningful

reform is possible. Kelly (1998) and Gossman and Cisar (1997) also noted the influence of demographics in encouraging universities to coordinate their language programs. It is difficult to gauge to what extent real reform has been carried out in Japanese universities but Hadley (1999), McVeigh (2001), Hood (2001), and Prichard (2006) all suggest there is still a long way to go.

#### *Approaches and methodology*

Historically speaking, it seems that the grammar-translation method has been inherited from the Meiji Restoration period. The Japanese government in those days sought to introduce Western thought and civilization through enormous quantities of translations, not to mention original works. Such an origin of grammar-translation to foreign language learning and teaching is still reflected in the pedagogic principles of the syllabus design and consequently also in teaching methods and materials employed in English classes of the present-day Japan.

Even though there has been an effort to introduce a more communicative approach to teaching English in Japan, it has still been too easy for teachers to revert to the grammar translation approach. Consequently, most Japanese who are fluent in English are so as a result of having had some experience of living or studying abroad, and not through their domestic language education.

Since the introduction of the 1989 *Course of Study*, it has been widely claimed that Oral Communication (OC) classes have not produced the intended outcome, as documented in Brown & Wada, 1998; Gorsuch, 2000, 2001; LoCastro, 1996; Oka & Yoshida, 1997; Pacek, 1996; Sato, 2002; and Wada, 2002. LoCastro (1996) noted the popularity of the grammar-translation method in class, by which the teacher goes over sentence-by-sentence translations and students practice choral reading the sentences aloud. Gorsuch (2000, 2001) used a survey method in order to examine how national,

school, and classroom variables are related to teachers' approval of communicative activities. The results documented the centrality of college entrance exams—grammar-oriented exams dictate the instructional focus and shape teachers' classroom practices in Japan. Due to institutional and social traditions, most teachers' preference for grammar-based instruction was found to be hard to change, even after they had completed training programs on communicative methods, as documented in Pacek's (1996) interview study. Furthermore, English textbooks were also found to provide only partial support for the development of communicative ability in Japanese English education. McGroarty and Taguchi (2005) found that most exercises that appeared in OC textbooks were mechanical and structured, included simple comprehension and production of information, and did not provide more cognitively complex language activities, such as negotiation of meaning.

Another study by Taguchi (2005) revealed that teachers were in an awkward position, caught between the objectives of the national curriculum and the constraints that discourage active practice in the communicative approach. The strong constraints were largely external, coming from the education system, such as college entrance exams. Although many have recently come to utilize communicative methodologies and tasks with lower-age groups and classes designed for non-university students, the reality is that as students start to prepare for university exams, almost all communicative classes are dropped, with the university-track students being put on a steady diet of grammar lessons in preparation for the exams (Kitao & Kitao, 1995).

Taguchi (2005) also reports that teacher-related factors, such as their lack of expertise and experience in designing communicative activities, were also principal obstacles in implementing OC classes. Thus, the wash back effect of the exams on the content of teaching was evident, as shown by the inclusion of



grammar exercises in OC classes, but not on the teaching methodology itself, because the methodology used in teaching spoken skills was essentially the same as the one used in traditional English classes. Teachers did not seem to understand how to use speaking and listening exercises in a communicative manner and consequently reverted to their traditional methods (e.g., going over vocabulary items, rote repetition, etc.).

These findings suggest that difficulty in implementing the communicative approach is not entirely attributed to the exams, and that simply changing the exams may not guarantee the successful inclusion of the communicative approach. Educational reform must consider factors related to the practitioners of the innovation, and promote changes in their attitudes, personal beliefs, and experiences (Taguchi, 2005). As Fullan (1998) states, in order for innovations to have the desired impact, practitioners need to undergo the process of re-evaluating their traditional behaviors and beliefs.

### Testing and grading

To prepare for their entrance exams, Japanese students spend months and years working industriously in school, at home, and in jukus in a kind of language testing hysteria (Brown, 1993). The whole process is known as *shaken jigoku*, or *examination hell*. Because most Japanese believe that the success of their children hinges on passing these examinations, families devote a surprising proportion of their resources toward assisting their children in exam preparation, and children devote long hours day after day to study.

However, many Japanese are not completely happy with the current examination system. Tsukada (1991) explains ways in which these examinations have undesirable effects on curriculum, on foreign language instruction, on family life, and on children's emotional,

physical, and intellectual development.

The types of questions in the English university tests are in most cases those within the framework of "sentence grammar": filling in the blanks from the suitable words given; paraphrasing; identification of the grammatical functions of the infinitives; sentence-building by arranging given words; putting into Japanese a few English sentences which are part of a larger paragraph; distinguishing whether there is anything grammatically wrong or not in each given sentence, etc. Oller calls this kind of test a "discrete point test" which is "one that attempts to focus attention on one point of grammar at a time." As Romaine suggests, the problem with a discrete point test is that it is obviously based on the assumption that it is possible to separate analytically different aspects of language competence without reference to the context usage.

In short, those kinds of questions are obviously aimed at measuring how much grammatical competence the students have achieved during their learning, and the learning process basically implies memorizing the vocabulary and constructions simply as usage, but decontextualized from the actual use of language.

MEXT annually evaluates the entrance examination papers used by each university for the purpose of improving the quality of the exams. Nevertheless, in actual practice, a disproportionate emphasis has been placed on scholastic examinations and the adverse effects of this are felt throughout the entire educational system (Nakata, 1990).

There is, however, a slightly different view on the testing system. Mulvey (2001) questions the applicability of terms such as "exam hell" and "language-testing hysteria" to the experiences of the majority of the student population. Analysis of current admission trends suggests that, especially for low- and mid-tier universities, successful admission is no longer a difficult prospect requiring hysterical (Brown, 1993) expenditures of time and family

resources. 25 years ago, the large number of applicants vis-à-vis the limited number of spaces available gave Japan's universities a well-earned reputation for exclusivity. Now, nearly 80% of test-takers pass the examinations and successfully enter university (MEXT, 1999).

Furthermore, though almost unmentioned in articles written in English, there has been a well-documented decrease in average test scores over the last ten years. Studies sponsored by the *Asahi Shinbun* (2001) and MEXT (2000), for example, indicate a sharp decline in median academic ability vis-à-vis test-related skill areas among even successful university entrants, with many of the freshmen evaluated lacking minimal skills in not only English, but also mathematics, the sciences, and the Japanese language. A study conducted by the *Daigaku Shingikai* (2000) found that a number of universities have begun accepting students with extremely low examination results, a trend which threatens to exacerbate the issue of the declining academic standards of university entrants. Not discounting the numerous problems documented in the admission process, Mulvey (2001) does suggest the need for a reassessment of the role of entrance exams and their influence on Japanese society today.

### **Professional teachers' training**

All secondary school teachers are required to have a teaching certificate, and they are employed based on an examination by boards of education for public schools. University faculty members are not required to have a teaching certificate, but they should have higher-level academic qualifications, which in theory means a doctorate, a masters degree, or its equivalent, plus some university teaching and research experience. For research experience, it is publications that count most. Many language teachers have fewer qualifications, but they

still have an MA and a number of publications.

Universities hire many part-time language teachers. For native speakers of English, it is possible to find this kind of job without an MA or any publications, but it has become more difficult in recent years because of an increasing number of teachers applying for part-time jobs who do have MAs. For Japanese teachers, an MA is a must, and some publications are usually required.

With the introduction of the ALT or JET program, thousands of young Western people have come to Japan to try to teach English to Japanese students. Unfortunately, these young people have little or no training as teachers and even less training in Japanese language or culture that often makes for a difficult, if not impossible, learning situation.

Admittedly most Japanese teachers of English, regardless of which level they teach, usually use Japanese when they explain grammatical points or give directions to students. Those teachers have not been trained sufficiently to acquire sufficient communicative ability since they usually major in English and American literature taught in translation-type settings, and may optionally learn some English linguistics theory in their universities. This seems to be one of the reasons why most Japanese teachers of English are, not unexpectedly, communicatively incompetent.

As Lokon (2005) states, to teach language communicatively, teachers need to set up situations where students perceive a genuine need to exchange ideas, share information, solve problems, or do other meaningful tasks using the target language in an authentic and contextualized interaction with others. This is difficult to accomplish in a monolingual educational setting that is geared toward mastery of test-taking skills. To achieve MEXT's stated goals, teachers need to refine what it means to be an excellent teacher. Unfortunately, it is still commonly believed that good teachers are those who can maintain classroom order, work hard for school events

and union affairs, and can keep pace with other teachers. Sato's (2002) yearlong study revealed:

“Those who were busy working hard for homerooms, school events, extracurricular activities, and union affairs appeared to be more highly regarded as teachers. Evaluations centered on teachers' ability to manage students, keep order, and get things done, as opposed to actually teach. ‘This is the school atmosphere’, to which everyone was expected to conform.” (p.52-53)

Murphey and Sasaki (1998) list two main reasons why Japanese teachers shy away from English:

1. Fear: It's scary for non-native speaking teachers to speak the target language in class, especially when one believes that “you must be perfect” (Horwitz, 1996).

2. Lack of student comprehension: Students can't understand spoken English and thus would not learn and be frustrated. This belief is at the heart of teaching. What many Japanese teachers do not realize is that there are ways to make their teaching in English comprehensible and ways to make it possible to learn more English through actual use.

In Japan, would-be teachers graduate from universities after only a few required courses in pedagogy (all of which are usually taught in Japanese) and two weeks of training in a school, and then they are expected to be a teacher—a perfect one (or at least they think they must be perfect). Not surprisingly, many avoid using English at all. After all, most of their teachers never did, so why should they?

## Conclusion

Language teaching is a complex social and cultural activity, and it is extremely important for educators to understand the socio-cultural context in which language teaching is situated.

Holliday (2001) warns of the danger of naively accepting BANA (British, Australasian, and North American) practice as superior, and uncritically adopting the ethnocentric norms inherent in Western English language teaching methodologies, without proper research into their effectiveness. To do so entails the risk of “tissue rejection” (Holliday, 2001) which means that “even well-intentioned curriculum innovations may fail to take root in their host institution” (p. 232). The purpose of this paper has, therefore, been to examine English language education in two very different contexts in an attempt to identify their weaknesses and strengths.

The cornerstone for the comparison of two educational systems is obvious: both Japan and Ukraine are not English-speaking countries, and both, realizing the needs of a modern world, have put strong emphasis on the improvement of English skills. Moreover, these two countries have another similar historical precondition: though at different times, the socio-political regime placed both countries in certain isolation. Yet, both Japan and Ukraine are integrating into the global community in their own ways.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain, the Ukrainian economy was in ruins and the socio-political situation very unstable. Therefore, Ukraine directed its efforts to opening its borders and minds to the West, trying to prove its new status and win acclaim from the global society. After 18 years, however, it is still in a period of transition, and poor living standards, unemployment, and insufficient financing of the state educational institutions are some of the problems that leave Ukraine far below the standards established by the European Union. Nevertheless, such a situation increased even more the motivation of English language learners in Ukraine, as knowledge of English today is not just a sign of intelligence, but a practical means of access to a Western style of life—a good job, stability, and well-being.

Japan, however, enjoys political stability and economic independence. English is one of the strategic priorities of the country, and MEXT is implementing a variety of policies aimed at an improvement in the quality of English education, providing all necessary support to educational establishments. Despite all these efforts, Japanese education is a paradox: students sacrifice their youth to intensely prepare for all-important university entrance examinations, only to suddenly lose academic interest once they pass through the university gates. What accounts for this? There are two possible explanations.

### *1. Culture of conformity*

While Western students are active, egalitarian participants in a learning process that involves open negotiation, Asian students seem to be more accustomed to environments in which they play a more passive role as recipients of knowledge transmitted by the teacher. They feel more comfortable when they are buried within a group and try not to attract too much attention to themselves. Naturally it contrasts with what is expected in a communication classroom. Students seem to construct a dichotomous understanding of the language learning experience: learning for test taking is boring but important, while learning for communication is fun but unimportant.

### *2. Japan's exam-centred education*

To make the transition from exam-oriented language teaching to a more communicative approach to language teaching, it is imperative that teachers are supported and rewarded for experimentation in innovative teaching practices, which requires teachers to be great risk-takers. School cultures and belief systems that reward conformity and success in entrance examinations are not going to encourage teachers to risk teaching in new ways.

High school students' beliefs and motivations are also tied to this preoccupation with

entrance examinations. Expanding the scope of these entrance exams is unlikely to transform student understanding of their language learning experiences or increase motivation to learn. In fact, it may make the situation worse if students perceive that they have to do even more drills and practices to pass the new entrance exam.

As long as teachers and students continue to measure their success in terms of university entrance examination scores, they are not going to make the necessary leap in value change. To make this change in values, teachers need to have the necessary institutional support from principals, parents, policy makers, students, and from each other in order to experiment and innovate. They need a collaborative and supportive school culture that rewards risk-takers and encourages critical reflection on their own thinking and teaching practices. They need the opportunity to make instructional decisions and feel that they are empowered to make those decisions.

In addition, companies should begin examining what students actually studied at university rather than what ranking a university has when judging the merits of particular job interviewees.

The Japanese schooling system, in spite of its serious problems at the higher educational level, does have certain strengths since it is generally able to turn out good workers with basic skill sets. However, as McVeigh (2001) states, we want to go beyond just the basics, and would like to see our students do more than just muddle through. Education is, after all, not about mastering a set amount of facts, but about being challenged to do better.

Moreover, it is important to remember that, like all great civilizations, Japan did and still does possess an idea that education can be utilized by the individual for self-cultivation and self-improvement, and that schooling does not always have to be for someone else, whether for the company or the national state, but this ideal is gradually becoming

submerged. The challenge, therefore, is to find ways to revive and strengthen a motivating, more individual-oriented, less job-oriented, view of learning.

The crucial significance of cultural factors should not be disregarded when introducing new strategies into the educational system. Understanding the difficulty of maintaining the delicate balance between the social and the pedagogic is vital in order to develop a pedagogy more appropriate to local conditions, as “no teaching approach will work unless it is accepted by both teachers and students” (Tudor, 1996, p.278).

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## 英語教育の比較研究（2）：日本

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### <要 旨>

本論は、諸国間の英語教育の比較研究シリーズの第2部である。昨年度発表した第1部では、ウクライナにおける教育制度を調査研究したが、本論では、日本の教育制度の現状と背景をその文化的文脈において考察する。

日本の英語教育は文法や和訳、そして教科書中心の学習に偏重しており、学生に英語の文化や言語としての有効性を浸透させ得ないでいると長年にわたって批判されてきた。結果として、学習者の積極的に英語を使おうとする能力を減退させることになったため、制度改革への運動が起こった。しかしながら、そのような運動においては、現行制度の文化的背景や既存の先進的な教育者や教育プログラムの成功を無視しがちである。

本論では、これらの問題を考察し、次のように結論づけている。すなわち、現行の教育制度には改善すべき点はあるものの、日本文化の文脈に適應するには、他文化で成功しているが日本では失敗の可能性もあるものを取り入れるよりは、既存の制度を維持するほうがよいと考えられる。

キーワード：比較、日本、英語教育

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