

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

Brian G. Rubrecht
Meiji University, Japan

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. The proposed presentation 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: communication; COVID-19; EFL; EMI; instruction