

# The Backwash Effect of the Entrance Exam on English Language Education in Japan<sup>1)</sup>

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## 0. Abstract

Under the current educational system in Japan, as of December 2010, Japanese school children begin to learn English at the age of 12 in middle school. This system started in 1947 with the launch of the new school year system (6・3・3・4), shortly after World War II. The learning of English continues in high school for another three years, usually followed by one or two years in university. So almost all Japanese children study English for at least six years, and more than 50% of them study the language for one or two additional years because in Japan, according to a report released by the Ministry of Education in 2007, more than a half of high school graduates attend university.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Technology (hereafter referred to as “the Ministry of Education”) has long encouraged leaders of English education to put more focus on teaching practical English

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in classrooms in order to increase globalization. However, there are still very few Japanese students who are confident in speaking the language without difficulty. In fact, English proficiency among Japanese students is relatively poor when measured by international standard English tests (Manto 1995). Japan's performance in TOEFL, for example, has long ranked the lowest among 28 Asian countries. Many ESL researchers blame this result on the flaws of the current entrance exam system in Japan. They argue that only grammatical knowledge and reading skills of English have been assessed in the English entrance exams administered in Japan, resulting in a “backwash effect” on the way of teaching and learning English. As a result, middle school and high school students are only motivated to acquire basic reading skills and ample grammatical knowledge rather than the listening and speaking skills which are necessary for being able to speak and understand practical English.

In this paper, I will discuss the backwash effect of the university entrance exams on English education at middle schools and high schools in Japan by indicating the reasons for the curriculum and students' motivation, and the result of this backwash effect.

The “backwash effect” of testing is a well-documented academic phenomenon common to nearly all institutional learning processes. The term “backwash” is defined as “the direct and indirect effects of exams on teaching method” (Prodromou 1995) or “the influence of testing on teaching and learning” (Gates 1995). The form, content, focus, and delivery of a test often determines an academic curriculum and the way it is taught. As a result, these features in turn tend to affect the skills the students achieve as the outcome of the training (Shawcross 2007).

At the end of this paper, some possible solutions against the negative

effects of the university entrance exam are proposed, with a view to improving the English proficiency level of Japanese learners of English. Facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Japanese society feels the necessity for coping with a more international era. Therefore, English language education is required to play an important role in teaching young students to be more internationally minded. In conclusion, assuming that the negative effects of English entrance exams on the current English education in Japan is undeniable, it is suggested that the Ministry of Education should play a leading role to encourage Japanese universities to adopt a speaking test as part of their entrance exams. It is recommended that the relative value of a speaking test should be more than 20% of the whole test.

Thus, it follows that the following things should be reformed in English education at the middle school and high school level: First, the number of English teachers with high speaking and listening ability should be drastically increased. Second, the curriculum should be changed to one through which students can become good speakers of the language. Finally, universities need to establish an efficient way to test the examinees' English speaking ability.

## **1. Introduction**

In Japan, English-language education starts in the first year of middle school and continues at least until the third year of high school. Since 97% of middle school graduates attend high school (data from the homepage of The Ministry of Education 2010), almost all children living in Japan study English for at least six years at school. However, according to the Asia TOEFL iBT score rankings of 2006, Japan ranked the lowest in English

proficiency among 28 countries. In fact, the total score was only 65 out of 120. Incidentally, the second lowest was North Korea, whose score was 66. On the other hand, the best was Singapore whose score was 100, and the second best was India whose score was 91. As for Malaysia and Indonesia, the scores were 89 and 80 respectively, both of which ranked much higher than Japan.

To reiterate, Japan has had an English proficiency level which is the worst in Asia. Now a question naturally arises as to why Japanese people are so poor in learning English. Some argue that since Japanese and English are totally different languages, there is no commonality, neither in structure nor vocabulary, which causes Japanese students to have a hard time learning English. However, this is definitely not a decisive factor because in fact, all Asian languages are linguistically very different from English. So one of the possible reasons may be the unbalanced instruction, which focuses heavily on reading and writing skills, with little or no focus on speaking and listening skills. In the past, Japan was an isolationist country and had very few foreign visitors, so Japanese people had very few opportunities to converse in foreign languages. Therefore, the goal of studying foreign languages was mainly considered to obtain knowledge, especially in math and science, from the research literature of other countries. Learning English became popular after World War II, but English was taught by teachers who had been trained under the grammar-translation method, which emphasizes reading skills based on grammatical knowledge. Thus, most Japanese people know English grammar very well, but cannot use or speak English with fluency sufficient to communicate with foreigners.

However, in recent years, the demand for people who have the

ability to speak English and comprehend spoken English has increased.<sup>2)</sup> In December 2008, the Ministry of Education announced a national plan to train Japanese students to speak English fluently. However, many educators claim that as long as the university entrance exams exist in their current form, the way lessons are taught will not change at all. As will be discussed in detail later, the skills of grammar and reading have been excessively valued in the university entrance exams.

The purpose of the present paper is to introduce the current system of the Japanese university entrance exams, and then to discuss the resulting backwash effects on English teaching and learning in middle schools and high schools in Japan. Although the ultimate aim of this paper is to specify the cause of the poor oral English language proficiency of Japanese people, the focus will be narrowed to the selection system based on the university entrance exams in Japan because the selection system can influence what is happening in classrooms in various ways. At the end of this paper, some possible solutions to remedy the problems will be proposed in detail.

## **2. Brief history of English education in Japan**

First, let us begin with a brief discussion of the history of English language education in Japan. Over 200 years have passed since English language education began with seven interpreters working for the local government in Nagasaki in 1809. At that time, Nagasaki was the only place in Japan in which doing business with other countries was allowed.

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2) For example, some Japanese companies such as Rakuten (an internet shopping website) and Fast Retailing (operator of the Uniqlo casual clothing chain) have recently announced that they will make English their official in-house language by the end of 2012 as part of their efforts to enhance global competitiveness.

During the Meiji Era (1868-1912), the Japanese government began considering English education as necessary because Commodore Matthew Perry had visited Japan in 1853 and 1854 with a letter from American President Millard Fillmore asking for the establishment of a commercial relationship between the two countries. At that time, the technology and the military power of the U.S. were far more advanced than Japan. However, during the Meiji Era, Japan had an isolationist policy, which prohibited foreign contact with every country other than contact between a trading post in Nagasaki and the Ryuku Islands, China, Korea, and the Netherlands. The visits of Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 and 1854 triggered Japan to open up to the outside world. To fill the technological gap between the two countries, the Ministry of Education, which was established in 1871 by the Meiji government, sent selected students to Western countries to have them study science and technology. The leaders of the government thought that it was important for Japan to have a similar standard of technology, politics, and education as Western countries, as well as linguistic competence (Gakken 1999). The start of foreign language education in Japan was part of this project, and foreign languages were introduced to the university curriculum and in addition, various subjects were taught in English beginning in this era.

English education during the Meiji Era can be divided into two stages. During the first stage, which was between 1868 and 1881, English language education entered into its boom period because of the government policies in favor of English. For example, in 1872, Mori Arinori, the first minister of education, published a report titled “The Use of English as the Official Language in Japan.” At that time, many Westerners (especially scholars from the U.S., Britain, and Germany) were invited to teach in

Japan. English became the medium of instruction for all subjects at Tokyo University, which was the first university founded in Japan. The number of invited Westerners during the Meiji Era reached more than 3000, and approximately one third of the budget of Tokyo University was spent on the salaries of the Western lecturers (Imura 2003). An educational record made in 1881 shows that six foreign language lessons per week were taught in middle schools at that time.

On the other hand, during the second stage of the Meiji Era, between 1882 and 1905, Japan went through a backlash period compared to the previous English boom. After the students who were sent by the government to Western countries came back to Japan and started teaching, Japanese became the medium of instruction at Tokyo University beginning in 1883. Furthermore, the academic books which were originally written in European languages started to be translated into Japanese, so it was no longer necessary for Japanese students to learn English in order to read academic books (Imura 2003). Therefore, the Japanese language replaced English as the access to Western culture and knowledge. This turn-around in the status of English seemed to have been accelerated by Japan's wartime victories over China in 1894 and Russia in 1904, along with the politically-driven government initiative to regard the Japanese language as the language of instruction for patriotic purposes (Fujimoto-Adamson 2005).

During the Taisho Era (1912-1926), which lasted for only 14 years, there was basically the continuation of the above-mentioned backlash towards the English boom of the early Meiji Era. However, during this period, the English Teaching Research Institute was established by Harold Palmer in 1915, who was invited from Britain by the Japanese Ministry of Education to be an English consultant. Palmer made great efforts to spread

the Oral Method in Japan, spending more than 10 years on the project. In addition, the first conference for English language teaching was held in Japan in 1924. This indicates that at that time, there was already an increasing awareness about the methodology of teaching English and the way of linguistic analysis among Japanese English teachers.

After the Taisho Era, the Shōwa Era lasted for 62 years, from 1926 to 1989, and can be divided into two stages: before and after World War II, which began in 1941.

The first stage of the Shōwa Era was from 1926 until the start of World War II in 1941. This stage started with the Primary English Program on radio. This was only two years after the first radio broadcast in Japan started in 1925, and this was actually the peak of the anti-English language education sentiment. The abolition of English education was proposed by Fujimura, who was a professor at Tokyo University in 1927. He criticized copying ideas from Western countries and suggested that foreign language education was a burden for Japanese students. Then four years later, in 1931, English classes at schools were reduced.

After Japan's involvement in World War II started with the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the American and British lecturers at Japanese universities were dismissed, and English was regarded as a negative foreign influence on society. Japanese English teachers at that time began to be required to follow the nationalistic government education policy (Fujimoto-Adamson 2005). The second stage of the Showa Era began in 1945 after World War II ended. This year was the start of the U.S. occupation of Japan. The occupation by the U.S. military played a major role in helping raise Japanese people's interest in English education. This can be regarded as the second English education boom in Japan. In 1947, English lessons



started again in middle schools. Along with the rapid economic growth in Japan starting from 1955, there was a call by leading business leaders to improve the level of English speaking and listening. Japanese businesses wanted its workforce equipped with better English skills to conduct international business. In 1963, the so called “Society for Testing English Proficiency” (the “STEP” test) was implemented in Japan. This was the first nationwide English exam in Japan to assess all four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). This test was manifested as a reaction to the call made by business leaders for more practical English instruction. The goal was to have middle school students reach Grade 3 of the test in practical English proficiency, and high school students reach Grade Pre-2. But, as a matter of fact, these goals were very far-fetched.

In 1979, a relationship between business leaders and English education in Japan started with the adoption of the “Test of English for International Communication” (TOEIC), which is a test of business English which was designed in the US. Since it is an international test, unlike the STEP test, it is convenient to compare the linguistic competence of Japanese learners of English with their counterparts in other countries.

In 1980, the number of English lessons in Japanese middle schools was suddenly reduced from four classes to only three classes per week. This was the result of a government policy to change the whole nature of Japanese compulsory education from one which was purely focused on study to one which emphasized holistic education and experiential learning (Fujimoto-Adamson 2005). At that time, the number of middle school and high school students who committed suicide was gradually increasing more and more due to the failure of students to obtain high scores on their entrance exams and bullying by classmates. The number of dropouts and

those students who confined themselves at home also increased. These were all considered to be serious social problems. Therefore, later on, these problems led to the Ministry of Education to decide for public schools to start having classes only five days per week instead of six days per week starting in 2002, and reduced the total class time of lessons by 30%, which was a reduction of 70 hours of lessons per school year. As a result, the appropriateness of the university entrance exams for testing English language skills in Japan also came under discussion among educators.

The method of evaluation also changed from “relative evaluation” to “absolute evaluation.” Japanese schools had traditionally adopted the method of relative evaluation, based on a normal Gaussian distribution (a bell shaped curve), but changed to an absolute evaluation because it became more and more obvious that there were large differences between schools in the average abilities of the students. For example, it has been well documented that in Japan, students at schools which are located in cities do much better than students who live in rural areas (Yagi 2006). This is because people who live in cities are generally richer than people who live in the countryside, and also because there are more evening schools (*gakushu juku*) in cities compared to rural areas.

The “Japan Exchange and Teaching Program” (also called the “JET Program” ) was introduced by the Japanese government in 1987 to improve foreign language education, and is still ongoing. There are currently about 8000 native English teachers (called “Assistant Language Teachers,” abbreviated as “ALT” ) in the JET Program. The ALT’s teach English at middle schools and high schools in Japan, and they are mostly young people in their early 20’s and recently graduated from university. The JET Program has had a tremendous effect on English education in Japan because

it has brought native-speaking English teachers face-to-face not only with students, but also with teachers and administrators of the schools.<sup>3)</sup>

Now let us turn to a discussion of English education during the Heisei Era that started in 1989 after the death of Emperor Hirohito (called “Emperor Shōwa” in Japan). In 1989, the English language syllabus in Japanese high schools started to be based on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, and then in 1994, a new learning objective was established. This shows that the government was trying to heighten the level of the students’ speaking ability. However, most English teachers in Japan kept using the Grammar Translation method, which led to the failure of Japanese students to attain standards of proficiency in speaking and listening.

In addition, in 1991, English lessons were started at some public elementary schools on an experimental basis in response to the intention of the Ministry of Education.<sup>4)</sup> In the spring of 2003, the Ministry of Education put forward a plan to foster English skills in Japanese children. The

- 3) However, one problem that has been pointed out is that the current Labor Service Temporary Assignment Law prohibits the consultation and cooperation between Japanese teachers of English and foreign English teachers (ALT’s) before and during their classes. It is because of this law that ALT’s are regarded as workers based on “duty dispatch,” who are not under their employers’ command. If they cooperated with the Japanese teachers of English while teaching, this could be considered as an act of a “disguised contract,” which is illegal. According to an article in the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper of August 5, 2010, more than a third of middle schools and high schools in Japan have used a job placement agency to hire ALT’s so that they can cut down their budget to hire ALT’s. If they directly employ ALT’s on their own, they would not have the problems mentioned above. However, it is usually impossible for Japanese teachers of English to conduct good and effective classes without close cooperation with the ALT’s during and prior to their classes. Therefore, this kind of teaching is not really “team teaching” at all.
- 4) Both Keio and Gakushuin elementary schools (private schools located in Tokyo) began teaching English during the early Meiji period, and more than 84% of private elementary schools had begun to have English classes by 1997 (Kuno 1995).

ministry officials envisaged middle school and high school graduates being able to communicate in English and university graduates being able to use English in their jobs.

Moreover, what is called, “Super English High Schools” also started in 2003. More than 100 high schools were nominated to be Super English High Schools, in which an emphasis was placed not only on English language studies, but also on an English-medium study of science and math, which is similar to trend towards English-medium instruction during the beginning of the Meiji Era (1868 to 1881). This was a reaction to the fact that English education in Japan had not succeeded in producing as many good English speakers as expected.

### **3. The Japanese university entrance exams**

English education to prepare for the entrance exams to universities and high schools, which is called *Juken Eigo* in Japanese or “English learning in order to pass exams” had already started at the end of the Meiji Era during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century because English had become one of the important subjects with which government elites were selected. Several books about learning English, designed for students hoping to take an entrance exam, were published during the Meiji Era. Then after the Taisho Era started in 1912, more and more publications of this sort came on to the market for students who wish to attend high school or university.

In Japan, every university designs their own entrance exam for the applicants. The number of subjects to be tested is usually five for public universities (Japanese, English, history, math, and science), while typically three subjects for private universities (English, Japanese, and history or

math). In addition to these exams given by individual institutions, applicants to public universities have to take a nation-wide exam called the “Center Test” (*The National Center Test for University Admissions*) as well, which has been administered since 1990. The content of English exams, for both national and private universities, was designed mainly for the assessment of reading and writing skills. The Center Test did not include any listening questions until 2006, even though a large part of the TOEIC and TOEFL tests is comprised of listening questions. In fact, it was in 1987 that the possibility of including listening questions on Japanese university English language entrance exams became an issue for the first time, but it took almost 20 years until it was finally implemented.

After taking the Center Test, the applicants to public universities have to take entrance exams at individual institutions which they apply to enroll at, and these entrance exams do not have any listening component at all. The reason for not including listening components on these exams is because it is claimed that listening tests are hard to create and administer. It is claimed to be far easier for examiners to evaluate form-focused questions than anything remotely communicative. On the public university entrance exams, 50 points are allocated to the listening section, but the written section is worth 200 points, which is four times as much. In terms of the amount time that students are given to answer the questions, the listening section is allocated 30 minutes, but the reading and writing sections are allocated 80 minutes. The listening tests are conducted by giving each examinee a Sony Walkman MP3 player and headphones to listen to the questions.

Overall, the entrance exams guarantee a level of basic knowledge for most of the students who want to go on to higher education. However,

there is no norm set to draw a line between which examinees “pass” and which “fail.” Therefore, the university entrance exams in Japan are administered only to select entrants, but not to evaluate their ability for future achievement.

The individual institutional exams actually a way for the universities to earn extra income. Each applicant must pay 35,000 yen to take the entrance exam for just one institution. On average, each student pays about 105,000 yen before entering a university because most students apply to about three schools for admission, according to a report released by the National Federation of University Co-operative Association in Japan in 2010.

Every universities wants to match its admissions quotas, but in reality, as of 2010, around 40% of private universities in Japan cannot fulfill their quota due to the decreasing number of applicants, which is caused by the decreasing birth rate in Japan. So, even if many of the applicants get lower scores than expected, they are still likely to be admitted to the university, unless the score is extremely low. In other words, there are no criteria set for any entrance exams. Thus, it is obvious that the tests are written and administered every year as part of the way to help raise funds for the universities from all of the applicants in Japan.

On the other hand, nowadays entrance exams are no longer the only way to get accepted into a university in Japan. What are called “Admission Office Tests” started for the first time in the late 1990’s, and they do not require examinees to take exams, but instead to have good grades in high school and take part in interviews. Admission Office Tests are getting more and more popular in Japan, especially at private universities, but they are not likely to become the most common way for the universities to choose applicants because it takes examiners a lot of time and energy to conduct

an interview for each applicant.

#### **4. The backwash effect of entrance exams on English education in Japan**

University entrance exams are so powerful that they wield enormous power over teaching and learning (Frost 1991, Rohlen 1983, Somerset 1996). This is because major companies in Japan recruit almost exclusively from prestigious universities. Thus, the selection process at these universities is very competitive. This is why entrance exams are needed.

Since the content of the exams tends to be literary, not practical, and includes a lot of translation questions together with questions of English grammar, English teachers at middle schools and high schools do not usually teach practical or communicative English. As a matter of fact, most of the English which is taught at middle schools and high schools is “Exam English” – i.e., English taught in preparation for exams. Obviously, tests have a significant role in shaping curricular content. Instead of devising a test to fit an existing curriculum, essentially what happens is that middle school and high school administrators change the curriculum to fit the entrance exams<sup>5)</sup>.

According to Fujimoto (1999), in the education systems of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Netherlands, and South Korea, the four English language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) are all

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5) For example, in 2007, many high schools purposefully taught Japanese history but not the required subject of world history just because either one of these (but not both) is required for the entrance exam. The educators at the high schools wanted to let their students have ample time to study Japanese history, making a sacrifice of world history, so that their students would get high grades in Japanese history on the entrance exams.

assessed equally. If speaking and listening skills were assessed more on the university entrance exams in Japan, then the oral English ability of Japanese students would definitely improve. However, the problem lies in the difficulty of efficiently evaluating individual speaking and listening proficiency using exams.

Fujimoto (1999) administered a questionnaire survey to Japanese high school students who planned to attend a university and the teachers who taught the students. His results confirmed the above-mentioned backwash effect. The first question asked by Fujimoto in the survey was about the students' main reason for learning English. The responses showed that for most of the students, their sole reason for studying English was to pass the university entrance exams. The second question was about the students' preferred method for learning English. The responses varied depending on the year they were in. The 10<sup>th</sup> grade students, for whom the university entrance exam was still far away, preferred to learn listening and speaking, while 12<sup>th</sup> grade students preferred to learn reading and writing. Note that reading is the skill which makes up the bulk of the questions on the university entrance exams. Thus, we can see that the effect of the entrance exams really does change learners' attitudes. These results seem to be good evidence for a backwash effect.

Regarding the questions which Fujimoto (1999) administered to teachers, one was about which skill was prioritized most in teaching English. The answer was "reading." Another question was about the influence of the university entrance exams on classroom activities. It turned out that 82% of the teachers responded that there was considerable influence on classroom activities from the university entrance exams. Again, these results reflect the clear influence of the the exam system. Thus, unfortunately, the recent



government proposals for introducing more oral exercises in class with a view to improving students' practical skills of English seem not to be fully realized.

What is the purpose of the university entrance exams? Are the entrance exams norm-referenced testing, are they aptitude tests, or are they proficiency tests? Actually, they are none of these because there is no specific qualifying score on the current entrance exams administered in Japan. Instead, each university decides a quota of how many applicants will be admitted, according to the highest entrance exam scores among the applicants. Thus, if most of the students who applied to a particular department at a particular university took a university's entrance exam and failed to get a high score, the required score would simply be lowered until the necessary number of entrants were admitted.

## **5. Solutions proposed by the Ministry of Education**

Because the backwash effect of the university entrance exams on English teaching and learning in Japan have been confirmed, we will now discuss some possible solutions to this problem. Obviously, the four skills of the English language (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) should be assessed equally in the Japanese entrance exams, as is done in most European countries. However, this is very difficult to accomplish because the number of students who take the university entrance exams is very large. For example, in 2009, there were more than 540,000 applicants who took the Center Test. It is not practical to include a speaking test on this exam because it would be extremely time consuming to grade so many tests.

After the nationwide Center Test started including listening questions in 2006, high school English classes started to teach listening. However, the new exam has not yet transformed English lessons at high schools into teaching practical communicative English because the scores for both the listening and the speaking sections do not count near as much as the scores for the reading, grammar, and writing sections.

One might consider that if a university in Japan started using the TOEIC or TOEFL exam for entrance qualification, middle school and high school teaching would be motivated towards teaching practical communicative English. However, this is doubtful because any teaching which is specifically for exams, regardless of the skills which are tested, seems to create very little practical communicative English.

In addition, the English vocabulary required of Japanese middle school and high school students is vastly different from the vocabulary of students who wish to study abroad. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should establish a way to test examinees' English speaking ability as part of university entrance exams. The most practical solution would be to cooperate with a non-profit English testing organization, such as *Eigo Kentei Kyokai* or STEP ("Society for Testing English Proficiency").<sup>6)</sup>

English education in Japan tends to be categorized into two parts: grammar-based lessons and conversation-based lessons. As Fujimoto (1999) pointed out, this can be a problem because grammar-based lessons are usually considered to be more important than conversation-based lessons because of the entrance exams. Therefore, he suggests communication-based grammar lessons which take in the good points of both lessons. If

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6) As a matter of fact, Sophia University in Tokyo is now carrying out a new entrance exam in cooperation with STEP (*Eigo Kyouiku English Education Journal*, Vol.59, No.2, p.26).

this kind of lesson is sufficiently provided to students, it could be an effective solution to the problems mentioned above.

It is also important to set up various kinds of environments for students in which they are forced to use English in a natural context. According to a report made by Benesse Education Research Center in 2006, Korean students are exposed to English in their daily lives three times as often as Japanese students. This may be one of the reasons why the average TOEFL scores of Korean students is much higher than for Japanese students. In addition, students should have far more English lessons to improve their speaking and listening skills, both in and out of their classes, under the instruction of teachers who are at a high proficiency level in English speaking and listening.

## **6. Conclusion**

Due to the decreasing number of high school graduates, it is more and more a “buyer’s market” in university admissions for the students who wish to attend a university. Based on the data of 2006, 547,000 high school graduates in Japan out of 1,147,000, which is 48%, attended a university or junior college after graduating from high school. Because the total admissions quota of all the colleges and universities was 700,000 in 2006, many universities, especially small private universities in rural areas, cannot enroll as many students as they would like to. Therefore, such universities are now desperate to get high school graduates to apply. As a result, many non-elite universities and colleges cannot set difficult hurdles in their admissions’ qualifications. The lower the hurdle is, the weaker the motivation of students to study English.

The Ministry of Education has recently announced plans to start teaching English at elementary schools and to teach high school English classes using English as the medium of instruction (*The Mainichi Daily*, December 30, 2008). This is because teaching speaking and listening at an earlier age would be more successful to equip Japanese students with the skills and knowledge of practical English. However, many teachers are perplexed over the move because they doubt that they themselves and their students would be able to handle classes which are in English only. The Ministry of Education has declared that “teachers should first display an attitude of actively using English themselves,” in order to boost their students’ English conversation ability. However, according to an article in *The Mainichi Daily* published on December 28, 2008, concerns have been raised over large disparities between both teachers’ English abilities and students’ levels of understanding. As a matter of fact, according to a report released in *The Mainichi Daily* on December 9, 2010, only about 21% of English classes designed for Oral Communication at high schools are conducted in English. Therefore, many teachers are requesting changes to university entrance exams in line with the move mentioned above, and they are also questioning how effective the change will be.

Thus, there are two things that the Ministry of Education should do urgently in order to make Japan’s English education truly communication-oriented. One thing is to increase the number of English teachers who have reached a high level of English proficiency in speaking and listening, and the other is to drastically change the current curriculum into one that has ample practice for learning speaking and listening.

What should we do to achieve the above two goals? A possible answer to the former is that the government should have as many Japanese

teachers as possible study English in an English-speaking country for at least one or two years at the expense of the government,<sup>7)</sup> and in addition, the government should require all Japanese high school teachers of English to obtain a high score on the TOEIC exam (e.g. 850 or more) or the STEP exam (Pre-grade 1 or Grade 1).

As for a solution for the latter, teachers should develop a program under which students are given ample time to learn practical English through face-to-face conversations with foreign students both inside and outside of their classes, for example, by using instant messaging software on the internet, such as Skype, Yahoo Messenger, or Windows Live Messenger.

What has been missing in English education in Japan? If the purpose of the government's action plan is only to make Japanese people become fluent in English, it seems to be of no use at all. The true value of language study should be linked with a person's way of living, i.e., his or her career goal. It is not necessary that every Japanese student has to become a fluent speaker of English unless he or she wants to have a certain international job. What is now needed most in English education in Japan is a well-balanced lesson plan for all four language skills. In addition, students who wish to study English eagerly for their future jobs should be taught how to learn the language in a practical and communicative way, not just knowledge about the grammar of the language.

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7) If this proposition is not affordable, then an alternative is that the Ministry of Education could develop a language exchange program with an English speaking country for one or two years. Living in an English-speaking country for at least one year can be a very educational experience for Japanese teachers of English.

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