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.

Problems on the Ground

Teachers and specialists have pointed to several shortcomings with this plan. For one thing, the 23 different kinds of tests offered by the seven private test makers have different objectives, content, and difficulty levels. They are held at different times in different locations, and charge different fees. These factors, critics say, make it impossible to guarantee impartiality and fairness, and mean that English
teaching in schools would be focused solely on techniques to pass private tests.

The Japan Association of National Universities also expressed concerns about the plan, and the University of Tokyo initially announced that it would not use private tests in deciding whether to offer an applicant a place. But on March 30, 2018, JANU published their guidelines on the use of private tests, offering a choice: “The basic approach is that national universities will choose one of the following methods, or combine the two based on their own policy priorities: (1) set a certain score of private tests as an eligibility requirement for applicants; and (2) add the score of private tests to the score of the official standardized exam. The differences among the various private tests are to be standardized based on a reference table using six levels of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which many fear could lead to further confusion.

The CEFR is a comprehensive framework of reference for various languages in terms of language learning, teaching, and assessment. It was developed to reflect the philosophy of plurilingualism upheld by the Council of Europe. The CEFR provides elaborate grids of Can Do descriptors to qualitatively assess language ability, which can be used for self-assessment as well. The six CEFR levels are broadly defined as Basic User, Independent User, and Proficient User. According to some research, most Japanese learners of English fall in the category of Basic User.

MEXT has overlooked the fact that the CEFR was not designed for college entrance exams in Japan. As such, serious questions remain about the appropriateness of using it as a reference table for various kinds of private tests, let alone the validity and reliability of using their scores in screening college applicants.

At the end of April, the University of Tokyo announced a new admissions policy that differed from its previous stance. In this latest announcement, the university said it would set up an internal working group to consider concrete ways of making use of private tests. This change of direction has attracted considerable criticism both within and outside of the university—given that none of the problems associated with using private English tests have been resolved, this latest announcement is tantamount to saying that the university intends to go ahead no matter what the consequences might be. It has been reported that professors responsible for English language education at the University of Tokyo have asked the university president to reconsider the decision.

These instances of confusion stem from a fundamental fallacy in the way private tests have been introduced. Many people involved with English teaching and testing are seriously concerned. The first lot of students who will have to sit the tests as guinea pigs in 2020 are understandably apprehensive. Rather than rushing to meet an arbitrary deadline, the Japanese government should take the time to carry out a proper debate and discuss the issues carefully until it comes up with a decent solution—improve the official standardized exams to somehow accommodate the four skills, or leave the speaking skill to each university to work on.

**Failing Reforms**

The question I would like to pose now is what has been achieved with the 30 years of reforms in Japan’s English language pedagogy.
The government outlined targets for students of passing the Eiken (Test in Practical English Proficiency) Grade 3 by the last year of junior high school and the Eiken Grade Pre-2 by the final year of senior high school. The aim was that by the 2017 academic year, 50% of students in each age group would be hitting these targets. But the Ministry of Education’s annual survey on the state of English teaching for 2017 reveals that in fact only 40.7% of junior high school students and 39.3% of senior high school students were reaching these targets. In this survey, even students who had not taken the Eiken tests were considered to have “reached the target levels” if they had passed another private test or were considered to “have attained an equivalent level of competence” in the judgement of a teacher. This leaves room for considerable doubt about the accuracy of the figures. But in any case, it is at least clear that the targets are not being met.

The top level in the Eiken test is Grade 1, followed by Grade Pre-1. This is followed by Grade 2 and Grade Pre-2, described as a level of proficiency that allows a learner to “understand and use English on a level necessary for daily life.” Various phrases are used to describe this level: “daily conversation,” “everyday language,” and so on. But the important thing to note is that the language in question is not especially difficult. Even so, less than half of all students manage to reach even this relatively modest level. It is therefore hard to say that the reforms have been a resounding success.

Recently, there have been serious concerns about the low English skills of first-year university students. English faculty across universities are complaining that many students enter school without a good grounding in the basics, and lack the grammatical knowledge and vocabulary to understand the English texts they read. As a result, they cannot answer questions, and are incapable of writing or speaking. Some universities are obliged to offer remedial classes to help with students’ poor grasp of high-school English.

The “Communication Equals Conversation” Trap

It is a given that in learning a foreign language, all four skills are important. However, in order to speak English well, students need to have at least a basic grasp of the grammar. Without this, they will never be able to string words together in a way that makes sense. The situation can be compared to sports: if you don’t know the rules, you can’t take part. This understanding of grammar and vocabulary is cultivated and improved by reading, which is the basis for other skills. Based on reading competence, students acquire listening and writing skills, and through using these skills they learn to speak and express themselves.

For simple situations like shopping or ordering a meal, it may be enough simply to memorize a few set phrases. But to understand what someone is saying, and to express one’s own opinions logically and persuasively in response, requires much more. If students can’t read or write, they are unlikely to develop the more robust skills required to engage in any kind of meaningful communication.

Reading is the starting point and the foundation in learning and using a foreign language. The reforms carried out over the past few decades chose to neglect this basic foundation, focusing instead on the idea that “communication” is simply everyday conversation. We are now starting to see the disastrous results of this decision reflected in recent surveys on the English proficiency of our high school.
students.

Annual surveys on the state of English education in Japan started in 2013; the most recent survey was the fifth. If it were a company, and the results of a reform fell consistently below targets like this, the company would inevitably analyze the situation, try to identify the cause for the failure, and take steps to put the firm on a better course. Unfortunately, English education in Japan has continued to press on with the same path of reforms for nearly 30 years, despite the lack of any improvement in results.

The time has come to take a fresh look at the reforms that have been carried out since the 1990s and to think seriously about whether English education in Japan is really heading in the right direction.

**Foreign Language Education as a Window to the World**

Very soon, Japanese students will study English for 10 years from elementary to high school, or for 14 years if they go on to university. They are pressed to study a subject that may hold little interest, and repeatedly told that failure to master English will doom them to failure in later life. It is no wonder that so many students end up hating the subject. Students are good at different things: Some are good at English, others prefer sports. This is healthy and natural, and part of the diversity of society. And the ability to communicate in English or any other language is not something so simple that it can be measured by a score in a private test. Plenty of Japanese people have gone on to have successful careers all over the world despite poor English scores in school. Communication is a holistic human endeavor that goes beyond simple linguistic competence. If a person excels in something, whatever that is, and happens to be faced with the need to use English, she or he is bound to be motivated to study the language, eventually leading to a certain level of proficiency.

In the end, English is simply one foreign language among many, and it is wrong to give students the idea that their lives are as good as finished if they can't do well in English in school. Learning a foreign language is a lifelong experience, and it opens a window to other cultures; understanding other languages and cultures can make our lives richer and more rewarding. In the case of English, its position as a de facto international lingua franca means that a knowledge of English opens a window onto the world.

It is my sincere hope that future generations will be allowed greater freedom and more flexibility to engage with a language that differs markedly in its characteristics from Japanese. I hope they will be encouraged to study English not simply as a way of passing a test, but as the key to understanding and communicating with other people and other cultures—ultimately, for intercultural communication.

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