

## Beyond EFL: Globalizing Education in Japan

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### Abstract:

*Current approaches to education are not providing students in Japan with the skills necessary to become global human resources. How can skills such as effective communication, problem solving, cultural awareness, and leadership, all necessary in a rapidly globalizing world, be developed and nurtured in Japan's schools? National public education must begin to play a more prominent role in the development of these important global skills. This paper will describe first year university students' experiences with, and impressions of, the foreign language education they have received and ask whether or not this can be considered a globalizing education?*

**Keywords:** global human resources, skill development, language education, reform

### Introduction:

Despite enjoying and spending significant time and energy learning about English, students in Japan find it difficult to put what they have learned to use. Further, both in terms of what students say they want and what the government ministry in charge of education indicates, developing an effective foreign language approach has certainly become a priority. The purpose of this study was to gauge first-year university students' attitudes toward English as well as understand their experiences as EFL students (English as a Foreign Language students) prior to entering university. It was also the goal of this study to ask whether or not some students might prefer an education that does not focus specifically on the technical aspects of language, but one that instead places emphasis on developing practical, global skills while at the same time pursuing a high level of academic achievement in all subjects, not only English.

### Literature Review:

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT) has provided a regular schedule of curricular updates that clearly adopt a communicative philosophy toward language teaching and learning<sup>1)-2)</sup>. Forthcoming revisions continue to ensure, "the future improvement and enhancement of English education"<sup>3)</sup>.

The term communicative language teach-

ing (CLT) denotes a number of approaches to teaching and learning, all of which require target language use in the teaching/learning process. Basically, CLT aims to promote language learning through "the communication of meaning over the practice and manipulation of grammatical forms."<sup>4)</sup>. Yoshida<sup>5)</sup> has asserted that in the communicative era of EFL in Japan, students' global mindsets, (their willingness or desire to experience life outside of Japan) may actually be in decline. Further, old ideas and cultural beliefs about what constitutes good teaching and learning still persist.

A cornerstone of CLT is that through language use, students will come to think in the language they are learning<sup>6)</sup>. Often this element of CLT is lacking from the current communicative approach in Japan. In many elementary (EL), JHS and HS classrooms, Japanese is still the language of instruction and the language of most of the individual communication between student and teacher, and so learning English in Japan becomes an exercise in English to Japanese translation<sup>7)</sup>. The role translation plays in foreign language education in Japan sets aside the central pillars of CLT by not requiring students to think in the language they are studying, and this aspect coupled with emphasis placed on perfection, testing, and technical aspects of language likely has a lot to do with why students in Japan find English so challenging.

We will see that the majority of students self-

identify their English level as “poor.” While this may be attributable to modesty and the Japanese tendency to deflect attention, for many students such self-assessments should be seen as leading to a cycle of further demotivation and negative associations.

Dornyei, Ibrahim, and Muir<sup>8)</sup> discuss what they term Directed Motivational Currents or DMC. Within a DMC, students experience a dissociation from time and their surroundings and become engrossed in a single action such as study. When students self-identify as “poor” English learners, they are likely doing so because they have never experienced anything like a DMC. Without the connection to the object of attention, in our case, foreign language skill development, students begin to feel their effort is unpredictable and pointless, and once this feeling occurs the question arises, “what general principles can be deduced from an unpredictable situation?”<sup>8)</sup>

Utilizing an approach where the onus is placed on students to actively and mindfully perform within a student-centered, project based approach, students may more easily become engulfed in their work, and thus begin to experience learning within a DMC. If elements of such an approach were to require foreign language use, not foreign language study, then all the better. Further, if such a program were to focus on gaining international experience and regular authentic, meaningful, and calculated communication with foreign professionals carried out in English, then even further benefit could be added.

Another potential solution may be an approach that has been successful in Japan and many other places. Immersion is widely accepted as being one of if not the most effective ways to acquire language while at the same time achieving high academic standards<sup>9)-11)</sup>. Within an Immersion context, besides English classes, at least half of the curriculum students normally study is undertaken in English.

Immersion began in the majority French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec in the 1960s. It was seen as a way of ensuring that children of English only, Anglophone households in Quebec had a chance of fully participating in Quebec society, both in adolescence and especially upon reaching adulthood. Immersion, in this instance, was seen as a socio-economic necessity<sup>12)</sup>.

In Japan, like Quebec, the target language, English, is not the language of the majority. In Japan, English is not even the most prevalent minority language<sup>13)</sup>. English is, however, the international language of commerce and Japan is a nation at a crossroads. Important government agencies such as The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Infrastructure (METI) have indicated the need for a globalized workforce to help Japanese products and industry find new markets abroad as a way of curtailing the dwindling, aged consumer base in Japan<sup>14)</sup>.

Global human resources (GHR) with skills necessary to help Japanese companies expand their business into overseas markets have been given the moniker global jinzai in Japan<sup>14)</sup>. [Table 1] shows the definition provided by METI<sup>14)</sup>.

According to METI, GHR are necessary for the future economic stability of Japan. Considering the above definition, language skills and cultural understanding are particularly important. The results that follow will attempt to assess the extent to which these global skills are being developed in Japan’s public schools.

**Methods:**

Eighty first year Japanese university students provided responses to a forty-five item survey<sup>i</sup>. Prior to the survey, students were given and were asked to read a one-page explanation of the survey which stated participation in the study was voluntary. Students had the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study did not

[Table 1]

In this world where globalization is in progress, global human resources can:
1. Think Independently;
2. Make themselves easily understood by their colleagues, business acquaintances and customers having various backgrounds;
3. Overcome differences in values and characteristics arising from cultural and historical backgrounds;
4. Understands others and considers their standpoints;
5. Further take advantage of their differences to build synergy, and
6. Create new values.

<sup>i</sup> The survey was conducted after receiving approval from the Ethics Committee at Aomori University of Health and Welfare.

[Table 2]

In your (JHS) English classes, for how much of the class time did the teacher use English ?	
a) Basically none (less than 10%)	10
b) A little (around 25%)	34
c) About half	30
d) Quite a lot (around 75%)	6
e) Always (More than 90%)	0

[Table 3]

About how much (JHS) class time was spent learning about English grammar ?	
a) Basically none (less than 10%)	0
b) A little (around 25%)	6
c) About half	20
d) Quite a lot (around 75%)	46
e) Always (More than 90%)	8

result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which students are entitled, and non-participation did not have any negative effect on students' standing in the class. Students were also asked to check and sign a release clearly showing their wishes regarding the data provided. Survey items covered five separate topics: Evaluation of own English ability, experience studying English at junior high school (JHS), experience studying English at high school (HS), global human resources, and globalizing education. The survey was conducted during class time and was given entirely in Japanese.

### **Results:**

For the sake of economy, what follows here is a summary of eighty respondents' responses to only a selection of survey items.

#### *1. On evaluation of own English ability:*

Items in this section of the survey provide information regarding students' general opinions of English and themselves as users of English. A fairly large majority of students (58/80 or 72.5%) indicated a general enjoyment of English as a school subject. Further, all students (80/80 or 100%),

believe that English ability will be important in the future. However, very few students report having a facility with English, and the majority of students indicate speaking and writing, the ability to initiate communication, as their weakest skills. In response to whether or not they would like to try living abroad in the future, roughly half of students (42/80 or 52.5%) provided affirmative responses.

#### *2. On experience studying English at JHS:*

The items in this section provide information about teaching practices and students' opinions regarding teaching and learning at the JHS level. The responses provided here indicate that English is still being taught primarily as an academic subject rather than as a skill, reinforcing much of the criticism levelled at current practices.

Considering the results shown in [Table 2] and [Table 3], it would appear that teachers spent the majority of class time lecturing about grammatical structures in Japanese.

#### *3. On experience studying English at HS:*

Responses in this section provided some interesting points of comparison between students' experience at the JHS and HS levels regarding common

[Table 4]

In your (HS) English classes, about what amount of class time was English being used by the teacher ?	
a) Basically none (less than 10%)	5
b) A little (around 25%)	10
c) About half	29
d) Quite a lot (around 75%)	23
e) Always (More than 90%)	13

[Table 5]

About how much (HS) class time was spent learning about English grammar ?	
a) Basically none (less than 10%)	0
b) A little (around 25%)	4
c) About half	31
d) Quite a lot (around 75%)	40
e) Always (More than 90%)	5

teaching practices. In regard to their experience at the HS level, [Table 4] describes students' responses.

This represents a marked difference compared to the results reported for the JHS level where more than 90% of respondents reported receiving English language instruction in Japanese up to 50% of the time. In the case of instruction at the HS level, more than 80% of respondents reported receiving instruction in English more than half of the time. What does not change however is the amount of time spent receiving instruction regarding the technical aspects of language rather than time devoted to the development of practical language skills. Please refer to [Table 5].

While it would seem that teachers at the HS level may be more adept at teaching English in English than their JHS counterparts, from a communicative, skill-development, perspective, the fact that the focus remains on learning about the technical aspects of language is worrying.

#### 4. On *global jinzai*:

There are established definitions of GHR<sup>14)</sup>, however responses in this section will show what students believe the term to mean. Roughly 70% (57/80 or 71.3%) of respondents reported that they rec-

ognized the term prior to the survey. When asked to choose the top three characteristics that GHR possess from a list of ten possible characteristics, the top five results were: People who can work overseas, people who can speak English, people who can explain Japanese culture, people who are familiar with foreign culture, and people who are familiar with foreign countries.

From the list of possible options adapted from relevant literature such as METI<sup>14)</sup> and MEXT<sup>3)</sup>, students seem to associate GHR with linguistic and cultural facility, choosing options that contain "culture" and "language" more frequently than those which do not. Please see [Table 6] for the complete list. Though students seem to have a fairly clear concept of GHR, they do not apply this to themselves or to those around them. Respondents nearly unanimously report they do not identify themselves as representative of the characteristics they selected. More than 95% (78/80 or 97.5%) of respondents report they do not consider themselves to be GHR. Further, a nearly identical proportion of respondents (79/80 or 98.8%) indicated they felt that most Japanese do not represent the characteristics of GHR. Finally, when asked if current educational practices can be considered effec-

[Table 6]

What does "global human resource" mean in Japan ?	
List of All Options	Top 5 Choices
1.) People who can read English	1.) People who can work overseas
2.) People who have lived abroad	
3.) People who are "hafu" <sup>i</sup>	2.) People who can speak English
4.) People who are familiar with foreign culture	3.) People who can explain Japanese Culture
5.) People who can explain Japanese culture	
6.) People who can work overseas	4.) People who are familiar with foreign culture
7.) People who can speak English	
8.) People who want to improve their careers	5.) People who are familiar with foreign countries
9.) People who are averse to Japan	
10.) People who are familiar with foreign countries	

<sup>i</sup> A term that refers to individuals with one Japanese parent and one parent who is not.

[Table 7]

Is the education you received conducive to the development of GHR ?								
Definitely not								Absolutely yes
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
5	8	31	24	5	6	1	0	0

tive practices for educating GHR, a large majority seem to feel that current practices are ineffective. In response to the item, “Is the education you received conducive to the development of GHR ?” the responses, shown in the lower row of [Table 7], were provided. More than 90% (73/80 or 91.3%) of respondents indicated uncertainty, returning unconfident responses at the level of five or less.

5. *On globalizing education:*

What, if any, relationship exists between education and GHR? While new curricula continue to be developed and implemented<sup>1)-3)</sup> the results students provided in previous sections indicate that common teaching practices have remained fairly static, despite the associated progressive rhetoric coming from sources like MEXT. Most respondents (76/80 or 95.0%) suggest that if the school environment itself were based more on English, practical English skills would increase proportionately. Further, a large majority of students (71/80 or 88.8%) report feeling that if the number of subjects, other than English, being taught in English were to increase, English language ability would increase proportionately. However, no respondents (0/80 or 0.0%) reported experience learning a subject other than English in English at either the JHS or HS level.

**Discussion:**

Considering the results that have been reported, we must now briefly explore some of the issues related to the type of education this paper espouses: education that results in significant foreign language and global skill development while maintaining high academic standards.

Baker<sup>12)</sup> writes that immersion has found success in several international contexts representing several very different socio-cultural realities. It has been implemented to help languages in decline rebound. It has been used to integrate minority populations into the social and cultural mainstream, and it has been used to internationalize and globalize. Immersion has developed in Japan as well, but was at first met with some objection. Downes<sup>10)</sup> inventories some of the concerns parents of students in

an immersion school in Japan felt, finding that they were concerned mostly with issues of identity and academic performance. Parents felt that if their children were to spend too much time focusing on and learning foreign language that somehow they would dissociate from their identity as Japanese. Further, it was felt that studying core subjects in English rather than Japanese would hinder rather than help students as they prepare for university entrance exams and so on. Downes’ study<sup>10)</sup> challenges these stereotypes, showing the opposite to in fact be true, telling us that immersion, and commitment to achieving a high academic standard in all subjects, with some subjects taught in English, increases students’ self-identification as Japanese, and at the same time nurtures an empathetic, multicultural point of view.

Some of Japan’s largest companies are taking it upon themselves to train a sufficiently globalized workforce<sup>15)</sup>. Companies such as internet shopping giant, Rakuten, and Fast Retailing, the parent company of the popular Uniqlo clothing brand, have adopted a radically global attitude by making English their corporate language. These are companies who have a vested interest in seeing their workers raise the level of their global skills. In Rakuten’s case, it seeks to improve its stake in international online marketplaces; while in Fast Retailing’s case, manufacturing and overseas expansion, with Uniqlo gaining popularity around the world, the need for a common corporate language is understandable<sup>15)</sup>. The do-it-yourself attitude these companies clearly espouse actually speaks as much to their willingness to be innovative as it does to the root of the problem. Calls to reform education on the basis of some complaint regarding deficiency are often answered curtly and in a fashion which suggests that if individuals lack some desirable skill after graduation from school that they should set themselves to learning it on their own<sup>16)</sup>.

This study has shown students enjoy English but are not satisfied with the results they have experienced in school. Further, this lack of satisfaction may be contributing to a disinterest toward and an ambivalence about developing their own global

skills. An approach like immersion whose goal is nurturing students' global potential could provide a reasonable solution to this situation while at the same time providing Japanese companies with exactly the type of employee they are in desperate need of.

### **Conclusion:**

Student participants in this survey have shown, through a sharing of their experiences as language learners, that the current approach to language education is not focusing on skill development. Overt focus on the technical aspects of language helps prepare students for the rigors of a regimen of standardized testing, but does little to give students the practical skills and abilities they will need in a rapidly globalizing world. Within the scope of the research conducted for this paper, students have provided responses which suggest that they would be open to a new type of education wherein foreign language ability is not the overt focus of study, but rather, along with other desirable global skills, one of the outcomes. Though many practical problems and ideological differences stand in the way of such a shift, the future of foreign language education and of education in general in Japan will likely come to be much more student-centered and focus more and more on skill development, which is, as this paper has supported, exactly what potential employers and current students alike would prefer.

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