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Problems in the Trends of English Language Education in Present-day Japan

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Madam Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all very much for coming to my presentation. This morning I should like to talk on the title "Problems in the Trends of English Language Education in Present-day Japan"

1. Introduction

For these ten or fifteen years there have been considerable changes in all aspects of education system in Japan. We can say that these are the changes that have come from the overall rebuilding of our education system in order to cope with the changes that are taking place in the world today. We can call it 'the adjustment of education for globalization'.

In September 1984, "in order to cope with the social changes and cultural developments that had been taking place and would take place in the 21st century," ex-Prime Minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone called the National Council on Educational Reform. The Council worked for three years and submitted its fourth and final report and was disbanded in August 1987.

The main points for the reformation of education suggested in the report by the National Council on Educational Reform were; a) establishment of a lifelong education system, b) diversification and reformation of higher education, c) betterment and reformation of primary and secondary

education, d) reformation of education for internationalization, e) education for the age of the information revolution, and f) reformation of the administrative and financial system for education.

All the changes that have so far been taking place in Japan are more or less directly connected to this report submitted by the National Council for Educational Reform.

As far as foreign language education is concerned, the changes that have been observed more prominently than others are; a) reformation of the English language curriculums in university education, b) readjustment of English language teaching at secondary schools in accordance with the 'Communicative Approach', which includes 'increase of classroom teaching hours from three to four or more a week', and 'introduction of assistant language teachers on a large scale from countries where English is used as the main language', and c) starting of English language education at public primary schools.

It is true, however, that a number of problems are emerging. I should like to deal with some of the more important problems and to try to analyze them and to suggest the solutions for them.

2. Reformation of the English language curriculums in university education

According to the recommendations given by the National Council on Educational Reform, the University Council was established in 1987. And in 1991, the Council submitted its report on "Improvement of University Education." In this they proposed a big change in the curriculums in

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university education. Their suggestion was to deregulate the Standards for the Establishment of Universities so that universities can develop curriculums that reflect their own educational ideals and objectives, and introduce a self-monitoring and self-evaluation system. As a result, the division of general education and specialized education courses was abolished. The standards of the credit counting system and of class hours were elasticized. Accordingly, in almost all the universities and junior colleges in Japan, reformation of the foreign language curriculums has been carried out.

Some of the universities have adopted curriculums in which English language education is emphasized—the required number of credits has been increased from 8 to 12 or 14 or even 16, for example, while at other universities they have decreased the number to a considerable degree—from 8 to 6, or 4 or even 0. It is a pity to say that generally speaking the latter type is the majority.

Among those that have adopted the curriculums in which English language education has been strengthened are Asian University, Keio University <Shonan Fujisawa Campus>, and others.

For example, in Asian University, the students are to take in their first year the 'Freshman English Course' and in their second year they are sent to the universities in the United States for five months to take 'American History' (4 credits), 'The Human Environment' (4), 'International Sports' (1), as well as four courses of 'English' (8). All the students of the International Relations Study Department, and approximately half of those who belong to others are sent to either one of the four universities in the United States; Western Washington University, Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University, or Oregon State University.

There are a variety of optional English courses as well.

Generally, however, especially at national or state universities, the required number of credits has been reduced from 8 to 6, or 4, and other languages have become optional. We have to say that foreign language education has been weakened to a certain extent. Chiba University, one of the biggest national universities in Japan, for which I myself worked for many years, for example, belongs to this group.

However, with these big changes in the curriculum, more or less stubborn university teachers of foreign languages seem to have been changing their attitude. English language education in the universities has gradually been changed. Instead of teaching written English in the old-fashioned grammar-translation method, spoken English teaching has become more and more popular. Not only recorded audio materials but also video

materials are quite commonly used in English classrooms today. And more and more native speakers are teaching English at universities and junior colleges in Japan.

Some of the bigger problems that exist are related to a) class size <40 is the better case, 50 is quite common, sometimes 60, or 70 or more>, b) teachers <the ratio of part-time to full-time teachers is very unsatisfactory; the number of qualified native speakers is still quite small>, and c) the low level of students' English proficiency < due to the decrease of the classroom teaching hours to three a week at lower secondary schools, to the popularization of university education, or to the decrease of the population of the students>.

3. Readjustment of English language education at secondary

Now let me move on to the problems of English language education at a secondary school level.

a) English teaching hours

Much against the trend of the language education in the world today, the class hours for English teaching at lower secondary schools in Japan were decreased from 4 to 3 hours per week in 1981. Why? This was just the implementation of the curriculum presented in the Course of Study issued in 1979 by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry forced all the national or local public schools to adopt the curriculum with the motto that sounded rather nice, "Yutori no Kyoiku" or "Education with a Sense of Latitude". Until the Course of Study was revised ten years later, this policy after all played an undeniable role in deteriorating the English language education at the secondary school level in Japan.

When the students who studied English in this 3-hour curriculum became university students, the mean score of the result of the nationwide JACET English Listening Comprehension Test (for university students) administered that year went one big step down below the previous year. Furthermore, just as many should have feared, the status of English education seemed to have been degraded in secondary schools. This tells how important a role the curriculum should play in developing the students' English ability. And, of course, ten years of anachronism could not be remedied so easily in a short period of time.

The current Course of study revised and issued in 1989, which is in force now, is the result of many discussions after the final report of the National Council on Educational Reform. This allows lower secondary schools to teach English 4 or even 5 class hours a week. According to the survey study

conducted recently, English is actually taught 4 class hours a week at many schools, and at some even 5 or more.

Please have a look at this data. This is the result of the questionnaire study conducted recently by LLA, Japan. Questionnaires were sent to as many as 1,000 schools equipped with language laboratory facilities and there were 271 responses.

The Educational Media, Technology in English Language Teaching at Junior High Schools in Japan (The survey study conducted by LLA, Japan)

1. Type of school:

National or local public schools: 254(93.7%)

Private schools: 13(4.8%)

Unknown: 4(1.5%)

Co-educational schools: 254(93.7%)

Boys' schools: 7(2.6%)

Girls' schools: 6(2.2%)

2. No. of class hours per week:

| | within 3 | within 4 | within 5 | within 6 | 7 or more | unknown |
|-------------|----------|------------|----------|----------|-----------|---------|
| 1 st year : | 14(5.2%) | 236(87.1%) | 7(2.6%) | 7 (2.6%) | 4(1.5%) | 3(1.1%) |
| 2 nd year: | 15(5.5%) | 235(86.7%) | 6(2.2%) | 8 (3.0%) | 3(1.1%) | 4(1.5%) |
| 3 nd year: | 5(1.8%) | 246(90.8%) | 2(0.7%) | 10(3.7%) | 5(1.8%) | 3(1.1%) |

Source: *The Educational Media, Technology in English Language Teaching at Junior High Schools in Japan*, LLA Kanto Chapter, 1999

b) Introduction of 'Communicative and Learner-centred Approach'

For the first time the Japanese expression 'communication' borrowed from English appeared in the foreign language subject section in the Course of Study revised and issued in 1989 by the Ministry of Education. The 'Communicative Approach' and the 'Learner-centred Approach' have become more and more popular among English language teachers of secondary schools in Japan. It seems that not a few teachers have attempted to introduce the idea in their classroom teaching. They have tried to make use of games, plays, or simulations. All for the development of what is called 'communicative competence'.

Eventually such practices as 'pronunciation practice', 'repetition', 'sentence pattern practice', 'recitation', and 'reading-aloud exercise' have come to be regarded as meaningless, unimportant, or even harmful. As a result these types of practice seem to have almost disappeared from their English class work.

And indeed in the classrooms boys and girls look more relaxed and happier. They seem to be enjoying their time with their teacher. But is it all right? How about their English ability? Can they understand English? Can they make themselves understood by native English speakers? Can they enjoy reading English stories? Can they write letters in English? I am sorry to say that the answer is a negative one. Generally speaking the situation is much worse than we would have expected.

We should not forget that they are teaching English under difficult circumstances; the class hours are very much limited, the boys and girls are studying English in situations where there is no need for them to use English, the class size is very big (as many as 40), and the learners' ages are from 12 years, and so on.

With all these restrictions in mind they have to reconsider their teaching activities in their classrooms. Perhaps such mechanical practices as pronunciation practice, repetition, memorization, recitation, sentence pattern practices should be rewarding. To build up the fundamental linguistic abilities is indeed worth while if we add communicative activities to them.

3. Starting of English language education at public primary schools

Last year the Ministry of Education once again revised the Course of Study for primary schools, which is to be put into force in the year 2002. With this, the ministry will allow primary schools to start teaching English in the regular class hours for the first time after the war. At private primary schools English language teaching has been rather common (87%) as the recent survey study shows. Please have a look at this.

The survey study of the foreign language teaching at private elementary schools in Japan (conducted by Japan Union of Private Elementary Schools)

Elementary Schools (Private Institutions):

1. Foreign Language Teaching Being Done

(1) Foreign Language Teaching

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| | Year 1995 (153 schools) | Year 1992 (147 schools) |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Being done | 133 (86.9%) | 126 |
| a. Not being done | 20 (13.1%) | 21 |

(2) Kinds of Languages Taught

| | Year 1995 (133 schools) |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| English only | 126 |
| English + French | 2 |
| English + Korean | 1 |
| English + Spanish | 1 |
| French only | 2 |
| Korean only | 1 |
| Total | 133 |
| | Schools |
| English | 130 |
| French | 4 |
| Korean | 2 |
| Spanish | 1 |

Foreign Language Teaching Style:

| | Schools |
|--|---------|
| Class only | 58 |
| Class + Club Activities | 23 |
| Class + School Functions | 25 |
| Class + Club Activities + School Functions | 25 |
| Club Activities only | 2 |

Teaching Style:

| | Schools |
|------------------|---------|
| Class | 131 |
| Club Activities | 50 |
| School Functions | 50 |

English Teachers (217):

Japanese 152(70.0%)

Foreigners 65(30.0%) <U.S. 43, Canada 8, NZ 4, Australia 3, Ireland 2,
Korea 1, UK 1, India 1, Spain 1, Ghana 1 >

Full time or part time:

Japanese full-time 64(42.1%) part-time 86(56.6%)

Foreigners full-time 11(16.9%) part-time 54(83.1%)

Source: *The survey study of the foreign language teaching at private elementary schools in Japan*, Japan Union of Private Elementary Schools, March 1996

At one of the private institutions, 'Kato Gakuen Primary School' in Numazu, Shizuoka Prefecture, even the immersion programme has been adopted. And it has been reported successful. However the number of private primary schools is quite small in Japan, almost negligible.

Not a few people have so far presented their opinions, requests, or claims concerning the need to start teaching English to Japanese children earlier than when they become the first-year students of the secondary school. In November 1985, JACET (the Japan Association of College English Teachers) submitted a paper entitled "The Request for the Advancement of Foreign Language Education" to the National Council for Educational Reform and at the same time, at a hearing session, explained its ideas to the council members there. One of the items in it that dealt with an earlier start for English language teaching attracted the members quite a lot. I

still vividly remember the scene. According to the record of the Council they themselves discussed the matter, and must have eventually influenced the Central Council for Education, the Curriculum Council, and others. In fact, there has been a lot of discussion about the matter on every side.

In 1991, the Osaka Municipal Board of Education submitted to the Ministry of Education a plan to carry out experimental English language teaching for the academic years 1992-94 at two of the local public primary schools in Osaka Prefecture. This was accepted and experimental English language teaching at a primary school level started in April, 1992.

Following this, in 1993, the Ministry of Education allowed two others to experiment with the English language teaching at a primary school level for the academic years 1993-95. One of these was Tokigane Primary School in Togane City, in Chiba Prefecture. As I was working at the Faculty of Education, Chiba University, I was asked to work on its steering and advisory committee by the Ministry of Education. As a result I was fairly deeply involved in this experimental work. The number of the experimental schools has been increased to 47, one school out of each of the 47 prefectures in Japan.

And last year in July, the Curriculum Council submitted its report "National Curriculum Standards Reform" in which they suggested to set up a "Period for Integrated Study" in the primary school as well as the secondary school curricula. And in the report they say, "Much value will be set on the improvement of fundamental and practical communicative competence in foreign languages and the subject of 'Foreign Language' will be a required one at lower and upper secondary schools. Elementary schools will provide hands-on learning activities to expose children to

foreign languages and help them get familiar with foreign life and culture in the 'Period for Integrated Study'".

And in due course, as has been said, the Ministry of Education revised and published the Course of Study for primary schools, which is to be put into force from the year 2002. So the Ministry of Education will allow primary schools for the first time after the war to start teaching English in what is called the "Period for Integrated Study" or in the "Special Activities" hours.

The Problems:

Now what are the problems? Of course the biggest one is a want of qualified 'teachers' who can teach English to primary school children properly. The teacher has, as it were, "to develop practical communicative competence".

There are as many as 24,548 primary schools in Japan, and supposing we need one teacher for each school, the necessary number of English teachers will be 24,548. Here's another calculation; the total number of primary school children is 8,370,246. If one teacher teaches three class hours a day, he can handle 600 children and we need 13,950 qualified teachers. And if we lessen the class size to 20, it will become 27,900. If we teach the kids two class hours a week, then it will become double that number, 55,800. How is it possible to recruit such a big number of qualified English teachers in a short period of time ?

My suggestions are; 1) to invite qualified English language teachers on a large scale from English speaking countries, 2) to develop a number of

'Number of Institutions, Students and Teachers' (Ministry of Education)

Elementary Schools:

| | No. of Institutions | No. of students | No. of full-time teachers |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| National | 73 | 47,318 | 1,777 |
| Local public | 24,302 | 8,254,741 | 426,003 |
| Private | 173 | 68,187 | 3,178 |
| Total | 24,548 | 8,370,246 | 430,958 |

Lower Secondary Schools:

| | No. of Institutions | No. of students | No. of full-time teachers |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| National | 78 | 34,500 | 1,679 |
| Local public | 10,551 | 4,300,507 | 257,870 |
| Private | 645 | 235,383 | 11,471 |
| Total | 11,274 | 4,570,390 | 271,020 |

Upper Secondary Schools:

| | No. of Institutions | No. of students | No. of full-time teachers |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| National | 17 | 10,161 | 634 |
| Local public | 4,164 | 3,288,245 | 215,230 |
| Private | 1,320 | 1,426,539 | 65,253 |
| Total | 5,501 | 4,724,945 | 281,117 |

junior Colleges:

| | No. of Institutions | No. of students | No. of full-time teachers |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| National | 36 | 13,735 | 1,122 |
| Local public | 60 | 24,134 | 2,219 |
| Private | 500 | 460,647 | 17,361 |
| Total | 596 | 498,516 | 20,702 |

Universities:

| | No. of Institutions | No. of students | No. of full-time teachers |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| National | 98 | 598,723 | 57,488 |
| Local public | 52 | 83,812 | 8,256 |
| Private | 415 | 1,864,114 | 71,720 |
| Total | 565 | 2,546,649 | 137,464 |

Source: Ministry of Education, May 1995

ideal video programmes for an English classroom use, and 3) to train as many students as possible to become competent primary school English teachers.

As for the employment of qualified English language teachers from English speaking countries, we have the experience to a certain extent. We have been inviting young Assistant Language Teachers for secondary schools in Japan under JET programme. Please have a look at the data of the "JET Programme".

Number of Assistant Language Teachers under the JET Programme

| Year | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| From; | | | | | | |
| United States | 1,557 | 1,738 | 2,021 | 2,248 | 2,433 | 2,441 |
| United Kingdom | 590 | 684 | 709 | 790 | 872 | 988 |
| Australia | 167 | 198 | 217 | 243 | 264 | 280 |
| New Zealand | 159 | 192 | 193 | 194 | 197 | 202 |
| Canada | 562 | 630 | 662 | 692 | 725 | 818 |
| Ireland | 41 | 55 | 52 | 63 | 69 | 81 |
| South Africa | — | — | — | — | — | 5 |
| France | 7 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 12 |
| Germany | 5 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Total | 3,108 | 3,508 | 3,865 | 4,243 | 4,574 | 4,831 |

(JET Program = "Japan Exchange and Teaching Program")

It will not be impossible that we invite as many as 30,000 language teachers from English speaking countries for primary schools.

The second of my suggestions is to develop a number of ideal video

programmes for English classroom use. Because the recruit of qualified language teachers is not so easy, and it takes some time, it is important to provide the best quality video language teaching programmes for primary school English classrooms, at least for the time being. The quality of the video English teaching programmes should be as good as that of "Sesame Street". They should be attractive to the children, and yet learnable for the children. Of course, for the development of such good quality language programmes it will cost an incredibly large amount of money. I know it through my experience of developing broadcast English programme courses for the University of the Air, in Japan. I think only the Ministry of Education can solve this problem.

The third of my suggestions needs no explanation. And especially due to the decrease of the population of the school children in Japan today, institutions for training language teachers have been forced to be lessened to a considerable degree, much against the world trend today. The teaching force is still there. Therefore it will not be difficult to expand this area.

Conclusion:

There is no doubt that the 21st Century is to become the 'Century of Globalization'. There will be still freer movements of people, more interdependence of economies, of industry, and of welfare. At the same time, we have to be more conscious of the earth's environment as a whole.

Yes, we move into the 'Century of Globalization' and we have to emphasize the importance of the roles that language should play in the global community. Language is so closely connected to the people who use it. Language is the reflection of the way people behave, of the way they live.

Yes, language is the culture of the people who use it. It is only natural that unless we place ourselves on the same linguistic field, it would be impossible for us to communicate with others smoothly and effectively.

With all this in mind, I am quite certain that language education will become one of the most important activities of human beings in the next century. We'll have to be aware more about what is happening in this field in other parts of the globe. In this respect, I feel happy that I have been able to talk about what has been, what is, and what will be happening in my part of the 'global village'. Thank you very much for your attention.

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