

New Proposal for the Improvement of English Language Education

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Gunma Prefectural Women's University
Foreign Language Research Institute

Preface

Nearly 4 years have now passed since November, 2001 when our Proposal for the Improvement of English Language Education was presented to the Governor of Gunma Prefecture. Our analysis of the problems which formed the background to our Proposal has not altered. Indeed it is uncontroversial to say that the traditional Japanese approach to English language education has a direct bearing on how successful our country will be in surviving the severe test of global competition. However the increasingly strident calls from society at large to improve our ability to communicate with other countries are often vague in content and made with little knowledge of the reality of what is happening in education.

The difficult task of implementing the recommendations contained in our Proposal fell to the various divisions of the Prefectural Office. They have worked hard together and the improvements made in English language education in the prefecture are in no small way the fruit of their labor.

At the beginning of the process of modernization which started in the Meiji era and has continued to the present, Japan had no choice but to rely on Europeans and Americans for its higher education. In the course of time, Japan was gradually able to conduct its education using its own people and in its own language. As a sign that Japan was now mature enough to conduct its own education, this is clearly a source of great satisfaction. However this phenomenon is surely one reason behind the decline in the foreign language ability of our university students. If we cast our gaze towards other countries, particularly Asian countries such as Korea and China, we cannot help but be amazed at the spread of English which has accompanied their rapid modernization. Anyone who has attended a meeting of Asian nations must have been struck by the relatively poor English skills of the Japanese participants. Reflecting on this situation, I hope that the decline of our English skills, intellectual curiosity, and commitment to improve ourselves are not signs of a more general slide in our country's international standing.

Following the lead of Governor Kodera, many important figures in Gunma in both public and private sectors have realized the pressing need at the local level to develop young people who can flourish in the era of

globalization. Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has been keenly discussing English language education in Japan, for radical change to occur, a local community like Gunma Prefecture should take the initiative to discuss education intensively and draw up their own model for reform based on future needs. The importance of producing such a model remains unchanged.

Since our previous Proposal took a fairly comprehensive look at the whole of Japanese English language education, I think that the basic ideas do not require any change. Therefore I decided this time to focus on 4 specific areas of education. These are outlined in the following sections:

The first section deals with the issue of English at Elementary schools, an issue which our first proposal did not address. Our current proposal recommends that for children in the lower grades, Grades 1 to 3, English should be used to introduce them to foreign cultures. For children in the upper grades, Grades 4 to 6, English should be established as a new subject that is part of a comprehensive 3 year syllabus with lessons at least twice a week.

The second section suggests that junior high schools, senior high schools, and universities should cooperate with each other so that each level forms part of an integrated English language education. While each level should form part of a natural progression, the respective goals and curriculum will vary according to the level.

The third section proposes that the 4 skills in English should be taught in harmony. English education before World War II emphasized reading and writing but after the war emphasized speaking and listening. Concentrating on speaking and listening tasks based on daily life may have made English education superficial because it fails to give students the ability to cope with complex situations relating to economic and social spheres.

Finally, the fourth section concerns ALTs who have been playing a significant role in English language education and promoting internationalization at the local level. Therefore to retain the services of capable ALTs and make the best use of their abilities, I propose that ALTs are offered better terms and conditions. This proposal should be carried out by universities and the government.

I believe that if the recommendations made in the 4 areas above are implemented, they will have a significant effect on improving the English ability of the next generation. It goes without saying that the educational community needs to study and discuss in detail those methods and procedures which are necessary to carry this out.

As we stated in our proposal of 4 years ago, any discussion of how to

improve our ability to communicate cannot be confined to the realm of educational policy. As a nation we need to create a forum in which all these deep rooted problems can be the subject of open and rational debate.

I would like to emphasize a point that may well be self-evident, namely that the promotion of English language education should in no way be made at the cost of passing down to younger generations, Japan's rich cultural and historical heritage. As we noted in the first proposal, "it is difficult to imagine that people who are able to use a foreign language skillfully will be unable to use their own language properly. Furthermore it is unthinkable that a person educated in Japan could have a deep understanding of other culture and yet be ignorant of their own." We must be aware of our own identity as Japanese as well as our responsibilities as members of the wider world community. We need to acknowledge the existence of different peoples and cultures while retaining a firm sense of who we are as Japanese.

I believe that the greatest danger facing our country in the future lies in our succumbing to an insular and complacent chauvinism which would inhibit a desire to meet the challenges facing us outside. While we should always remember with pride the achievements of our country, we must never lose our desire to engage actively and fearlessly with the wider world. This attitude is what saw Japan through the revolution of the Meiji restoration, which helped her recover in the post-war period and which will be needed well into the third revolution of the 21st century.

I. English Language Education at Elementary School

English at elementary school is currently being conducted as part of the international understanding section of the Period for Integrated Studies. The necessity of English language education at this level is still the subject of much debate. In society at large there is a strong demand that English be taught to our children who will be growing up in an increasingly interconnected world. However this does not necessarily imply that English should be introduced at the elementary level. Indeed if this is done without proper preparation it may result in children developing a strong aversion to English. Hitherto the main focus of English at elementary school has not been on developing children

with advanced foreign language skills. English has been used as a means through which children could develop their individuality, their interpersonal skills, and an attitude of openness to foreign cultures. However it is now time to move beyond an approach to learning English as merely fun. English should be established as a proper school subject to help children form rich relationships with others, develop their intellectual curiosity and draw out the best of their ability. To achieve this will require far-reaching reform.

1. English for Lower Grades

For the lower grades, Grades 1 to 3, English should be used to help children develop an interest in foreign cultures and communicating in English. At this level, learning should be enjoyable and relevant to the children's immediate environment.

2. English for Upper Grades

For the upper grades, Grades 4 to 6, the purpose should be to acquire basic communication skills in English. Children at this age are at an important physical and intellectual milestone in their development. English should therefore reflect this fact and become a full school subject which students are expected to master.

3. Curriculum

English for children in the lower grades should not be a school subject but should be conducted in time allocated for special activities. Children should learn English which is relevant to their daily life and be given the chance to learn about foreign cultures through a range of basic activities. In the upper grades, a 3 year curriculum should be drawn up and a minimum of 2 hours a week should be allocated to the subject of English.

4. English as a School Subject

The main emphasis should be placed on listening and speaking. Children should be able to use basic greetings, instructions, and other language which is relevant to their everyday life. Reading and writing should be restricted to the basics and use pattern sentences which illustrate the fundamental English word

order of subject-verb-object.

5. Teachers

When English is first introduced into the curriculum as a full school subject, it should be taught by the homeroom teacher of each class because they have the best understanding of each child's character. However they should be assisted by a specialist English teacher, an ALT, or a member of the local community with appropriate knowledge and skills. Once the teaching system becomes established, it is advisable that the teaching be put into the hands of a specialist English teacher.

6. Pre-service Training

Universities should set up special courses to produce teachers who have the necessary English language and teaching skills to be able to teach English at elementary schools.

7. Recruitment of Teachers

In order to create and maintain a strong bank of teachers with basic practical English skills, all prospective elementary school teachers should have to pass an interview in English as part of the hiring process.

8. Professional Development

Research should be carried out at all levels of education in the prefecture and the results made widely available. Homeroom teachers should have regular workshops to learn how to teach English at elementary school. When the schools are on vacation, elementary school teachers should be given the opportunity for concentrated periods of study so that they can reach the required English level and learn how to improve their teaching skills.

9. Motivation

While it is important that lessons are enjoyable, if children are not engaged at a deeper intellectual level they will not be able to maintain their motivation. Much can be achieved through combining a minimum amount of grammar

with an expanding vocabulary and openness to children's interests. For example, if children are interested in insects, the teacher can introduce them to the words beetle (*kabutomushi*) or dragonfly (*tombo*). It is important that children experience the pleasure of being able to understand and express in English what they would like to say.

10. Learning Environment

It is important to create an environment in which English becomes a strong and regular presence in children's everyday life. Every school should have an area set aside where children can look at English picture books and children's encyclopedias and watch children's television programs in English. If children can see homepages from other countries and exchange simple e-mail messages with children abroad, they will begin to feel that they are part of the global village.

11. Teaching Materials

At the national or prefectural level, videos, DVDs and other general teaching materials should be produced and made available to schools. This would be of great benefit to teachers who are not English specialists and would greatly lighten the burden of having to make original materials.

12. Locally Produced Materials

Each school should make their own collection of teaching materials which are appropriate to the locality and level of the children. These materials should be freely shared among teachers. Collections made at every level in the prefecture should be put on each school's respective homepage so that they are available for other schools.

13. Junior High School

There should be a close connection between elementary and junior high schools. English teachers should be able to move between elementary and junior high levels. It is particularly important that a junior high school English teacher be transferred to an elementary school when a new program is being started there. In addition, teachers from elementary and junior high schools

should attend the same training programs and be encouraged to observe each others' lessons.

14. Research

Research should be undertaken to establish a reliable way to measure whether or not the target level of English proficiency has been reached and to analyze the results of making English a school subject at the elementary school level.

At the national or prefectural level a model test should be designed and piloted at schools randomly assigned. A longitudinal study should be carried out to track the results.

15. The Alphabet (Romaji)

The alphabet should be introduced in English lessons, not Japanese lessons. For the benefit of foreigners, children should be taught how to write their names and addresses in English using a transliteration system which is close to English such as the Hepburn system.

16. Japanese Language Education

The English language skills of students should build on the fundamental intellectual foundation which has been established in Japanese so that students can develop their powers of critical thinking and imagination. In the future, the ability to express yourself and your opinions, to discuss and debate matters, and to understand another's message accurately are all skills which should be acquired in both Japanese and English.

17. English Language Education in Other Countries

We should look carefully at how other countries have managed to develop successful foreign language programs to see how we can improve English education in Japan. It would be particularly beneficial to look at the elementary school foreign language programs of countries whose native language is not English or whose native language grammar is markedly different from English. Such programs should be carefully studied and good practices which are appropriate to Japan should be considered for inclusion in Japanese schools.

II. An Integrated Approach to English Language Education from Junior High School through University

In order for English language education to improve, there should be cooperation between institutions from junior high school through university and clearly defined goals.

18. Cooperation between Levels

In order to promote cooperation, plans should be made to exchange personnel between different educational levels. There should be various kinds of exchanges, both short and long term between junior and senior high schools and between senior high schools and universities. Teachers from junior high schools and senior high schools, and from senior high schools and universities, should have the opportunity to study together to improve their teaching skills and English proficiency.

19. Objectives at the Junior High School Level

Building on the base of what has been learned at elementary school, the objective of English at the junior high school level should be to develop students' communicative ability in a systematic way supported by a knowledge of grammar. Building on listening and speaking skills learned at elementary school, the emphasis should be shifted towards developing accuracy in reading and writing. Basic methods such as reading aloud, recitation, and dictation are essential. Students should be taught in small classes and be grouped according to their English level.

20. Objectives at the Senior High School Level

The objective of English at the senior high school level is to develop the skills which have been learned at junior high school. Senior high school students should be able to understand English in content areas such as science and technology, society and culture and acquire the ability to express themselves. Their English level should be such that they are able to read essays and short papers, newspapers, and understand BBC and CNN news broadcasts. There

should be an emphasis on developing students' output skills through activities such as presentations and skits. It would be effective to establish two different English courses: a course for students who want to acquire basic skills and a course for students aiming at more advanced skills.

21. Objectives at the University Level

At the university level, students should build on the English that they have learned at senior high school to deepen their general knowledge of the current era of Globalization and acquire the English necessary for their specialized fields. They should learn how to write reports and graduation theses and be presented with opportunities to discuss and debate issues. In order to apply their English skills in a practical and integrated manner, students should volunteer at international events and conferences, and undertake internships at companies where English is used.

22. Cooperation between Universities and Senior High Schools

In order to promote cooperation between senior high schools and universities, students should be given opportunities to learn about education at the university level. For example, university professors should give lectures at high schools and there should be more opportunities for students who are taking the advanced English courses to attend classes at university.

23. Entrance Exams

There should more questions which test students' communication ability. Senior high school entrance exams should have interviews in English that require students to do more than just introduce themselves. Students must be able to express their opinions and discuss issues relevant to their lives. University entrance exams should include listening materials from authentic sources such as documentaries, and discussion television programs. They should also have to write essays. All 4 skills should be evaluated so that a fair determination of students' English ability can be assessed.

24. Advantages of 6 Year Secondary Schools

The advantage of 6 year secondary schools with a strong English focus is that students will be able to study English without being interrupted by the need to prepare for senior high school entrance exams. The research from these schools should be disseminated to other junior high and senior high schools.

25. Achievement Testing

Achievement tests should be made for each grade to avoid inconsistencies in the curriculum and to clarify achievement goals. Although this has been put into practice in some regions, tests should be carried out at the prefectural and national level. Clarifying the goals reached by each grade from junior high to senior high school level will be able to motivate both students and teachers.

III. A Balance of the 4 Skills of English

English language education has come to lay an undue emphasis on speaking skills. However if students are to acquire a truly meaningful ability to communicate, speaking and listening should be balanced by reading and writing. For this reason, careful thought should be given to producing an English language program with a balance of all 4 skills.

26. Cultivating a Balance of the 4 Skills

Recently, there has been a tendency to emphasize listening and speaking skills, but it is also important to foster competence in reading and writing. Learning tasks that require the use of all 4 skills, such as reading about a topic then writing a report and finally presenting it, should be adopted.

27. Variety in Learning

In order to prevent learning becoming tedious, thought should be given to providing lively and varied ways of learning. Strategies to be considered include focusing on a different skill each term or school year, concentrating on one skill for a short time, or making an immersion program during the summer

vacation. Tilting the balance of the 4 skills intentionally for a fixed period of time will produce better results in the long-term.

28. Improving Reading Skills

In order to improve their reading skills, students should be offered a variety of ways to read. These should include the rapid and extensive reading of fairly simple materials such as detective, romance and science fiction novels, and the intensive reading of essays and English newspapers. It is important to read aloud and to practice memorizing well constructed sentences.

29. Improving Writing Skills

In order to improve their writing skills, students should be given opportunities to express their own ideas in English. It is important for students to practice writing in a variety of genres by keeping a diary, writing letters or summarizing stories. Excessively abbreviated and informal English should be avoided even in e-mail. It is important for students to receive adequate feedback on their compositions. ALTs should assist Japanese teachers in this task.

30. Improving Listening Skills

In order to improve their listening skills, it is necessary to increase opportunities for students to listen to English. It is important for them to have as much exposure as possible to English in their daily lives by using television, movies, and the Internet, both inside and outside the classroom.

31. Improving Speaking Skills

In order to improve their speaking skills, students should practice reading English aloud on topics that interest them. At first, set phrases and structures should be memorized. Next, students should focus on grammatical skills so they are able to express their opinions and ideas accurately. In addition to this, by practicing short speeches and simple debates, students will naturally be able to develop the ability to speak correct English.

32. Teaching Grammar

Grammar should be made an independent subject in order to improve the 4 skills. However, the focus should not be on teaching about grammar in an abstract way but on exposing students to many example sentences so that they will be able to acquire structures in an experiential way. Through such experiential learning, students will be able to learn grammatical items, from the simple to the more complex, in a natural way.

33. Avoiding Katakana English

Using inappropriate katakana English should be avoided. For example, words that are used in the media such as "shokku," "kuria," "forou," differ from their original English meanings of shock, clear, and follow. The pronunciation of words such as "forum" and "veteran," differ from the correct English pronunciation. Teachers should be aware of the incorrect uses of katakana English and pay attention to this fact when they are teaching. If there are concepts such as "governance" or "identity" for which it is difficult to find an appropriate Japanese word, then the use of katakana English in those cases is permissible. When learning a language, whether Japanese or foreign, it is important to have a firm commitment to use the language correctly.

IV. ALTs in English Language Education

ALTs are already playing a major role in improving English language education in Japan and helping to promote the development of internationalization at the local level. Indeed as the pace of globalization quickens, the demand for ALTs both from schools and society at large is becoming even greater and many boards of education are employing increasing numbers of Non-JET ALTs. It is important that schools make the best use of the teaching skills of ALTs. To ensure that the services of capable ALTs are retained and that their abilities are utilized to the maximum, serious thought should be given to reforming the ALT system by creating more favorable terms and conditions.

34. Collaboration between ALTs and Japanese Teachers

Every school should ensure that there is adequate time set aside for lesson planning so that ALTs and Japanese teachers can develop their professional relationship. ALTs and Japanese teachers should work together to create lesson plans and teaching materials that will stimulate the intellectual curiosity of the students.

35. Professional Development

ALTs and Japanese teachers should continue to attend workshops together so that they can understand their respective viewpoints and incorporate the best of their differing approaches and methods into their teaching practice. By watching excellent Team Teaching lessons, ALTs and Japanese teachers will be able to improve their own practice. ALT peer training is also valuable. Opportunities should be created for experienced ALTs to provide practical guidance and support to less experienced or new ALTs.

36. Team Teaching Manuals

There should be a variety of team teaching manuals in English to improve team teaching. They should be versatile so that they can be utilized in a variety of educational contexts. They should include not only theory but also a large number of actual lesson plans and useful teaching materials.

37. Making the Most of ALTs

ALTs should be encouraged to make use of any special skills or abilities which they possess. ALTs should teach not just English but also any subjects in which they are qualified. They should also take part in club activities. Increasing the amount of time that ALTs spend with students will have a beneficial effect on students' English skills.

38. Evaluation of ALTs

To develop ALTs' skills as teachers and to retain capable ALTs, it is suggested that there be a workplace evaluation. Education specialists at prefectural and municipal Boards of Education should make an impartial assessment of ALTs' teaching abilities and professional behavior. Fair and appropriate evaluations should lead to improved employment terms and conditions such as increased remuneration and an extension of the contract.

39. Selection Process and Contracts for ALTs

In order to maintain capable ALTs, efforts to improve the selection process are required. We should employ more foreigners who have specialized knowledge and experience in language education. Contracts should be extended flexibly and consideration should be given to making ALTs full-time teachers so that their experience and teaching skills can be fully utilized.

40. ALT Working Hours

In order for ALTs to become a more integral part of the school and to utilize their full potential, it is suggested that ALTs work a 40 hour week like their Japanese colleagues. This will increase the amount of time ALTs can interact with students and allow them to develop closer working relationships with their Japanese colleagues.

Afterword

This proposal was created under the leadership of Yasushi Akashi, Director of the Foreign Language Research Institute (FLRI) with the help of an advisory committee. The members of the committee contributed greatly to this proposal with their ideas, insightful discussion, and critical evaluation. In addition to the committee, we also consulted with ALTs. We would like to express our appreciation to all the people who participated in the creation of the proposal.

The ideas and opinions of the advisory committee were keenly discussed from a wide range of perspectives. It goes without saying that each individual member does not necessarily fully agree with every item in this proposal. Furthermore, the ideas and opinions of the committee were offered by them in a personal capacity, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of their respective organizations. Although this proposal was created by the FLRI of Gunma Prefectural Women's University, it does not necessarily represent the opinions of the University.

We are well aware that this proposal does not constitute a complete or definitive treatment of the subject. Our hope is that it will stimulate a wide-ranging critical debate which will build on our recommendations. However, making this proposal is an important step towards achieving the fundamental purpose of Gunma Prefectural Women's University Foreign Language Research Institute which is to conduct research on foreign language education and develop individuals who will be able to flourish in an international society.

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