Chronic Reforms and the Crisis in English Education

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English teaching in Japan's schools has undergone major changes over the past three decades in a push to teach students “practical English.” In the run-up to the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, these reforms are gathering pace, as the government looks to develop what it calls "global human resources." But there are fundamental problems at the heart of the thinking behind these reforms.

In this article, I will attempt to look at the reforms that have been introduced to give students command of more “practical” English over the past few decades, and to consider some of the reasons why these reforms have led to a crisis in the way the language is taught and tested in Japanese schools.

Government-Led Reforms and Changing
Curriculum Guidelines

The shift came about in response to proposals made by the Ad-Hoc Council on Education convened by Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro in 1984. The Council’s Second Report, issued in 1986, called for fundamental reforms in the way English was taught. Many of the changes that have taken place over the decades are the result of these government-led educational reforms.

In the decades since the report, MEXT has instituted a series of reforms designed to teach students “English that can be used for communication.” In 2003, for example, a government action plan was introduced to cultivate “Japanese people with English-speaking abilities.” Among other provisions, the plan increased the number of assistant language teachers (native speakers who work as teaching assistants in public schools), introduced a listening test for the first time in examinations run by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations, and made English compulsory in elementary schools. These comprehensive reforms came into effect over a period of five years.

The current Courses of Study stipulate one lesson a week of “foreign language activities” for children in the fifth and sixth grades of elementary school. The chief aim of these classes is to familiarize children with English through songs and games and prepare them for more formal study of the language later in junior high school. The guidelines also dictate that in senior high school, English classes should be conducted basically in English; both these guidelines require substantial work on the part of schools and teachers in the classroom.

But things are about to get harder still, following the announcement of the new national curriculum guidelines that will come into effect starting in spring 2020.

What Will Change After 2020?

There are several main changes in the new guidelines. First, in elementary school, the current requirements for students in the fifth and sixth grades to take part in English-language activities are brought forward to the third and fourth grades. Fifth- and sixth-grade students will take English as a full-fledged subject. So far, the main objective at this stage has been to familiarize children with English in a relaxed and fun way, forbidding elementary school educators to make an advanced start on the curriculum of junior-high-school English by starting to teach children spelling or writing.

But since English will now become an official part of the curriculum, there will have to be government-approved textbooks, and children will naturally be taught spelling and basic grammar. They will also be assessed and given grades. During the four years of elementary school, children will be expected to acquire a vocabulary of around 600 to 700 English words.

There will also be a change to the way English is taught in junior high school. No longer will classes be taught in Japanese: as in high school, English classes will be conducted in English as a basic rule. At the same time, there will be an increase in the number of words students are expected to master, from 1,200 words at present to between 1,600 and 1,800.

In high school, the standard of lessons will be pitched at a higher level, and
students will be expected to master a vocabulary of around 2,500 words (compared to 1,800 now). At present, students are expected to learn approximately 3,000 words in junior and senior high schools combined. But when the new curriculum guidelines are implemented, students will be expected to master a vocabulary of between 4,000 and 5,000 words throughout their school years, from elementary school through the end of high school.

**Private Testers Take Over Assessment**

In 2012, the government published a strategy for cultivating what it calls “global human resources.” This strategy has had a profound impact on English education in schools, which is naturally a vital part of the government's efforts to improve people's English skills. Following this, in 2014, the government launched the Top Global University funding project, which aims to enhance the international compatibility and competitiveness of higher education in Japan. The reality is that universities are requiring students to attain certain scores in private tests, such as the TOEFL and TOEIC, in line with the application requirements for funding. And even at schools that were not selected for the program, English teachers are exhorted to do all they can to ensure that students achieve better results on these tests. A similar situation prevails at the secondary level, where efforts to boost students’ English skills were strongly urged in 2013 by MEXT in its “English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization.”

More important than these changes are the reforms currently underway in the university entrance examination system. It has been argued that making fundamental changes to the style and content of English teaching in high schools is almost impossible without commensurate changes to university entrance exams. Accordingly, the current tests organized by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations will be scrapped and new standardized university entrance exams will be introduced in their place starting in 2020.

The standardized exams for the national language, Japanese, and mathematics will include some writing elements in addition to the usual multiple-choice tests. In mock tests carried out in 2017, it was revealed that the grading of these tests was quite uneven. Numerous questions have been raised about the need to improve the accuracy of grading, as well as the necessity of hiring competent graders, the amount of time required for marking the tests, how grades are adjusted, and what is to be done about regrading.

One particularly worrying aspect of the reforms is the drastic decision to hand over responsibility for assessing the English language ability of university applicants to varying private testing companies. The official exams given by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations are designed to match the MEXT Courses of Study, but it was claimed that the present national exams only assess two student skills, namely reading and listening, and are inadequate to measure all four skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking), particularly speaking.

Yet, it was maintained, since tens of thousands of students take the official university entrance examinations every year, assessing the “speaking ability” of so many candidates at once would pose insuperable practical difficulties to the National Center. Thus, the use of tests run by private testing companies was justified by MEXT. However, the hasty decision, made without public debate,
ignored two fundamental problems: These private tests are not designed with the Course of Study curriculum guidelines in mind, and they were not designed to be used in university entrance examinations.

Initially, the national standardized exam and private tests will be used concurrently, but the plan is to switch to using only private tests after three years.

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