



Questioning Japan's English-Only and Other Language Teaching Communicative Directives

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Abstract

In 2014 the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) published its “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization” so as to “promote the establishment of an educational environment” conducive to enhancing English education in Japan. This plan, which explicitly covers pre-tertiary education levels and was to be incrementally promoted prior to full scale implementation beginning in fiscal year 2020 with Japan’s hosting of the Tokyo Olympics, states that English education classes are to be conducted in English from the lower secondary school level. This directive to match the students’ target language (TL) with the language of instruction evinces MEXT’s belief that English mediated instruction (EMI) directly impacts TL learning outcomes (e.g., by students consequently displaying competency in TL skills), with those results considered to be key first to students’ university-level English language learning endeavors and then to Japan’s increased internationalization and globalization efforts. To external observers, such an English-only stance appears fully apropos, valid, and justifiable. However, MEXT’s directives must be questioned, not only because of the general untenability of first language (L1) exclusion in TL learning situations, but also because of the difficulties encountered by both educational institutions and their instructors as they attempt to follow MEXT’s directives, particularly after the unforeseen move to remote teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief article discusses MEXT’s reform plan, examples of COVID-19’s impact on EMI in communicative teaching contexts, and the myriad benefits to be had by allowing L1 inclusion in TL instruction.

Keywords: Japan, Ministry of Education, English-only, English medium instruction, L1

1. Introduction

In 2013, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT) announced its construction of the “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization” (MEXT, 2014a). This Reform Plan, which was to be rolled out in stages beginning in 2014 and set to culminate with Japan’s hosting of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, was meant to be a full-scale development and implementation of English education reform to better position Japan in a world of increasing internationalization and globalization. It was not

constructed in isolation. With ongoing factors such as declining birthrates, an aging population, and increased economic competition with other countries (including but not limited to other Asian nations), a concerted push toward internationalization and globalization was seen as needed, and this push necessarily included English and making changes to English language education within the education system.

Part of MEXT's overarching reforms included changes to tertiary-level education systems. Although a detailed explanation of these reforms is beyond the scope of the current paper, it may be succinctly stated that the globalization measures to be undertaken included "reform [to] national universities to maintain competitiveness and create new added-value ideas" (MEXT, 2014b, p. 1, line 1). As far as they concern English language education, this includes in part drives to (a) increase the number of courses conducted in English at the university level and (b) strengthen study abroad initiatives for both Japanese students studying overseas and students from abroad to study in Japan. Both are tied inexorably to the Reform Plan, and when viewed together as part of a larger whole, evince the impact of why, what, and how English is taught in the Japanese education system from pre-tertiary levels onward.

On the surface, with Japan's many obstacles in an ever-changing world, MEXT's various reforms and directives appear apropos, valid, and justifiable. However, with full-scale implementation of the changes to English education now in progress post-final implementation stage and post-COVID-19 pandemic, there is ample room to question these directives and examine the impact they currently have on the teaching and learning of English at all education levels in Japan.

It is the aim of the paper to explain and address the following interrelated matters:

1. MEXT's Reform Plan
2. English language teaching at pre-tertiary levels
3. English medium instruction
4. Current university English courses
5. First language inclusion/exclusion

The aim of the paper is to indicate from investigation that the intended results of implementing the Reform Plan seem to have not yet materialized, and that at least one possible reason may be from an overly rigid stance on the use of English in classroom teaching and learning settings.

2. MEXT's Reform Plan

MEXT, being the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology, covers all the areas that its name implies. Of concern to the present paper is the "education" category, and more specifically, the foreign language education subcategory, specifically that of English. MEXT outlines policies, otherwise known as national curriculum standards that are called Course of Study Guidelines, which are meant to guide all education levels spanning from the elementary and secondary education levels to higher levels of education. These national curriculum standards, which undergo updates approximately every ten years (O'Halloran, 2019), can be found by navigating from MEXT's main English-language webpage (MEXT, 2024a). Found within is MEXT's "English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization" (MEXT, 2014a). Although the Reform Plan found here is only one page long, it essentially outlines three distinct areas for New English Education (hereafter, NEE):

1. An increased focus on English language education that focuses on communicative English language teaching
2. The empowering of teaching staff, including training and utilization of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs)
3. The utilization of standardized tests to evaluate students' English ability

To understand the import and implications of these three areas that are fundamentally intertwined requires a deeper inspection and discussion of previous and current English teaching pedagogical practices pre- and post-Reform Plan implementation.

3. English Language Teaching at Pre-Tertiary Levels

To explain MEXT's intentions regarding its NEE guidelines requires explaining how English has traditionally been taught at pre-tertiary levels. For decades, the most used method has been a form of grammar translation called *yakudoku* (literally: translation reading). This method typically involves the steps of (1) translating all target words (while retaining the target language's syntax), (2) reordering the words to fit Japanese syntax, and (3) refinement to fit Japanese syntax (Cooper & Price, 2019; Rubrecht, 2003). Critics have pointed out *yakudoku*'s many flaws, which extend far beyond it just being a lifeless way to learn a living language.

More than two decades ago Rubrecht (2003) outlined three main reasons why pre-tertiary-level teachers would continue to use *yakudoku*, and even with many reforms in the interim, they still seem to be in play. The inexorably intertwined reasons are (1) washback from entrance examinations, (2) traditions of translation, and (3) teacher experiences and beliefs. Each helps explain why communicative language teaching has yet to gain a foothold at pre-tertiary levels.

3.1 Washback from entrance examinations

The requirements of the life-altering high school and university English entrance examination preparation have long made the implementing of methodological practices like communicative language teaching (CLT), which is learner-centered and meaning-oriented rather than form-focused, unrealistic (Bradley, 2012; Fujimoto, 1999). Both the current "Common Test for University Admissions" (*Daigaku Nyūgaku Kyōtsū Tesuto*) and its predecessor, the pre-2021 "National Center Test for University Admissions" (*Daigaku Nyūshi Sentā Shiken*) are themselves only reading and listening comprehension examinations (O'Halloran, 2019; Wood, 2019), which makes them categorically not communication-oriented tests. With such external and pre-determined constraints, it is little wonder that teachers—as well as students, parents, and educational institutions themselves—would doubt CLT's preparatory effectiveness (Butler, 2011).

In their study, Cooper & Price (2019) found that many teachers believe that entrance examination preparation is of greater importance than any MEXT guidelines. If *yakudoku* has been used successfully in the past to allow high school students to pass English university entrance exams that are essentially grammar- and reading-focused, then it stands to reason that some teachers—and the pre-tertiary educational institutions that employ them—would find merit in the methodology and wish to continue using it (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Sakai, 2014), particularly if the entrance examinations themselves have not undergone any radical changes. Should classrooms continue to see *yakudoku* being used, even against the wishes of MEXT, then CLT suffers in terms of time devoted to it, quality of its administration, or both.

Additionally, there is the serious and ongoing concern of the lack of teacher training (Bartlett, 2020; Butler, 2011; Chapple, 2015; Tada, 2016). Teachers still struggle at pre-tertiary levels to engage students in communicative linguistic activities. Faced with various

challenges, they often default to teaching straight from textbooks in a one-way manner (Ito & Uda, 2023), without any focus on helping students gain communicative competence.

3.2 Traditions of translation

MEXT has long implemented various incremental reforms to phase out this very non-communicative English language teaching and learning style (Borg, 2023), but very much in vain. With the 2014 Reform Plan, MEXT took its largest step yet to do away with *yakudoku* and usher in communicative English teaching methodologies. Specifically, MEXT announced that English classes were to be taught in English either “in principle” at the lower secondary school level (i.e., junior high school) or simply as a matter of course at the upper secondary school level (i.e., high school). Such directives would, in theory, eliminate *yakudoku*. However, reform plans only work if they are followed. As things stand now, it seems as though they are not.

The Course of Study Guidelines as laid out by MEXT (2024b) puts emphasis on the four language skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Translation as a skill is noticeably absent, yet its use is noticeably prevalent (Cooper & Price, 2019). Thus, *yakudoku* has not only *not* disappeared as a language teaching methodology from pre-tertiary levels in the face of constant reforms, but it continues to be used to such an extent that it comes across as being the default method of English language instruction.

In their study, Cooper and Price (2019) found that 70% of Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) believed that translation skills help with entrance examination preparation. Their continued use of *yakudoku* “suggests that they are not working solely towards the goals set by MEXT” (p. 28). But their faith in their grammar-translation method of choice may not be the only reason for its use.

There is a systematic disconnect between MEXT’s policy declarations and the realities of pedagogical practice (Glasgow & Paller, 2016). English courses at pre-tertiary education institutions in Japan are often staffed by regular Japanese teachers with minimal English proficiency, much less any communication-oriented teacher training (Tada, 2016; Wood, 2019). The result of this is that reliance on the relatively easy-to-use *yakudoku* methodology remains attractive and consequently implemented.

If teachers are so focused on the goal of preparing students for their entrance examinations, then they will likely talk more (i.e., lecture) in order to transfer as much information as possible in the limited amount of time allotted to them. Consequently, even if there are MEXT directives to teach mainly or solely in English, those directives will be downplayed or ignored altogether. Teachers will therefore have to learn (or be taught) to reduce the amount of teacher talk in the classroom and “adopt a language- or skills-based, communication-oriented bilingual approach to teaching” (Kyeyune, 2003, as cited in Chapple, 2015, p. 183).

3.3 Teacher experiences and beliefs

Even with MEXT having clearly conveyed its directives to educational institutions across the nation, a look at the literature (e.g., Bartlett, 2020; Cooper & Price, 2019; Glasgow & Paller, 2016; Humphries & Burns, 2015; Shimizu, 1995; Yokogawa, 2017) shows numerous factors, reasons, and beliefs that make it ever-more unlikely that *yakudoku* will ever be phased out at pre-tertiary education levels. Many of these are related to teacher experiences and beliefs, as well as to the realities of the teaching contexts in which teachers—the very ones to implement the directives—find themselves.

1. Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) generally evince over-reliance and trust in *yakudoku*
2. Large class sizes (e.g., 30 to 40 students) present massive hurdles in terms of teaching and evaluating individual students' progress and communicative competence
3. JTEs may assume they know better than MEXT and resist directives or resort to non-implementation
4. JTEs may view having students pass entrance examinations as being more important than having their communicative competence developed
5. JTEs may feel a sense of responsibility to help their students pass their entrance examinations
6. Students themselves may be disinclined to participate in speaking activities if they are not in line with their entrance examination preparation expectations
7. Parental pressures may make it difficult for JTEs to switch from the previously "tried-and-true" entrance examination preparation methodologies
8. JTEs may resist the top-down policies made without their input
9. Senior JTEs may pressure younger JTEs to continue using *yakudoku*
10. JTEs may possess English language abilities only sufficient for translation purposes
11. JTEs may lack the ability or knowledge to implement alternative teaching methods, as the Reform Plans are merely directives and do not specifically involve teacher training

A final important reason must also be included here: the onset of COVID-19. Just as the Reform Plans were to go into full effect in 2020, the world was hit by a global pandemic. The timing of this unforeseen event was catastrophic, as the ultimate aim of the Reform Plan and NEE policies was to make classes more communicative rather than just grammar- and vocabulary-based. Teachers were not only forced to scramble to find ways to conduct classes remotely in order to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, but they also had to come up with lesson plans that allowed them to teach their required course content from a distance, as there was still teaching to be done and entrance examinations to be prepared for. Added to this were literally life-and-death concerns to be addressed as vaccines were being developed. In short, there were—and continues to be—a plethora of reasons why the uptake of CLT has yet to manifest, even several years after the outbreak of the pandemic.

4. English Medium Instruction

Upon cursory inspection, MEXT's English teaching reforms at pre-tertiary levels appear to be working. This can be said because Japanese universities are forging ahead with various initiatives and English-only course offerings meant to boost Japanese university worldwide rankings (Brown, 2017) and serve—or at least attract—high-achieving international students, or ISs (Bradford, 2018; Chapple, 2015), to a country facing sharp population declines. Such initiatives and offerings would not be feasible if universities did not expect entering high school graduates to be prepared and equipped to communicate in English as per MEXT's pre-tertiary-level directives. The last reported figures from MEXT (2021) show that 307 (41%) Japanese undergraduate universities offer courses via English medium instruction (EMI). This is up from 176 (23%) in 2005 (MEXT, 2017) as well as from 262 (36%) in 2013 (Bradford, 2018), the year the Reform Plan was being finalized. With internationalization and globalization as both the backdrop and the goal, and with an awareness of MEXT's incrementally implemented Reform Plan, it would make sense for universities to offer more courses taught in English, including but not limited to English language learning (ELL) courses.

The problem, however, is twofold. First, as alluded to in the previous section, it is highly doubtful that those students who made their way through the Japanese pre-tertiary education system are now truly prepared for all-English education to the degree that MEXT and

universities expect. Nationally, test scores are down. Comparing the average percentage of correct answers on the English-speaking portion of the 2023 National Assessment of Academic Ability examination show an 18.4% decline from the previous year (down to 12.4% from 30.8%). Additionally, more than 60% of the student test takers failed to answer any of the five quiz questions correctly (Ito & Uda, 2023). Although this decline can likely be explained in part by the lingering impact of COVID-19 and remote teaching and learning on educational outcomes, these scores nevertheless indicate that either the Reform Plan is not working as envisioned or that it is not being implemented in the first place (or both).

The second problem involves the meaning of EMI and its intended use. As traditionally defined, EMI is about the teaching of specific academic content via English and not the teaching of English itself (Brown & Bradford, 2017). As such, EMI is not necessarily applicable to ELL courses, which makes the increasing number of EMI course offerings at Japanese universities as noted above either (a) irrelevant, as those EMI courses are not meant to raise the English abilities of domestic students (DSs), or (b) highly disconcerting, as universities might be misusing EMI. As Chapple (2015) explains about EMI in the Japanese university context, ISs are the intended enrollees of such courses, but being English-only educational environments, they are simultaneously touted as being courses that allow DSs to improve their English proficiency. Indeed, students have been found to want and expect to improve their English skills through such university EMI courses (Bozdoğan & Karlidağ, 2013; Ellili-Cherif & Alkhateeb, 2015; Sugimoto, 2021). However, as language teaching is not the focus of EMI courses, DSs who are not as communicatively capable as they are thought or expected to be face a host of setbacks should they enroll. Studies have found such students to participate less in such classes (Webb, 2002), encounter more difficulty in comprehending lessons (Chapple, 2015), and drop out with higher frequency (Selzer & Gibson, 2009). Linguistically deficient students also place a tremendous burden on instructors, as they must either sacrifice course pace and objectives by “dumbing down” lesson content or leave those students to fend for themselves (Chapple, 2015).

5. Current University English Courses

Although it is beyond the scope of this brief paper to tally and analyze all university-level English and EMI courses across Japan, what has been presented thus far should nevertheless illuminate the problem MEXT and universities (and the nation as a whole) is now facing. To recap the linkage:

1. MEXT expects pre-tertiary-level ELL classes to be conducted either mostly or completely in English.
2. For the many reasons cited above (e.g., the continuation of *yakudoku* teaching methods, overemphasizing entrance examination preparation), such English language teaching does not occur.
3. Universities nevertheless expect matriculating students to have taken all-English classes previously, which justifies their stance that ELL courses should be conducted all in English and that DSs should be allowed to enroll in EMI courses that are ostensibly meant for ISs.
4. However, because MEXT's pre-tertiary-level directives are not or cannot be followed, a mismatch ensues between what universities expect their students can accomplish and what their students can actually achieve, with the result being an unnecessary burden placed on both teachers and their students at the tertiary level.

Add to all this the disruption in 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. During emergency remote teaching (ERT), teachers who were supposed to conduct classes partly or fully in English were met with even more passive and reticent students as they taught their classes online (Agustina, 2023). Japanese students, being unaccustomed to autonomous classwork (Cutrone & Beh, 2022), felt increasingly isolated and disconnected during remote teaching and learning (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Peper et al., 2021), thereby negatively impacting their motivation and engagement with their studies (Isha & Wibawarta, 2023). With these factors combined, it made the following of MEXT's directives that much more infeasible. As face-to-face lessons resumed, social distancing requirements kept pair work and interactive lessons to a minimum, thereby further reducing communicative learning opportunities. Furthermore, as schools reopened, MEXT (2020) informed educators that, due to the disruptions, if target education goals could not be met, those goals could be postponed "to 1 or 2 years in the future" (p. 6) and that special consideration (i.e., lowered expectations) should be shown to students taking various entrance examinations. The takeaway here is that the pandemic clearly hampered pre-tertiary-level learning, thereby casting further doubt that students matriculating post-pandemic would be at expected English proficiency levels.

As a case in point, after the final implementation of the Reform Plan and during the height of the pandemic, the prestigious Tokyo-based ABC University (a pseudonym) began initiating changes to its required ELL courses, particularly but not exclusively for its first- and second-year students. The new curriculum, unambiguously named "Interactive," was clearly developed in response to MEXT's directives (see MEXT, 2014a) as students enrolled in the courses are expected to participate in communicative activities, examples of which are their giving presentations in English, having debates in English, and explaining in English their reasoning for any conclusions they generate about a topic. In short, according to written instructions given by the university to English course instructors, the university expected that "classes should develop students' knowledge of English and how to use it in interactions with others."

However, the English language abilities of the AY2023 cohort of students made evident the difficulties brought about by MEXT's directives and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this academic year, the enrolled students had some of the lowest-ever TOEIC scores for this university (i.e., in the 200-300 range). This alone would have made it more difficult to teach solely in English, but compounded to this was the fact that, as part of the curriculum changes, instructors were forced to choose from a limited group of communication-themed textbooks that, by design, include little or no explicit grammar or vocabulary instruction—arguably the very aspects of English that the students need, particularly if they are to engage in English interactive activities that have them deal with unfamiliar topics and situations. With firsthand knowledge of the textbooks, with experience teaching this cohort at the university in the capacity of a part-time lecturer, and from discussions with other instructors also required to select from and teach with these textbooks, the author of the current paper can attest to the difficulty of teaching under this new curriculum that was based on erroneous expectations of students' ELL experiences pre-university matriculation. Others elsewhere have also lamented that educational policies meant to enhance CLT were incompatible with the reality of the teaching context, with inadequate textbooks cited as one problematic area (Humphries & Burns, 2015). It is also of no small consequence that students show aversion to immersion-style language education approaches at university, as their pre-tertiary-level education involved little more than grammar, translation, and examination preparation (O'Halloran, 2019).

6. First Language Inclusion/Exclusion

Given the reality of Japanese university students' general English ability four years after the start of the pandemic, MEXT's directives are apparently not being followed, or if they are, because of the extenuating factors previously discussed, matriculating students are not able to engage in the types of activities that universities expect, which includes active participation and engagement in EMI courses. Consequently, a question might rightfully be put forth: if universities are taking it as a given that students have had classes all in English at pre-tertiary levels and can engage in meaningful communicative endeavors in English, but the students show clear signs of being unable to do so due to being deficient in terms of their English grammar and vocabulary abilities, should universities insist that classes "continue" to be taught English-only, or should instructors "downshift" and be allowed to adapt to the reality of their teaching situations and permit some amount of the students' first language (L1) in the classroom to aid in their learning? To answer this question, let us examine EMI situations and typical ELL situations.

In the case of EMI courses, universities (and instructors) have but two options regarding L1 use in the classroom. The first is to provide some sort of assistance to the DSs (e.g., by simplifying the content, by providing Japanese translations of technical terms). Given that EMI courses tend to specifically target IS enrollees, the providing of such assistance should be considered inappropriate due to its negative consequences, for instance, by its slowing class progress, increasing instructor workloads, and otherwise hindering courses ostensibly constructed for IS enrollees. The alternative of letting the DSs fend for themselves would also be inappropriate, especially when it is erroneously assumed that EMI course enrollment will naturally improve their language skills. Chapple's (2015) suggestion of setting entry requirements (e.g., setting a minimum TOEIC score, requesting writing samples from potential enrollees) seems the most feasible solution to this quandary.

However, the case of ELL courses is more nuanced. There have long been arguments that, being an ELL environment, the L1 should be excluded from the classroom so that students may receive maximum target language (TL) exposure and be allowed to negotiate meaning (Ellis, 2005; Krashen, 1982). However, practitioners are increasingly realizing that L1 use presents numerous cogent benefits, including but not limited to (a) aiding learners' cognitive functions, (b) bringing about the recognition that learners are to become bilinguals by learning another language, as it is impossible for them to become L2 monolingual speakers, (c) improving class time efficiency, and (d) helping build rapport with students (Rubrecht, 2020).

Even if higher educational institutions and their instructors assume that Japanese secondary school teachers have faithfully followed MEXT's directives and taught ELL courses completely in English, the problem remains that matriculating students may not be (and, as this paper argues, typically *are not*) in possession of English language abilities that warrant the following of English-only course policies. Any language policies used in the classroom should be context-sensitive (Littlewood, 2013). Although it has been argued that banning L1 use in the classroom is indefensible (see Turnbull & Daily-O'Cain, 2009), one may counter that its polar opposite (i.e., permitting L1 with no restrictions) is just as extreme. This is not the case. It certainly stands to reason that an ELL classroom should have all participants—both students and teacher alike—speaking in and listening to English to the greatest extent possible. However, teacher perceptions of pedagogical methodologies are only part of the dynamics that allow effective teaching and learning to take place. L1 use should be determined in part by pragmatic concerns (Ford, 2009), as class goals, students' motivations and expectations, and students' level of English proficiency should all remain factors to be considered (Sugimoto, 2021). Indeed, Japanese learners of English have been documented to either want (or at

minimum appreciate) their L1 to be acceptable for use in the classroom (Burden, 2000; McCarthy, 2021), for instance, when class policies or grammatical differences between Japanese and English require explanation (Kawabata, 2024).

7. Conclusion

There is little doubt that Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, otherwise known as MEXT, strives to improve the development of Japan from within so that it may develop its relations with the greater world beyond the nation's borders. This is evinced in part by the many incremental iterations of its Course of Study for English teaching and learning within the national education system to make English language learning more meaningful by making it more communicative in nature. However, while the basic premise in MEXT's directives for CLT of having English courses taught primarily or solely in English exhibits strong face value and may well be justified, given the state of matters at the current time as discussed above, it appears that the premise is ultimately flawed, or at the very least, the ambitious policies MEXT has attempted to put into play fail to take into account the complexities of the dynamics involved in an ever-examination-centric educational system post-pandemic with teachers lacking the support to make those policies produce their intended outcomes. These complexities will not simply vanish when new goals are stated or when novel directives are announced.

It has long been recognized that the implementation of communicatively-based English language teaching faces constraints at multiple levels (Butler, 2011), but the gaps found between MEXT's directive declarations and the feasibility of implementing those directives at the local level (Glasgow & Paller, 2016) seems widest of all, as MEXT's ambitious policy aspirations are mismatched to the realities of how English is currently being taught in pre-tertiary-level classrooms. As there is no definitive way to determine the level of English proficiency in Japan (Borg, 2023), reform of MEXT's default stance of putting forward ever more reforms seems unlikely. What MEXT and others need to fundamentally understand is that second and foreign language learning brings about multicompetence (Cook, 2013) and plurilingualism (Council of Europe, 2017). Without valuing learners' L1 and allowing for a translanguaging approach that views learners' different languages as part of an integrated language system rather than taking a "double monolingual" approach (Rubrecht, 2020), then there is little hope for meaningful change to come about. It is high time for MEXT to focus on and promote the learners as active participants in the learning process rather than on dogmatic linguistic activities that fail to be implemented in the first place.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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