

Proposal for the Improvement of English Language Education
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Foreign Language Research Institute
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Preface

This proposal for the improvement of English Language Proficiency issued by the Foreign Language Research Institute of Gunma Prefectural Women's University is a continuation of the previous two proposals of 2001 and 2005 respectively. It is the outcome of discussions between interested parties representing many different aspects of the education world both from Gunma and outside. It tackles four main areas.

English education in Japan is still beset by many serious problems the solutions to which unfortunately remain far from clear. Although there has been a very noticeable improvement in the English proficiency of a sector comprised of mainly younger people who have a direct need to use English for their work or research, in Japanese society at large it is difficult to see any improvement in practical English skills. If one turns one's gaze towards the countries of Asia then, particularly in the cases of China and Korea, we can see a rapid spread of English skills across society. If we then compare the foreign language skills of Asian students studying in America universities with Japanese students also studying abroad, then the inferiority of Japanese students becomes painfully obvious.

Over the past few decades, Japanese society as a whole has become very inward looking. Young people in particular seem to have lost the desire to go abroad, experience a different environment and experience things themselves. This is at least partly explainable as a consequence of a prolonged economic recession. In recent years as intellectual culture in society as reflected in the media has become more impoverished, the sense of Japan and Japanese people as being part of a wider international world has diminished. Against this background, it is becoming more and more difficult for Japanese people to play an active role in the task of multi-national negotiation and law making which our global society is making essential.

Of course anyone who wishes to work in the international world must have the required level of professional expertise in their chosen field. However this specialized knowledge and insight must be combined with the ability to communicate it accurately and persuasively to people from other cultures otherwise it will come to nothing. English is overwhelmingly the language of choice for international communication in America, Europe and the Middle East. However while the need for Japan to have an effective English language education has been recognized for many years, the goal still remains a long way off.

If the English language skills of Japan are to be raised then it will probably require Japanese society to embrace a culture which encourages more open discussion and

exchange of information in every field. In other words, an essential prerequisite for any wide scale use of English is for the winds of change to blow through the whole of Japanese society. In the field of education, the old style of teacher centered exposition needs to be discarded so that teachers and students can discuss matters freely and openly in Japanese. Unfortunately the Japanese language is currently in a state of some disarray. Probably because of the influence of television and related media, there is a widespread use of language which is extremely puerile. We are being inundated by a flood of strange and somewhat repellent katakana words. If as a society we are unable to discuss matters in a clear and logical fashion, it is extremely unlikely that we will ever be able to reach a level of English which can be used internationally.

The need for good communication skills in foreign languages in almost every aspect of life and work has now become more widely recognized in every field. In Gunma, an increasing number of companies are working at an international level, and more localities are establishing ties with foreign countries. More foreigners are coming to Gunma for work and research and as tourists. In the 21st century Japanese people in every area of life will have to learn to live in increasingly multicultural environment. Both at the national and the local level, language and cross cultural communication skills will be essential.

In 2003 as part of a national initiative to develop Japanese people who can use English, a number of schools were designated as Super English Language High schools. Changes were made in the standard university entrance exam to include a listening section. More recently, there have also been important changes in the new course of study for elementary school up to high school. These changes will ensure that English Activities become a compulsory part of the curriculum and that more English lessons will be given at the junior high level. Of course we cannot expect such changes in the education system to bear fruit overnight. In order to improve English proficiency, the appropriate measures need to be taken and implemented in a rigorous and determined way at every level by all the relevant authorities using a budget which is adequate for the task.

Gunma Prefecture has approached the task of improving English language proficiency with great resolve focusing on the education system. In the four years which have now passed since the second Proposal, expectations have been raised even higher for a more effective system of English language education. It is important to retain the sense of enthusiasm which characterized the initial approach to these problems and approach this question of improving English language proficiency with a broad view so that these important measures may be put into place.

It is vital that English language education maintains a careful balance of all four skills, namely reading, writing, speaking and listening. In this respect the damage done by placing an undue emphasis on simple spoken English in the postwar education system needs to be repaired. It is also important that English education be viewed as one integrated system which begins at elementary school and progresses through junior, senior and high school levels to University. A particularly pressing problem is the need for better training and qualifications for teachers working in elementary schools. If this is not done and students are taught English in an inappropriately academic way, they may end up disliking English from an early age. It is also important that the many thousands of young foreigners from the English speaking world who come to teach on the ALT system are used in a more effective way. It would also so be beneficial if Japanese people who have experience living abroad could also be used in a flexible way.

There is certainly no contradiction between a respect for Japanese and Japanese culture on the one hand and learning a foreign language and culture on the other. Indeed the study of both in parallel can only deepen the understanding of each. Based on this foundation, if we can view English education as something which can only flourish if the necessary intellectual and social preconditions are established, then we will be able to create an environment which will motivate people to study English.

I Creating an English proficiency which has a balance of all four skills

Any effective foreign language curriculum must include a balance of the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Rather than trying to put undue weight on developing any one skill, it is much more effective to develop all four skills in parallel so that they may mutually reinforce each other.

Traditionally English education in Japan has put the strongest emphasis on developing proficiency in reading and writing. However in recent years the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction of speaking and listening. This imbalance should be corrected so that a comprehensive English proficiency can emerge.

In order that these four skills can be acquired as part of a comprehensive English proficiency, lessons should be planned which include not just a focus on teaching one skill, but should require students actively to use two or more of these skills together. A variety of different teaching materials should be used so that students are able to improve their ability both to understand and convey information. In this way, the general English skills of students will develop based on a firm intellectual and linguistic foundation.

1 Lesson style

The classroom should be a place where students listen carefully to each other and feel able to express and debate different ideas in a spirit of free and mutual learning. In comparison with other countries, Japanese classrooms still tend to be dominated by the teacher with students having little opportunity to ask each other questions and exchange opinions. This often leads to a rather passive style of learning and prevents students from developing their own ideas. It is very important that lessons are created which require students to offer and exchange opinions in an active way.

2 Creative lesson planning

Lessons should be planned so that students are required to use two or more of the four English skills. For example students could be asked to read a passage and then present their opinions on it or to listen to a news broadcast and then put down their impressions in writing. Lessons should include regular pair and group work. Students should be given the chance to debate and discuss matters. The amount of lesson time devoted to allowing students to learn how to think and express their ideas should be increased.

3 Variety of materials

The Internet, satellite broadcasts and English newspapers can be used to

supplement content from the textbook. Lessons which use audio visual materials of current events in English will also stimulate students' intellectual curiosity. If there is a greater use of material dealing with topics taken from such areas as Japanese politics, economics, science, history, literature and art, students will be able to gain a firmer grasp of Japanese culture as they explain these in English. At the elementary and junior high level, materials could be developed which arise from local and natural environment. As students advance in their school life, they should be encouraged to read essays and articles of cultural value to develop their general knowledge.

4 Evaluation methods

Evaluation of English proficiency should be transparent and include a variety of criteria. There should be opportunities to evaluate students' skills in such activities as interviews, speech and presentation. An effort made to ensure that no single one of the four skills is given undue emphasis. In lessons in which there are presentations and discussions, it is important that the teacher observes carefully the attitude and enthusiasm of the students and that appropriate feedback be provided. In this way students will be more motivated to continue to study.

5 Reading aloud and recitation

Reading aloud and memorizing fine passages from English writing has been a somewhat neglected area recently but it is of great value and should be used. It remains a very effective way to learn English expressions and how to combine them in sentences. Using materials from speeches, essays and editorials from newspapers also allows students to increase their understanding of important current issues. The easy availability of audio materials on CD and other formats make it easy for students to study them at home. Students should be encouraged to take part in speech contests where the results of their self study can be evaluated.

6 Improving the English Language and teaching skills of Japanese teachers

The group which plays the most important role in developing the all round English skills of students is without doubt Japanese English teachers. If students are to learn how to give presentations and debate in English then it is vital that their teachers have both excellent English and teaching skills. In order to develop these skills, teachers should be encouraged to take part in workshops in Japan and to go abroad to summer schools at universities organized for professional development. If this is to become a reality, it is important that a budget be set aside to pay part of the costs of this training and employ substitute teachers. There should be a thorough revision of the way in which teachers are trained at university so that they have the required English language and teaching skills.

7 Choice of language in classroom

Within the limited amount of lesson time, it is important that everything is done to ensure that as much English as possible is used. There will of course be times in which it is much more efficient to use Japanese. The language to be used in each part of the lesson should be appropriate for the particular activity and content.

8 English at university

At the university level, it should be made possible for students to study their major in English. The number of lessons given in English and the amount of required reading in English should be increased. This should apply not just for those fields such as politics, economics, law, history and comparative culture but also for the sciences. More foreign lecturers who are qualified in these fields should also be hired. The ability to teach their subject in English should also be an important factor to be considered when Japanese lecturers are appointed. If around a third of all lectures were to be given in a major foreign language including English then more students from abroad would be able to study here without having to have achieved advanced Japanese language skills prior to their arrival.

9 Entrance examinations

The content and form of the entrance examinations exert a very strong influence on how junior and high school students are taught. The overall English proficiency should be evaluated based on what students have studied at junior and high school level. It is particularly important that that there be more questions requiring listening skills so that there is greater awareness of listening, and that questions which require more extended writing skills are included to evaluate expressive powers. Interviews conducted in English should also be introduced across a variety of majors where appropriate.

II Motivation

There are extremely few occasions on which people living in Japan need to have any contact with English in their everyday life. Even though it is often said that the ability to understand and use English is one of the essential preconditions for success economically and socially, this seems in fact to exert a fairly limited motivating power for people to learn English. While there do exist a few places in Japan where the percentage of resident foreigners is above 10%, the national average is only about 1.7%.

Given this background, if learners are to improve their English proficiency then the importance of creating an effective learning environment which will motivate learners to study English can hardly be overstated. An effective way of doing this is for learners to regularly experience the intellectual excitement of actually using English to understand each other and exchange opinions. It is therefore important that great care and attention is given to creating situations where learners can have the chance to use English in a natural way. Everything should be done to increase students' motivation by creating such situations not just in lessons but also outside school during the long vacations. If students have the chance to meet people from different cultural backgrounds, the new knowledge and experience gained from these encounters will provide them with great intellectual stimulation and have a very positive effect on their motivation to learn.

10 Cultural exchanges

Students should be given more opportunities to meet people from different cultural backgrounds and so experience at first hand a multi-cultural environment. One way to achieve this is to invite to school foreigners living in the locality, whether as residents or as exchange students from various schemes. Inviting students from other countries and having the chance to meet them face to face will greatly enrich and invigorate school life. If students have the chance to discuss matters with students of the same age from other countries they will be able to gain not just benefits to their language development but will also be able to experience on an individual level what living in a global society actually means.

11 Study abroad

Students at both the high school and university level should be encouraged to go abroad on summer study abroad programs for a duration of at least one to two months. If students actually have the opportunity to go to an English speaking country and have the experience of trying to exchange ideas in English, they will be not only deepen their knowledge of other cultures but they will have a chance to realize the importance of being able to actively express ideas and information. The

effects of such experiences will certainly translate to increased motivation to study once they return to Japan. Both at the national and the local level, everything should be done to encourage more students to have such experiences both by making the relevant information available and where possible by providing financial support.

12 Entrance examinations

Entrance examinations for high school and university naturally provide a very strong motivation to learn. It is important to make full use of this opportunity. When students prepare for such examinations they have to study English in a concentrated way. It has often been pointed out that examination English inevitably requires a certain very unbalanced approach. However it is certainly true that even if the aim is to increase reading and writing skills, studying all four skills in a balanced way is a much more effective method. Conversely, if you are trying to develop the ability to use English accurately for communication you must have a large vocabulary and a firm grasp of grammar. In this way it is clear that entrance examinations if they are approached in the correct way can play an important role in helping students to improve their general English proficiency.

13 Universities and tourism

If universities work together with local bodies and tourist organizations in locations which are visited by many foreign tourists, it will provide an excellent opportunity for students to use their English skills on a regular basis. Students could be given the task of showing tourists around, writing web pages and making sure that all facilities are foreigner friendly. Students should be encouraged to take part in such activities and could benefit by receiving credits for such work.

14 ICT (use of technology)

Information technology now makes it possible to increase the opportunities for people in distant locations to engage in real two way communication. Through the Internet we now have the chance to exchange voice mail and texts and even use tele-conferencing. The two way nature of such communication makes it essential that each party work to understand the other thus providing a natural opportunity to develop the key skills. Where the other party is not from an English speaking country, there is an excellent chance for both to enjoy developing their skills together and receive mutual encouragement and support.

15 Small classes

Ideally the number of students in English classes at junior and high school level should be under 20. Learning English is a skill like sport or music so it is vital that

students have many chances to actually use it so that they can acquire the knowledge and skills necessary. Students should have lessons in small classes and be given as much opportunity as possible to practice the active skills of giving and exchanging their opinions on a one on one basis.

16 Creating a center for English learning

Local bodies or universities should offer junior or high school students who are interested in English the chance to improve their English skills on a regular basis by giving them the opportunity to study in a concentrated fashion. Through such study, students could be helped to develop high level skills of speaking and debate as well as learning how to write well. The mock United Nations debate would be an appropriate format for such concentrated study.

17 Katakana English

Recently our language is being used in an increasingly vulgar way and newly coined words or words used in strange ways are being actively welcomed. One example of this tendency is the way that words which are based on foreign words are used by people in deliberately odd ways and have been accepted into general use. Words such as *foro* or *kuria* have now become part of the everyday language. Japanese people now think *foro* can be used to mean 'follow up' and think *kuria* can mean 'solve' when they speak English. Of course it may be difficult to avoid using katakana words where there is no appropriate word in Japanese because the idea itself is not so familiar, for example *aidenteti* for 'identity' or *gabanansu* for 'governance'. However where there is already a perfectly good Japanese expression in existence it seems pointless to go out of your way to introduce some foreign coined word into an ordinary sentence. Such expressions will not only damage the status of our language but will also damage the correct use of those words when they are used in their natural foreign language context. It is important to make everyone aware that English words used in a strange sense should not be used in Japanese sentences and that English words should be used correctly in their proper context.

III English education at elementary school

It is extremely important to develop the ability to communicate effectively. The utmost efforts should be expended on ensuring that English education at elementary school can achieve its goal of helping students to deepen their understanding of the culture and language both of our own country and of other countries. Those Japanese elementary school teachers who are tackling this task with such energy and commitment deserve our greatest respect. However at the current state of the implementation of this plan there remain some unresolved problems relating to both the allocation of properly trained teachers and the number of hours allotted to this plan. For these structural reasons, in spite of the efforts of teachers, it is difficult to say that the current situation is meeting the expectations of students and their parents. The first steps along the path to English proficiency are vital. We still need more thought about exactly who the best people to teach English are and what kind of English education is likely to be the most effective.

If the goals are both to develop the ability to communicate effectively and to learn how to use basic English, then making English a regular subject at elementary school from the 4th year with a minimum of two class periods a week seems to be a feasible plan. If this plan is going to be effective then there must be enough teachers with proper training. If these conditions are not met, the setting up of English as a school subject will merely result in students developing a dislike of it at an early age. The teaching of foreign languages at elementary school has been successfully introduced in many countries around the world including in Europe and America and, if Japan is prepared to ensure that the basic conditions of introducing an effective program are met, there is no reason why Japan should not introduce her own program of beginning English education at the elementary school level.

18 The goals of the program

English at elementary school has the following 3 goals:

1. Through the use of both Japanese and English, to gain deeper knowledge of both languages and cultures through hands-on learning, and to learn how to communicate effectively.
2. To become familiar with the basic sounds of English and learn useful expressions so that students can understand simple messages and use basic English to express their ideas.
3. To learn the basic structures of English.

19 Early start

The 4th year of elementary school is an appropriate time to introduce English because students at this age have already reached a certain objective understanding of their mother tongue and are open to new intellectual challenges. Students at this age are very receptive to new sounds so this is the right age to introduce activities which center on listening and producing new sounds.

20 Teachers

Junior high school English teachers and other teacher who have an English teaching license should be sent to elementary schools to work in close cooperation with the homeroom teacher. If there are two classes a week, one of those classes can be led by the homeroom teacher and the other by the teacher who has an English teaching license. Both teachers should share the planning of the lessons and contribute their respective skills. Wherever possible, ALTs or other suitable persons in the local area should be brought in to assist.

21 Training

If the program of English education at elementary school is to be successful then it is vital that the teachers there receive adequate training. The extra burden being placed on teachers should be recognized and time set aside to allow teachers to learn how to teach English and how to work effectively with ALTs. Teachers should be encouraged to watch excellent lessons. Teachers coming from junior high school or newly qualified teachers should receive training about the goals and methods of teaching at elementary schools.

22 Use of the alphabet

The main emphasis for English education at elementary school should be on speaking and listening but students in the upper grades should have the chance to use the alphabet to write simple English words and phrases in accordance with their developmental level. When visual materials such as picture cards are used, words and phrases should be written on them so that students can begin to develop an interest in the relation between sound and spelling.

23 Cooperation with junior high schools

English education at elementary school should be seen as the start of an integrated program of learning which passes seamlessly to junior high. Teachers from the junior and elementary schools of each school area should have the chance to train together and to watch each other's lessons to ensure that there is a natural flow between the content of English at elementary and junior high levels.

24 The importance of Japanese language education

It is now recognized that good levels of literacy in your mother tongue can actually play a role in helping you develop communication skills a foreign language. If Japanese students can communicate what they want to say in Japanese skillfully and accurately, then it will be far easier for these skills to be developed in English. It is also widely recognized that contact with another language can stimulate the vocabulary development in your own language as well as helping to increase interest in language itself. There is clear evidence that the learning of your own language and a foreign can provide benefits and support for both languages without causing confusion.

IV ALTs and English Education

The Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) system has been fulfilling its dual role of improving the quality of English language education and promoting internationalization at the local level. Placing native speaking teacher in the immediate environment of Japanese students has been a particularly significant contribution to English education. Now as the drive to increase the communication skills in English continues, English will become a compulsory subject at elementary school. This means that the ALTs sphere of activity will now extend beyond the junior and senior level and into the elementary school level.

Against this background it is important to maintain the services of non-Japanese teachers who can work well with Japanese teachers and have a high level of teaching ability. At present the JET ALT system is only one of the many different employment systems in place.¹ However regardless of the particular contract, it is important that ALTs have adequate opportunities to improve their teaching skills and that an environment is created in which the conditions of employment are improved so that the skills and commitment of ALTs can be used to the maximum. Both at the national and local level, a budget should be secured to retain such teachers. Japanese teachers should treat ALTs as their colleagues and work together in a spirit of mutual learning towards a common goal.

25 The role of the Japanese teacher

If ALTs are to be able to work to their full potential then the role of the Japanese teachers in the school to which they are assigned is crucial. Where ALTs lack an adequate understanding of Japanese education and students it will be difficult for them to realize their potential. To prevent this possibility, it is important that the Japanese teacher takes the lead and devotes sufficient time to talk to the ALT so that both parties have a shared understanding of the underlying educational goals and policies. Japanese teachers can also play an important role in encouraging JET ALTs to take an active part in activities promoting international exchange since their job is not only to teach but also help foster international understanding.

26 Training

There should be many opportunities for newly arrived ALTs to watch experienced ALTs team teach and learn how to improve their teaching. These training workshops should be held frequently at the local level and it should be possible to attend them with the minimum of administrative procedures. Once ALTs have gained some experience of teaching in Japan they should meet with Japanese teachers and other ALTs to have frank and free discussions about the education system and Japanese students.

27 Exchange of information

All the various different organizations responsible for managing JET-ALTs, should ensure that schools with ALTs and Japanese English teachers are better informed about such matters as what the role of the ALT is and about the training seminars which are available. In particular there should be much wider awareness that CLAIR² (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations) has already produced manuals and teaching materials for use by ALTs and Japanese English teachers. There should also be better communication and feedback between schools which have JET ALTs and CLAIR so that a more effective program can be developed.

28 Evaluation

In order to improve the skills and motivate ALTs, the Boards of Education should carry out an evaluation of their performance and the results should be acted on. The workplace evaluation should include the opinions of the teachers who work directly with them. ALTs should be given feedback based on the results of their evaluation so that this feedback may help them to improve their teaching skills.

29 Terms and conditions

ALTs are currently working under a number of different employment contracts and conditions. However regardless of the details of their particular situation it seems only fair that those who show excellent teaching skills and commitment should be given better conditions and higher salaries. At the time of contracting to be ALTs, young foreigners with specialist knowledge and experience should be given preference. ALTs with experience and commitment should be given better terms and conditions.

30 Employment as full-time teachers

At the end of their term of employment, ALTs who would like to continue to work in Japanese English education and who have the required teaching skills and commitment should be hired as full-time teachers able to teach their classes alone. In this way, ALTs with commitment would be able to have a goal for their future in becoming a full time teacher. Foreign teachers who teach with Japanese teachers over a period of time would be able to help students experience a new kind of teaching style and give a fresh stimulus to Japanese teachers to reconsider their own style.

¹ ALTs who come to Japan on the JET programme are referred to as JET-ALTs, those who are dispatched independently to localities are called Non-JET-ALTs

² CLAIR (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations) Body responsible for promoting internationalization at the local level.

Afterword

This Proposal was based on the ideas given by the members of the Proposal for the Improvement of English Language Committee under the guidance of the director of the Foreign Language Research Institute, Yasushi Akashi. It represents the outcome of intense debate and discussion conducted by the members of this group. In addition, we received valuable help from meetings with ALTs and from many interested parties who gave their comments on earlier drafts of the proposal. We would like to express our deep gratitude to everyone who was kind enough to offer their opinions on this proposal at various stages of its production.

Each member of the committee was able to contribute to the final proposal by offering insights from their particular individual standpoint. It goes without saying that not every member is in full agreement with every part of the proposal, and that the opinions do not necessarily represent the ideas of the respective organizations to which each of them belong. Although this proposal was made under the aegis of the Foreign Language Institute of Gunma Prefectural Women's University it does not claim to represent the ideas of that University.

We are well aware that there will be many different opinions about this Proposal and that it cannot claim to have dealt full with the issues raised. We are also aware that much of the content restates and reemphasizes proposals already made in the previous two Proposals. However we believe that it is of value for a proposal to repeat important items. What is of particular importance is that the ideas contained within it were based not on abstract speculation but on experience gained from people directly involved in working in the actual educational settings of Gunma Prefecture. We would be delighted if this Proposal were able to offer some pointers not just to those directly involved in English education but also to everyone striving to ensure that Japan and Japanese people can play a more active role in helping to meet the many challenges which now face our world.

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