

Innovating English Language Education by Looking beyond the Syllabus of the Typical Japanese University English Program

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In recent years Japanese universities have been feeling increasing pressure to survive in the competition for a decreasing number of students, and English programs have been an obvious target of reform because of their potential to appeal to applicants who want the language skills to communicate with the outside world. However, there are many ways in which this reform could be carried out badly by university administrations that don't take a full account of the complexity of the issues surrounding English education in Japan (EEJ).

A common framework for reforming English programs is a corporate one, taking inspiration from successful reforms at companies. This could be the wrong way to approach the problem because a corporation has several advantages over a university when it needs to restructure itself.

One obstacle facing universities is that they are intensely democratic, and thus political, institutions. Reform cannot proceed as it does in a corporation, with the old guard demoted or laid off to make way for new leadership and fresh ideas.

Another, and perhaps much greater obstacle, is the problem of coordination of reform.¹⁾ It is no secret that the traditional English education system has been unsatisfactory for a long time to everyone involved in it. The slowness of change is often attributed to conservatism or apathy, but this is a simplistic way of understanding the problem. In fact, it is smart to resist reform until it can be imposed on everyone

simultaneously. Everyone would love a new system, but too many actors in the system would have to change in a coordinated way. Everyone would like to recruit students with good communicative skills, but which university will be the first to abolish its entrance examination and introduce a totally new one that tests these skills? High schools and cram schools do not prepare students for such examinations, nor is the education ministry likely to force them to. Students would just apply elsewhere, so no single institution can dare to be the first one to change, even if everyone knows the change would be rational. Finally, the employers, the end users of the university's product, (graduating students) influence the system as well. Thus the university is a unique enterprise caught in a complex web of interlocking institutions and individuals – private and public schools, cram schools, local, prefectural and national government, employers, and the students and their families. Effective reform would have to be co-ordinated among all these elements. Complicating matters further is the fact that students are in the same ambiguous role as the audience of the entertainment industry that is appealed to as a client then sold to advertisers. Students are the client in the sense that a product, education, must be sold to them, but they are also the product, employees, that must be sold to another client, employers. These factors make the university business quite different from making and selling cars.

Reform of English programs will proceed poorly if the problems above are not acknowledged, but there are additional issues to confront. One issue is that EEJ has evolved over a century and a half in a rather insular way. This has become increasingly noticeable in recent decades because the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (referred to as TESOL, TESL or ELT – English language teaching) has become a colossal global undertaking with numerous professional organizations, publications and training programs. Although many Japanese English teachers do participate in this global profession, most do not, and this has led to a situation in which many practices in Japan are quaintly out of step with TESOL as it occurs elsewhere in the world. With this observation I acknowledge a nation's right to find its own unique solutions, but I argue that these solutions would be better informed if there were greater awareness of how other countries solve their problems.

Another issue, developed in depth over two decades by Seijo University's Kei

Nakamura is the development of a “Sociology of English in Japan.” Kobayashi says Nakamura’s work is “...an effective approach to uncovering the social, political, cultural and historical factors behind the ambiguous linguistic attitude of the Japanese toward English.” He also states, “Many people in Japan today often discuss how to learn English more efficiently and effectively for practical reasons, but very few debate the rationale behind the country’s ‘language policy.’”

In this paper I argue that anyone charged with reform of university English programs ought to consider these comments and take them as a warning that little will be achieved on the practical level if there is no consciousness of the underlying social, political, cultural and historical factors that limit what is achievable by any reform. In addition, there needs to be a greater awareness of how English education is proceeding outside Japan. If these considerations are ignored, reforms are likely to fail.

In the sections that follow, I discuss some aspects of university English programs that could benefit from some international perspective, then conclude with a discussion of how a better recognition of Japanese psychological and cultural attitudes about English study could be brought to bear on English education reform.

Placement Testing

One of the most basic and uncontroversial practices of language education is that a student should be tested and placed in a classroom that suits his level of language proficiency. However, many universities are not able to accommodate this common sense idea. In recent years some Japanese universities have tried to solve this problem by experimenting with multi-level English programs, but they tend to encounter problems.

Everyone knows that Japanese universities are ranked and have a reputation for recruiting students of a particular level of academic ability. If a university suddenly says that there are three levels of ability among students, this raises questions about the university’s true ranking. Are not all of the students more or less equal in ability, having all passed the same standard of admission? ²⁾ How can there be such differences in ability? The multi-level system is very disruptive in a culture in which there

are assumptions about group harmony and homogeneity, even if these are an illusion. Students placed in the high level will feel self-conscious about being placed there, while students in the lower levels will resent them or feel ashamed of their own low ranking.

Furthermore, methods of placing students may be impractical and prone to error. If we use a TOEFL score, for example, two students of widely different abilities could get equal scores, as in this example. Student A went to high school in Texas for three years, while student B followed the typical Japanese academic path. Student A scores high in the listening component, but low in the grammar component. Student B's scores are the inverse, but it is possible that their total scores will be equal. Their TOEFL scores alone tell us nothing about how to appropriately place these two students in a speaking course and a writing course.

Other placement testing systems are likely to have problems, mostly because, as Westrick concludes in his review of a placement test system used at one Japanese university,

“Sadly, there are teachers and administrators who never question the reliability of test scores and instead accept raw and converted scores as perfect reflections of students' abilities. Cut points are set and strictly followed, and decisions are made without any second thoughts.”

A further problem is that it is impossible to predict how many students will be placed into each level after the placement test. It is hard to predict class size or how many textbooks will be needed for each level. When this problem happens, schools are tempted to fill an advanced class, which had few students placed in it, with students from the over-crowded intermediate class, thereby undoing some of the benefit that was supposed to come from a multi-level system.

Finally, there is one problem that could easily go undetected. Students quickly figure out the inherent flaw in the system. A student of high ability could definitely get an A in the intermediate level, but he might not get more than a B or C in the advanced level, and he would have to work harder. He would also have the embarrassment of appearing haughty among his peers if he took the advanced class.

Students become strongly motivated to just be average. Students can even claim, with some justification, that they have the right to choose to take the intermediate or lower level course, against the recommendation of the instructors, if they feel it is more suitable for them. This is particularly true if talk about the importance of high achievement is not seriously believed by anyone, and employers of graduates don't place any importance on it.

Use of TOEIC and TOEFL for Placement and Evaluation

Japanese culture tends to be, relative to other cultures, obsessed with tests and certification in many fields. Thus, foreign English instructors from other countries are often dismayed by the heavy emphasis on standardized language tests. The problem is that there are serious misunderstandings about what these tests measure with validity. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), makers of the TOEIC and TOEFL, may be complicit in this abuse, but if we look deeply enough into their own research on these tests, we find that they hedge their claims about what their tests say about a person's English proficiency. TOEIC and TOEFL have only a predictive validity about the future success of test takers in vocational or academic environments where English is used. They have been widely criticized for not actually measuring the fluency or communicative ability of the test taker at the time he takes the test, even though ETS allows this misunderstanding to persist.³⁾

Because of these criticisms and complaints from organizations that use the scores, the ETS has announced plans to make significant reforms to TOEFL and TOEIC. Japanese universities that are now relying heavily on these tests to measure student ability are in for a surprise. The new tests will test skills in an integrated way, forcing the test taker to speak and write about what he listens to and reads. This means scores of Japanese test takers will go down because EEJ, before and after university entrance, is now unprepared for such a change in the way English skills are developed and judged. The way the test scores are used and the way students are taught to prepare for the tests will have to be changed.

The ‘Rational’ Reform Approach

One reason I urge Japanese English teachers to become involved in international TESOL organizations is so that they can defend themselves against the fads and ‘revolutionary’ ideas that come from it. If they do not engage directly with these ideas, they are likely to be misled by those who would promote them or adopt them undigested in the local environment, with little awareness of controversies and criticisms surrounding the latest fashionable solution to language learning problems.

What would become apparent through such direct involvement is that there are no certainties about language education. Communicative Language Teaching is obviously the reigning ideology of the profession, but there are numerous controversies around it, ranging from a rejection of it to struggles over how to define it and how to design language teaching for communication. The more one learns about these controversies, the more one can protect himself from those who claim to have *the* answer for all that is wrong with EEJ.⁴⁾

This caution would be well heeded by those who would apply a rational management model to university English language programs which might seem to be in line with best practices of the global English teaching profession. A common solution is to set up a language center under a hierarchical management system, with teachers classified as language instructors instead of as lecturers or professors. Job requirements are eased. Teachers need not be serious scholars. Productivity increases, labor costs decrease, course content and evaluation methods are standardized. All seems to be headed toward the paradise of economic rational efficiency. Yet this is all done without any awareness that this undermines the very purpose of having universities. Ideally, universities are by definition places that encourage education and employ the highly educated. If they, or parts of them, are going to be run like corporations, they become, by definition, not universities but vocational training centers. Such reform is also done with the dubious assumption that better results will be achieved by not letting teachers manage themselves, or by not developing faculty capable of doing so, and this goes against even modern corporate trends. For example, in information technology companies, hierarchies are being flattened, outside

talent can be brought in to lead the company, and power is not based on seniority. These elements cannot be found in universities or in the proposed language centers.

Classification of teachers: “native” “bilingual” “Japanese”

If Japanese English teachers increased their contact with English teachers from other countries, they would quickly realize the oddity of one other feature of their attitude toward their specialty. Japanese universities make clear distinctions between “native” “bilingual” and “Japanese” English teachers. Although even English dictionaries define “bilingual” as “equally fluent in two languages,” the term “fluent” in this definition has, for language teachers, recently come to be seen as too problematic. Because “fluency” is too hard to define, for language teachers it is considered more appropriate to define “bilingual” more loosely, meaning a person who has a certain degree of proficiency in more than one language in certain domains of language use. With this as the common understanding of the term, teachers encourage their students by telling them to think of themselves as bilingual when they can achieve certain communicative functions. Thus it would be unwise for a university English program to create the impression that some of its Japanese English teachers are not bilingual.

The trouble with categories such as “native speaker” and “bilingual” is that they have come to be regarded as laughably out of date in the language teaching profession. There are just too many gray areas between these categories. If someone immigrated to America at the age of eight, then learned to speak English, can this person teach English in Japan as a native speaker? What is the cut-off age for such an immigrant to become a native speaker? How long does a Japanese person have to live abroad to become a “bilingual?” What if he doesn’t speak English as well as the Japanese teacher who never lived abroad? A century of accelerated global migration and travel has broken down these categories and made them irrelevant considerations as qualifications to teach English as a foreign language. We don’t need to worry about who is “native” or “bilingual.” We just need good English teachers.

Considering the changes coming in standardized tests, mentioned above, these distinctions will become less important as all language teachers and students will

have to change their attitudes toward teaching and learning English. By the same token, “natives” could become more bilingual and use their knowledge of Japanese to understand what aspects of English are particularly difficult for Japanese learners of English.

Re-defining the Native Speaker Teacher

Just as the classification of Japanese English teachers into bilingual and non-bilingual is inappropriate, there are certain proposed changes in the classification of native speakers that are also misguided.

Japanese universities have for many years tried to make their English programs more appealing to students by employing native speakers of English as adjunct faculty working on annually renewed contracts. It has never been easy to recruit people with scholarly resumes for these positions because of the requirement that they be well enough educated to work as university faculty, that they be citizens of countries where English is the official language, and that they be willing to work only one day a week while supplementing their income elsewhere. Because of a disparity in labor market demand, Japanese adjunct faculty had to meet high requirements in terms of academic qualifications and publications, while often the native speaker adjunct faculty had a weaker academic background. This led to a certain amount of resentment and doubt about what was being learned anyway in these English conversation classes. It was easy to compare these classes to the sort of class taught by native speakers in private sector English conversation schools, for lower wages. It would be tempting for the university to employ native speakers to teach these ‘simple’ conversation classes, if only the government ministry controlling the universities would permit it. Now the ministry does seem more willing to permit university credits to be earned for attending casual English conversation classes, so many universities are trying to move in this direction.

Plans to reclassify the native speaker teacher usually come with a plan to create a “language center” in place of the usual syllabus of university language courses. Such restructuring is seen to be cost-effective and appealing to applicants. They feature casual conversation classes, undemanding pass/fail evaluation standards, and

a presumption that classes led by native speakers of English need not be taught by professional teachers or academics.

As I mentioned above, such restructuring leads a university toward becoming a vocational training center. Faculty members who support this restructuring may think it is a fine idea to save costs by restructuring someone else's courses (in this case, foreigners who are dis-empowered and outside the social networks of faculty members), but they should not take comfort from the government's new willingness to allow university credits for courses taught by people who are not career academics.

If we believe that foreign languages can be learned without professional teachers, and university credits can be given for such learning, what other subjects in the curriculum could be considered for similar restructuring? It may seem at first that foreign languages are unique and that learners need only some contact with native speakers to acquire the ability to communicate with the foreign language, but other subjects can be viewed in the same way.

If the students' ability to write in Japanese is deemed insufficient, let's have a freelance journalist teach the subject in a "writing center," working for 2,000 yen per hour on a short-term contract basis. If basic science and math skills seem to be lacking, let's hire some *juku* teachers to hold some classes on a part-time basis. If the students of a child psychology course don't seem to have learned enough about the subject, let's just have them casually observe kindergarten classes and interact with children in a natural way to acquire a true 'literacy'⁵⁾ in the subject of child psychology. This would really not be at all different from giving university credits to students who spend ninety minutes a week in contact with native speakers of English. A great deal of money could be saved in professors' salaries if the university adopted this approach to education, and students might indeed react more favorably to them and learn more than they do in lectures. However, such a university would not be a university any longer because a university defines itself by adhering to the tradition of supporting higher education (who will go to graduate school if doing so doesn't lead to a good teaching job?), by employing the highly educated, and by providing professors with job security and opportunities for both teaching and research. Any university that wants to be a language school or a vocational training center should stop calling itself a university.

I also wish to illustrate with these examples above that the interest in singling out particular subjects for restructuring can politicize the teaching faculty as it slowly cannibalizes itself. In a corporation facing restructuring, employees don't get the opportunity to form committees that defend their own interests and attack others', so this is one of the ways in which university reform can be much more ineffective than corporate reform. The matter is further complicated because universities are supposed to be implementing a system for self-evaluation and peer observation of teaching, but these cannot be carried out effectively if there are disputes occurring over whose programs are to be subject to cost-cutting. Everyone will end up devoting more thought to faculty politics than to the teaching of their courses, and peer evaluations will be done, or feared to be done, with malicious intent. This, ironically, takes the faculty away from the original purpose of reforms: attracting good students to the university through the improvement of teaching.

Finally, we should consider one other interesting reason given for reclassifying the job of the native speaker instructor. The language center concept with casual English conversation classes is believed to have good market appeal for prospective students, but if this is the case, why would a university offer the lowest salaries to teachers who are bringing such extra value to the institution? (I make this suggestion for ironic effect, not as a serious proposal). In businesses that are operated rationally toward making a profit, star talent is rewarded the highest and the less appealing products and services are paid less or eliminated. Irrational economic planning has its prime example in the old factories of the Soviet Union where the customers had long been ignored and the workers believed that the factory existed for their benefit. Universities that are trying to improve their finances and appeal to the market need to take account of the fact they cannot carry out 'corporate' style reforms because they are not corporations. It is possible that reform processes will merely lead to plans that are actually disingenuous nostrums coming one after another.

It is worthwhile to consider in more depth some further assumptions behind the reclassification of teaching by native speakers of English. One assumption is perhaps that native speakers don't really need to teach in a structured way, that students can acquire English through unstructured contact with native speakers. Such an assumption is bound to lead to poor outcomes, which the native speakers may be

blamed for. If they are not blamed for it, it may lead to a further assumption that students could fail to learn just as well with a less qualified and more poorly paid native speaker.

It should come as no surprise that students don't develop a great speaking ability after their classes with native speaker instructors. Learning to speak a language takes hundreds of hours of instruction. Universities courses offer only about thirty-nine hours of instruction per year, to students who live remote from any genuine contact with speakers of English. Even less can be expected of a course that simply puts students in contact with a native speaker who has no training as a teacher or a linguist.

A course with such a limited number of hours needs to adopt what is called an investment model of pedagogy, and for this an experienced and trained language teacher is needed to focus on the most salient aspects of the language that the student can learn and use in his future attempts to acquire language skill after the course is over. A class with an unskilled native speaker is likely to be rehearsal focused rather than investment focused.⁶⁾ Students communicate with the 'teacher' with a limited shared language code, just as they would communicate with a baby, a dog or a native from a remote jungle tribe. The session may be fun, but whatever is practiced is rehearsal of randomly occurring native speaker language samples. Little of value can be taken away for future investment in learning. The university is well prepared to adopt the investment model of teaching, while a rehearsal model can be left for other types of institutions.

Thus we might make opposite conclusions about why the results of English education have been unsatisfactory. Perhaps the old system is inadequate because the traditional part-time lecturer job category was not enough to attract good teachers. The old structure should be renovated and strengthened rather than replaced with a weaker structure. A job that offers one day of work per week, no benefits and annually renewing contracts cannot be expected to inspire a great deal of devotion. Worsening these conditions seems like a good way to lower educational standards and invite numerous problems with staff turnover, low morale, and unprofessional behavior. We should also note that those who wish to create such job categories on campus assume that there is a steady supply of young people to fill them. The conditions

and salaries suggested are not fit for an adult who wants to assume adult responsibilities such as raising children or supporting aging parents.⁷⁾ It is one thing when a burger chain adopts such practices, but it is not something that a university could be particularly proud of.

Entrance Examination Reform

Although many reform plans show that there is some sincere interest in improving English education and making it more appealing to students, one significant factor has not been considered in these plans. Entrance exams have a profound effect on the way students approach the learning of English. If we want them to develop communicative skills after they enter university, the best way to do this is to get students who have developed these skills before they enter university. This is an obvious weakness of EEJ, cited often in critical reviews (see Hato), so the fact that reforms are slow to be undertaken is a sign that it is an example of a coordination problem mentioned above, in addition to being a problem of unattainable objectives and insufficient time for students in junior and senior high schools.⁸⁾ Even though the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has recommended changes in English entrance exams,⁹⁾ its approach is typical of Japanese bureaucracy: suggestion but no follow-up or enforcement. No single university wants to be the first to have listening comprehension questions on its entrance exam, and no *juku* or high school knows how to help students prepare for such questions.

A further problem with university entrance exams is that they have developed over decades in an insular way, so testing practices have lost touch with global developments in the field of language testing. There are some fundamental best practices that need to be adopted, such as conducting test trials, doing post-test item analysis, and designing tests with a clear idea of how they are to be reliable and valid for specified purposes.¹⁰⁾

Historical and Socio-Cultural Context

Any reformist zeal to improve English education should be tempered with a realistic understanding of what can be accomplished in the Japanese setting. Firstly, English education takes place within the larger context of university education. Students come to university with a high expectation that they have earned a right to take it easy and catch up on non-intellectual aspects of their maturation. (Kelly, in Wadden, 173) Little change can be expected in English achievement if the general motivation to study is not increased somehow.

With regards to English itself, learning a foreign language is a long, difficult process, and progress is difficult in a country with a homogeneous culture and a single language. Japanese learners have been influenced by their education system and the nature of university entrance exams. Their attitudes toward communication and their motivation to speak English are shaped by their upbringing and the deliberate language policies that have always tried to keep English at a safe distance so that it does not threaten the status of Japanese. If we compare EEJ and English education in Singapore, some differences are obvious. In Singapore people learn English because they have to in order to survive, but Japan was never an English colony, it is not multicultural, and it succeeded economically without a reliance on foreign investment. If, in comparison with Singaporeans, Japanese don't learn English, it is because they don't have to.

In fact, there was a historical period in the early Meiji era when the educated elite were functionally bilingual in English and it was becoming essential for career advancement.¹¹⁾ This was achieved in a short time by specific educational policies in a period that was much more open to the possibility that a standardized Japanese language may not be possible or preferable for the nation. There was talk of abandoning it in national education, or romanizing written Japanese, but a reverse course eventually won out. Had things gone a little differently, Japan would now be like Singapore, and no one in Japan would have to worry about TOEIC scores or read essays like this one.

English ceased to be the medium of instruction at Japanese universities as

policy shifted toward establishing a national language for education and a Japanization of foreign terminology. Policies were adopted to keep English at a distance.¹²⁾ English education became text-based grammar translation – a system so daunting that all but the determined few would fail to learn the language, and I stress that this was and still is the deliberate policy, no matter what we believe today about English being the essential global language. This 19th. Century system is still with Japan in the 21st Century, whether Japanese English teachers are aware of this or not, and if this fact goes unacknowledged, English education reform is bound to fail.

If we really wanted to make every young person fluent in English, it could be done easily by halting the teaching of Japanese. Since that is not desirable, everything else regarding English education is a compromise between the desire to improve English skills but maintain the status of the national language. You can't have it both ways.

Or maybe you can. Perhaps these enduring attitudes of EEJ could be explained metaphorically as psychological trauma. They arose during the traumatic threat to national identity that occurred in the childhood of the modern nation, the Meiji era, and echoed again after WWII. In 2006, the threat is gone, but the inappropriate reaction to the trauma continues in the 'adult sufferer' of this 'childhood trauma.' The therapy and the cure can come by bringing to consciousness that the English education system is still working under policies suited for a different era. The Japanese language has been firmly established, literacy rates are high, the nation is prosperous and independent. There is no rational reason to fear being colonized or culturally erased by the English language.¹³⁾ Thus it is time to have an English education system that operates as it does in other countries that face the same problem of balancing the learning of the national language with the learning of the language of global communication. The most fundamental difference between Japan and these other countries is that in the latter teachers of English consider themselves bilingual, they don't apologize for making mistakes that don't conform to 'correct' English, and they don't hesitate to use the language for the joy of communicating with outsiders. Consequently, this psychologically healthy attitude is passed on to students. If we can ever diminish the pervasive tendency of Japanese students to giggle when they utter an English word, this might be one way of measuring whether better attitudes

are emerging. This giggling expresses the entire complex of conflicting and uncomfortable emotions that Japanese have toward the learning of English.

Setting examples for English learning

An obvious truism in educational psychology is that young people are instinctively motivated to learn by observation and imitation of their elders. They notice the skills that are important for their future survival and focus on learning them, and worries about how to motivate them are notably absent in such circumstances. Good educational planning takes advantage of this learning instinct by creating social environments that make young people focus on the particular skills that are deemed important. In the case of English education, this would mean creating an environment where students see Japanese adults, not necessarily only English teachers, speaking English as if it is a matter of course.

Such a shift has already occurred in many Japanese workplaces that have come under pressure to relate better to the outside world, and workers in finance, engineering, marketing and management – people who are, I emphasize, not professional English teachers – have adapted quickly. If university English courses are going to market their English programs as places to prepare for these new workplaces, it only seems reasonable that the university should resemble them.

The motivation of students might increase if their elder role models – who are Japanese adults, not foreign English teachers – were seen to be functionally bilingual in the workplace. If this happened, they might come to believe that the message they hear about English being essential is something more than the pretty words of a marketing slogan. This would require university staff to get over their lack of confidence (on the flip side of which there is also a certain degree of pride) about speaking English. Of course, this problem is not only about shyness and pride. We can't ignore the fact that being forced to speak a foreign language is stressful and humiliating if one cannot express all that he wants to. There is no getting around the uncomfortable facts of the human language faculty. A teenager just back from a couple years overseas speaks English better than a university professor who is able to write research papers in English. It is a human instinct to link social status to language

proficiency, so for the person of high social status there is a strong motivation not to speak English at all. Nonetheless, we need to admit that this gets in the way of achieving the educational goals described in the syllabus.

In addition to having this change in individual bilingualism, some spheres of official activity in the university could become bilingual.¹⁴⁾ Furthermore, when foreign faculty have been hired to promote the learning of English, it might be time to consider whether it is counter-productive to allow students to hear them speaking Japanese in the workplace. As much as it is reasonable to expect foreigners to use the language of the country where they live, the more this is expected of the staff of an English department, the more this department moves away from its primary objective. The university is not paying these teachers to practice their Japanese while on the job.

It seems to me that these environmental changes could be achieved through an effort of all university staff to increase awareness of the social, political, cultural and historical factors shaping Japanese attitudes toward English – an effort which would adapt these attitudes to the modern era. Additionally, teachers of English could participate in the global TESOL profession. These efforts should be made before we look at the usual targets of reform – the surface aspects of English programs such as standardized test scores, teachers' employment conditions, materials, computer assisted language learning and course content. If we become aware of the underlying causes of the English education problem and act on changing them, all else will fall into place.

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Notes

- 1) Surowiecki, 84-86, has a detailed description of this co-ordination problem, and other problems in institutional decision making .
- 2) In fact, I have personal experience in some universities where the selection of students worked so effectively that it was often difficult to make any distinctions in English proficiency between students, at their entrance and at their graduation.
- 3) See Chapman for an example of such a criticism of the TOEIC.
- 4) See Widdowson, 93-107, for an insightful, skeptical criticism of some of TESOL’s reigning ideologies.
- 5) I use the term “literacy” here because of its frequent occurrence in reform plans, appearing as a katakana word リテラシー . Being a foreign import, the word is suitably vague for Japanese readers, so it could be introduced stealthily into the reformed syllabus and later used to absorb any subject that needs to be moved into a new cost-effective “learning center.”
- 6) I refer again to Widdowson, 115-116, for his useful dichotomy of investment vs. rehearsal language teaching.

- 7) In Abbot & Achbar, activist Naomi Klein comments in an interview on the global trend of employers to “infantilize” the workforce by providing only low-paying jobs that do not pay enough to allow people to assume adult social responsibilities. Thus conservative economic policies create one of the problems lamented by social conservatives – the low birthrate and the ‘selfish’ generation that ‘refuses’ to grow up.
- 8) See Hato for pertinent comments and a critical review of the MEXT’s *Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities*.
- 9) See Toyama for the full context of this quote from the ministry’s 2003 *Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities*: “Based on the attainment targets for English ability that are established by each university, the English abilities required for applicants will be clarified. In particular, from a perspective of emphasizing communication abilities, selection methods that appropriately evaluate communication abilities will be promoted in the approach of each university through the use of such means as listening tests.”
- 10) See Bachman, 24-25, for definitions of reliability and validity.
- 11) See Loveday, 59-76, for a description of language contact from the Meiji era onward.
- 12) See Nakamura for an unconventional analysis of Japan’s English education system.
- 13) Here I differ from Nakamura who describes English as “a killer” “the language of racism” a “mental agonizer” and imperialistic because it “brings the Anglo-American way of life to every corner of the world.” I question the attributing of such agency and determinism to a language. Languages don’t do these horrible things. People do. People are infinitely creative with what they do with a language, thus English quickly becomes the language of choice for placards in Iran venting Muslim anger that read “Down with Denmark” (International Herald Tribune) – notable in this case for being written in English rather than Danish. The question of linguistic imperialism may have been relevant in the age of empires, but recently it seems to have been superseded by a sense that English is out there beyond the ownership and control of any founding nations of native speakers. Widdowson (43) notes, “It is a matter of considerable pride and satisfaction for native speakers of English that their language is an international means of communication. But the point is that it is only international to the extent that it is not their language. It is not a property for them to lease out to others while retaining freehold. Other people actually own it.”
- 14) See Chung for a description of the “English Village” concept being adopted by some educational institutions in South Korea. These schools are creating English-only environments to create a place and social context for language learning to occur, hopefully at an accelerated pace.