

Hiroshi Hasegawa, 2017

Volume 3 Issue 1, pp. 567 - 585

Date of Publication: 22nd March, 2017

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2017.s31.567585>

This paper can be cited as: Hasegawa, H. (2017). *The Critical Role of Universities in Impacting upon English Education in Japan*. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 3(1), 567-585.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN IMPACTING UPON ENGLISH EDUCATION IN JAPAN

Hiroshi Hasegawa

Curtin University, Perth, Australia

h.hasegawa@curtin.edu.au

Abstract

Learning a foreign education is compulsory in the Japanese primary and secondary school curricula, with most schools selecting English as their foreign language. Japan's MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) clearly identifies one of the main aims in teaching foreign languages is to improve students' ability to communicate in the target language. However, many students in Japan continue to think of themselves as having only limited oral English communication skills, and are not confident when interacting orally. The majority of Japanese students are primarily externally-motivated English learners: they study simply to pass examinations. Thus students' motivation for studying English is inconsistent with the Ministry's aim in teaching it. Despite this, the current lack of opportunity for students to practise their English communication skills could be overcome by implementing systematic plans and achievable strategies. To enable the provision of such opportunities, the role of Japan's higher education institutions, including universities, must be reassessed. This paper sets out ways in which universities can play a critical role in promoting practical strategies for improving and positively influencing students' practical English skills in primary and secondary schools. The paper discusses three key suggestions for improving the use of English as an oral communication tool: (1) the inclusion of oral performance in English in the university entrance examination, (2) the development of coherent learning processes for achieving specified

outcomes at the university level, and (3) the introduction of teacher-training opportunities for current university lecturers of English.

Keynotes

English education in Japan, MEXT, University entrance examination, Development of coherent learning processes, Improvement of teaching skills

1. Introduction

Japanese nationals spend a total of nine years in compulsory education, comprising six years of primary school (Years 1 to 6) and three years of junior high school (Years 7 to 9). In 2011, 98.2% of junior high school graduates advanced to non-compulsory education (MEXT-Japan, 2012, p. 4), including senior high school (Years 10 to 12) and higher education institutions, such as universities. In 2016, having attained their senior high school certificate, 55.0% of high school graduates gained entry to four-year university or two-year college courses, and 16.2% went to vocational schools (MEXT-Japan, 2016, p. 4). At any school level, students may choose to attend either public or private schools. However, private schools only accept students who satisfy their academic and financial criteria (sometimes an interview is also required), and the students must complete an entrance examination prepared by the particular school. Despite such differences between public and private schools, there is a common hot topic in education in Japan, which is the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

Foreign language education is a compulsory curriculum activity for primary schools, and a compulsory subject in the current junior and senior high school curricula in Japan. Most schools choose English as their foreign language, because of its current status as a global lingua franca. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is the national government organisation responsible for educational curriculum policies (Komatsu, 2002; Leong & Ng, 2016), and "... is responsible for making decisions related to curriculum content and design, classroom resources, teacher training and subject methodology" (Lamie, 2015, as cited in Leong & Ng, 2016, p. 216). MEXT is currently proposing to introduce mandatory English language study in primary schools. Already, since April 2011, all primary schools have introduced English language learning as an extra-curricular activity for students in Years 5 and 6, and the public seems to have taken for granted MEXT's decision to introduce the study of English into earlier stages of schooling. (Note: April is the start of the new school year for all Japanese schools.) MEXT's proposal has already propelled changes in some of the private junior high school entrance examination processes. Within the Tokyo metropolitan area, for

example, a total of 33 (up from 15 in the previous year) private junior high schools introduced English as one of their school entrance examination subjects for the 2015 school year, and the number increased drastically to 64 for the 2016 school year (Shutoken Moshi Centre, 2015, para.

When MEXT established a committee in 2010 to nationally promote the study of English as a foreign language, it forged five primary proposals, along with some concrete strategies for achieving these proposals by the end of the 2016 school year. The five proposals were (1) to understand and investigate the level of English proficiency achieved by students, (2) to encourage students to understand the necessity of learning English in a globalised society and to promote their motivation (to learn), (3) to create opportunities for students to use English through the efficient use of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), (4) to strengthen English teachers' English teaching abilities, and/or to implement strategies of English education reform tailored to different schools/communities, and (5) to attempt to better align the university entrance examination with the requirements of a globalised society (MEXT-Japan, 2011).

MEXT, and Japanese people in general, are likely to consider the most vital aspects of English language education to be the acquisition of speaking skills. This is despite the fact that whole-language theoreticians emphasise that all four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are vitally important as an integrated set of communication skills for the mastery of English: "all aspects of language interrelate and intertwine" (Ayadogan & Akbarov, 2014, p. 3). English in the majority of schools in Japan is regarded by students (and teachers, too) as a subject to be studied primarily for externally motivated reasons, such as for examination purposes, although such motivation may be subject to criticism as it stands in contrast to the MEXT's aim.

This paper argues that there is a need for educational reform to enable universities to play a critical role in helping primary and secondary schools to improve their English language teaching. To argue this, the paper first discusses the flaws in MEXT's proposal to introduce compulsory English language education in primary schools (Section 2). Section 3 examines the benefits and issues involved with assessing students' oral performances in English for the university entrance examination, while Section 4 looks at the need to introduce coherent learning processes for achieving specified outcomes at each stage of university study. Finally, Section 5 discusses teacher-training opportunities to ensure that current university lecturers of English are equipped to satisfy the curriculum requirements.

2. Flaws with MEXT's proposal

MEXT is currently proposing that English study should be introduced in Years 3 and 4 as an extra-curricular activity, and in Years 5 and 6 as a mandatory school subject, aiming to roll out the reform from April 2020. This initiative should be debated and viewed with scepticism for the following reasons.

First, it is a myth that the earlier that one begins learning a second language, the better the expected outcome will be. This claim is based on, or influenced considerably by, the critical period hypothesis (CPH), which states that the "... optimal period for language acquisition... ends at puberty" (Abello-Contesse, 2009, p. 170). However, many scholars do not seem to be convinced that young children perform better than adults in their second/foreign language learning. For example, some have argued that under normal circumstances, CPH refers to first language acquisition, rather than second language learning (Abello-Contesse, 2009; Strakova, 1997). When conducted in an instructional setting or informal classroom environment, first language acquisition occurs differently from second language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Therefore, CPH does not apply to official learning settings such as the classroom, the very setting that MEXT is targeting in their proposals for teaching English as a foreign language in Japan. Further to this, other scholars have theorised that high-quality input exerts a stronger influence than starting age when it comes to learning a language (e.g., Munoz, 2014, as cited in Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016), and that the level and degree of language competency differs between children and adults, as children produce sentences which are shorter, with lower breadth and depth of vocabulary, and less complicated grammar (McLaughlin, 1992). Despite these counterarguments, MEXT's claim that 'earlier is better' is widely and intuitively accepted by the public, and also by some researchers. Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams (2013), for example, noted that:

...maturational and environmental differences between younger and older learners indicate that it is most advantageous to learn two languages early on in life. ... The evidence points to fairly robust advantages for simultaneous bilinguals relative to sequential bilinguals. They tend to have better accents, more diversified vocabulary, higher grammatical proficiency, and greater skill in real-time language processing. (p. 103)

MEXT seems to have accepted this idea that early language learning is best. However, the logic behind this thinking is flawed, since it confuses foreign language study with different types of bilingualism, specifically simultaneous as opposed to sequential bilingualism. Learners who have been exposed to and are able to use two different languages from birth or as toddlers

are regarded as simultaneous bilinguals. On the other hand, those who have learnt/acquired a second language after mastering their mother tongue are regarded as sequential bilinguals (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). Most of the students targeted by MEXT's proposal can only hope to become sequential bilinguals, as they will be exposed to English as a foreign language for only a limited time during the school term. This is a situation vastly different from one in which learners acquire a language in a natural, immersive setting, and MEXT has not adequately considered this difference. Although it may be feasible to overcome the limitations of sequential bilingualism by hiring a babysitter or au-pair who speaks the target language, or by establishing structured immersion programs to cultivate functional bilingualism (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013), this is not the only difficulty MEXT's proposal faces.

A second disadvantage in MEXT's proposal is the issue of sustaining a balance between teaching a newly introduced English curricula with the time and resources required to teach existing curricula in primary schools. English is currently taught as an extra-curricular activity in primary schools, yet MEXT proposes to somehow squeeze English language and existing subjects into the curriculum (Leong & Ng, 2016). According to MEXT's summarised proposal, Year 5 and 6 students will undertake a total of 70 compulsory English lessons (3150 minutes) per year. This increases the total number of school lessons in a year to 1015, considerably greater than the current 980. MEXT's summary report did not include any strategic planning as to how to manage the extra 35 lessons per year, which presents a drawback for students and teachers, as it does not guarantee sufficient coverage of the current course content (Takahama, 2016). Further, although early exposure of primary students to English language could help to equip them with skills that may be helpful "... in later educational and professional contexts" (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013, p. 104), there is a risk that some students may be disinclined to continue learning English after being forced to study it at primary school. English as a compulsory subject is likely to be viewed as an extra burden, especially for students already struggling to maintain academic standards in pre-existing subjects.

A third disadvantage of MEXT's proposal is that it will require extensive, time-consuming and specialist teacher training. Most primary school teachers teach a general curriculum to a specific year level, rather than being specialist teachers, whereas English is a specialised academic area. Strategic planning for the teacher training required to teach English language presents a challenge, and will be time-consuming to manage. Thus, offering English to Years 5 and 6 as an extra-curricular activity, rather than a compulsory subject, presents the optimum solution.

Instead of focusing attention on the primary school system, students' English communication skills could be better served by implementing the systematic plans and achievable strategies detailed in this paper in higher education institutions, such as universities. In other words, if Japanese students are to improve their communication skills in English, there is a need for systematic university reform, instead of the current focus on early education. Hasegawa (2015) called for MEXT's initiatives in English education to be more effective, petitioning for a shift in Japan's current national policy towards English as a foreign language. This involved examining learners' oral communication abilities, considering professional development for teachers, and viewing the role of universities as vital: "The steps that have been suggested here may be implemented more effectively if the university entrance examinations and courses are reformed first, so that they focus more on individuals' actual communicative competence in English". (Hasegawa, 2015, p. 200)

3. Students' oral performance in English for the university entrance examination

Universities can play a critical role in positively influencing students' practical English skills, and this role depends on the nature of university entrance examination, coherently between different stages of study at university, and the provision of teacher-training opportunities for academics of English. To understand the role that universities can play, a discussion of students' motivation in studying English is required.

Research on motivation in second/foreign language learning and acquisition was initiated by Gardner in the middle of the last century (e.g., Gardner & Lambert 1959, 1972; Gardner, 1968), and has been extensive since then (e.g., Brown, 2007; Dornyei, 1998). Among various influential factors, motivation plays a key role in success in second/foreign language learning and acquisition (Brown, 2007; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Motivation can be divided into two categories; one influenced by integrative or intrinsic factors, and the other oriented to instrumental or extrinsic factors. These two types of motivation are inextricably intertwined, and can turn into each other interchangeably through the process of one's second/foreign learning and acquisition.

The primary motivation for Japanese students to study a subject at school derives from formative and summative assessments, which may be considered preparation for the tertiary entrance examination. "The Japanese education structure is of the 'tournament' type, which propels students... to make fervent preparations for university entrance examinations"

(Sugimoto, 2003, pp. 116-117). Thus the nature of university entrance examinations play an important role in motivating students (MEXT-Japan, 2011; Poole, 2003; Sugimoto, 2003), and has enormous impact on students' views and attitudes towards English communication as a school subject (MEXT-Japan, 2014).

The major problem with the current approach to teaching English language in the Japanese school system is that insufficient weight and attention is given to assessing oral performance. In most cases, school English examinations are focused on assessing students' written abilities, while the concept of English as an oral communication tool for social interaction does not seem to be present or valued. Therefore, to enable assessment of students' performances in oral as well as written communication skills, it is vital that the traditional written English examination is divided into two sections - written/reading and oral/aural – for all types of tests and examinations.

Assessment of oral communication skills should also feature in the English examination structure for all Japanese university entrance examinations. This change would likely encourage high schools and junior high schools to begin assessing of oral performance in both formative and summative tests. This approach, in fact, is one highly recommended by MEXT (MEXT-Japan, 2011). By 2020, universities in Japan are required to deploy English proficiency testing systems for their entrance examination for English as a subject, and the scores will be used for student recruitment decisions. The tests used for this purpose include domestically well-known tests without university links, such as EIKEN, GTEC-CBT and TEAP, as well as globally employed English proficiency tests such as IELTS, TOEFL-iBT, Cambridge and TOEIC. In 2015, such proficiency testing system was implemented by a total of 50 (6.75%) out of 746 universities, including nine (5.4%) national and public universities and 41 (7.1%) private universities, as a substitute for the 2016 school year original English entrance examinations. (Obunsha, 2016, p. 1).

The proficiency testing system organised by a non-government third party may bring about several positive effects for both examinees and MEXT, as the administrator of Japan's national unified examination. For the former, it will provide examinees with multiple opportunities to take the oral English examination in slightly different variations and forms, since the nature of an oral communication examination is such that an English-speaking examiner requires one-on-one time with examinees. By making a variety of examination locations available, examinees are able to select a convenient location from a number of optional locations, rather than taking it in a particularly designated venue/location. This would certainly

ease MEXT's concerns regarding the best way to implement and administer the examination to the hundreds of thousands of students who take it every year: in 2016, 563,768 examinees sat for Japan's national unified examination (Kyodo, 2016). Therefore, these factors are very appealing to MEXT from an administrative perspective because of the positive expectations brought about by their overtness and transparency.

However, requiring an oral communication component as part of the tertiary entrance examination does raise some issues. One is the challenge of deciding the content of test questions (including themes and topics), which can vary widely between tests, and which may not be relevant to judging examinees' English oral performance. During a MEXT-initiated discussion panel of test design practitioners and decision makers, one panellist raised the example of a question with doubtful relevance to an oral English communication test for school students: "Agree or disagree: Technological advances have made the world a safer place." Or "Is the Japanese healthcare system a good model for other countries?" (MEXT-Japan, 2014). While there is the embedded expectation that a student's response should be based on logical and critical thinking, this should be a test designed not to assess critical thinking skills, but rather to judge a student's oral English ability, as the guidelines state that, "The TOEIC Speaking test is designed to measure a person's ability to communicate in spoken English in the context of daily life and the global workplace" (ETS TOEIC, 2010, p. 6). Since the range of target examinees is broad, the questions may be far beyond the knowledge and experience of high school students, which restricts their ability to communicate about the issues in question. Although it is common for test designers to require examinees to be familiar with the test content, it is still questionable whether using these speaking tests for the university entrance examination may lead to cognitive impediments to the test results, or other negative consequences.

Another concern is the standard and quality of examiners' judgements from one test to another. It is common for examiners to differ in their focus and judgement of proficiency in oral communication. Therefore, the cultivation of fair and objective judgement is attempted in all testing companies through professional training to standardise the assessment process. Non-standardised regulations in testing companies, each with their own set of rubrics, will result in variations in scoring, and discrepancies will arise when examiners have been trained by different testing companies. If MEXT's proposal to include oral English examinations is accepted, they will officially authorise all testing companies for involvement in university entrance examinations in Japan in 2020, while MEXT's direct involvement in ensuring the integrity or quality of the companies' test content and scoring procedures remains undiscussed.

Mastering English as a foreign language requires a long-term, cumulative study plan, tailored specifically for each individual. Consequently, it is important to establish systematic and coherent processes across a student's entire learning journey. However, while MEXT is proposing to allocate increased attention to the teaching of English communication at earlier school levels, it tends to overlook the fact that most entrance examinations fail to properly assess oral communication. MEXT should be ensuring the coherence of the long-term collaborative education process, especially during the transition from one school level to another, as English teaching in high schools is strongly influenced by the content of the university entrance examinations. Students' high school graduation certificates may have little relevance to national and public university entrance examinations, unless MEXT intervenes to establish unified test content and standardised procedures across the curriculum and up until the final year of high school.

4. Coherent and achievable learning outcomes at each stage/level within university courses

Although the public and mass media tend to focus on the need for school students to begin their journey towards becoming proficient users of English language, it is an unrealistic expectation that all Japanese people will become fluent communicators in English. In fact, it is more sensible that MEXT's English education reform targets those who are learning English in institutions of higher education, such as universities. Continuously declining birth rates are already affecting university enrolments, which may lead to a situation in the future where all applicants are permitted to enrol in university courses, irrespective of their entrance examination results (Arimoto, 2015; Sugimoto, 2003). Still, current reforms to the English education system in Japan are not focused adequately on the content of English lessons in Japanese universities, nor on the quality of pedagogical approaches employed by instructors. This neglect will lead to a great deficit in the structure English language courses, and insufficient discussion as to the matter of how to affect real improvement in university students' English abilities.

Apart from the specific higher education disciplines that necessitate direct government instruction and scrutiny (such as education and medicine), most university courses in Japan are made up of varieties of classes which are not necessarily based on any mutually negotiated content communicated between the subject coordinator and the course coordinator/university-appointed authority/MEXT. This particular tendency within academic institutions is not currently regarded as a problem, since public disclosure of a subject's content is not mandatory or

regulated by institutions. The lack of explanation or justification of a subject's content can result in the subject coordinator overlooking the significance of linking to the content of other classes, or even of clearly identifying achievable learning outcomes for that subject. Thus, providing information such as a subject outline may enhance the positive outcomes of studying the subject, as it enables subject coordinators to more objectively monitor students' progress as they move towards achieving specified aims. A subject outline explains vital points, including the subject's aims, the requirements to be met in order to achieve specific learning outcomes, the class activities required to acquire sufficient academic knowledge and skills, and assessment tasks. Furthermore, assessment rubrics can show the magnitude of students' achievements in each category of skill or knowledge. The inclusion of rubrics for assessment tasks in subject outlines would be especially practical for both students and teaching staff (Reeves & Stanford, 2009; Wolf & Stevens, 2007). Teaching staff can refer to holistic rubrics to score students' overall performances, while analytic rubrics can be used for scoring performances in each established category before calculating a student's total score (Nitko, 2001). Using both types of rubrics this way allows teachers to utilise achievement data to reassess the relevance of the teaching strategies and teaching/learning activities employed in their lessons. Developing a subject outline also contributes to creating a sense of balance between the different components of the subject. In the case of learning English language, the subject should take care to address the four key macro-skills, as well as various linguistic aspects of English, productive and receptive skills, general knowledge about linguistic aspects, and cultural awareness. A subject outline leads to the development of a coherent subject whose aims are spelt out explicitly to students. This same subject outline enables coordinators to scrutinise and clarify students' semester and yearly achievements in terms of the outlined goals.

MEXT officially instructs schools to follow "... their detailed guidelines on what is to be taught and how it is to be taught at each grade from primary school to high school" (Sugimoto, 2003, p. 130). This excludes universities. The absence of an authorised independent body to inspect the content, goals, and connections between tertiary classes is a noteworthy issue for universities in Japan. Consequently, university courses in Japan may be comprised of subjects which are not necessarily linked, or organised coherently. Within an English major course, for example, the classes introduced after the successful completion of Level 1 English Grammar and Level 1 English Writing are not necessarily those classes equivalent to Level 2. It is not unusual to see subjects with the same title, but for different levels, conducted with entirely different academic focuses and made up of dissimilar content. However, there is not much point in

students learning English academic writing or English for specific purposes, if they have not yet mastered a sufficient breadth of vocabulary, set phrases and grammatical rules. An independently appointed authority could play a vital role in ensuring that subject coordinators create a sense of synthesis between the different subjects within a course. Ensuring a more holistic view of tertiary courses would reinforce students' actual achievement of course learning outcomes and, at the same time, enable facilitators to scrutinise each subject's content and aims.

The tendency to overlook these vital parts of the teaching and learning processes brings about a lack of inter-relation between subjects and levels within the same course. This does not mean that Japanese universities do not scrutinise teaching applicants' academic knowledge and the particular expertise required, nor do they disregard teachers' appropriateness for the subject or subjects they will coordinate and teach. However, in theory, students can obtain high levels of academic knowledge from subject experts, while subject coordinators are able to organise their approach to teaching their subject in whatever ways they like, due to the absence of third party evaluation of their subject content. This existing system of independently authored and managed subject structures is dysfunctional, especially with regard to courses based on skill-cultivation, such as English as a foreign language. By missing the opportunity for teaching staff to investigate and negotiate the content and methodologies of their subjects, the quality of students' long-term academic outcomes is very likely reduced.

5. Improvement of teaching quality at university

It is not so much that “[b]y and large, university staff are lax in their duties” (Sugimoto, 2003, p. 140), but rather that they are, in general, ill-equipped in language pedagogy and theoretical knowledge, and therefore may not be utilising the most effective strategies for teaching English as a foreign language. This is because their fields of expertise are not necessarily education, or even pedagogy. However, teaching is one of their academic duties, along with the research and administration tasks related to their subject or field of work (unless, of course, they are purely conducting research). Therefore, it is critical to train and equip teaching staff with pedagogical theory and the practical aspects of teaching, as these have direct influence on their students' achievements. A number of researchers have highlighted the need for pedagogical skills for teaching staff in higher educational institutions (e.g., Chalmers & Gardiner, 2015; Hirsto, Lampinen & Syrjakari, 2013; Robinson & Hope, n.d.), but this has not been debated extensively in Japan.

With regard to the teaching of English as a foreign language in Japan, the issue of equipping tertiary level academics with pedagogical skills must be considered concurrently with the issue of recruiting native speakers of English, which is currently common practice in schools and universities. Native speakers of English tend to be employed in line with MEXT's recommendations, supported by the influence of the widely spread ideological belief in 'native speakerism'. This ideology assumes that native speakers of English are the ideal teachers of English, since they portray the English-language culture and have sufficient (non)cognitive knowledge of English and pedagogy (Holliday, 2006). This belief persists despite the counter arguments to the native speaker fallacy. Along with the argument that non-statistic evidence rationalised native speakers is appropriate, Pierrel (2009), for example, explained the native speaker fallacy using the following three concepts: The first is linked to Kachru's (1986, as cited in Pierrel, 2009) well-known concept of the three circles of English such as the inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle, where the countries located in the inner circle are automatically considered superior to others. The second concept is Chomsky's (1965, as cited in Pierrel, 2009) acclaimed notion that native speakers of a language can be considered authorities on grammatical judgments. The third concept is based on Canagarajah's (1999, as cited in Pierrel, 2009) idea that many EFL students, wishing to learn English, choose a country and institution based on their perception of the countries' socio-politico-economic factors. Applying Pierrel's theory in the context of Japanese universities, native speakers who are employed as English instructors are able to listen, speak, read and write English, but this does not automatically make them superior instructors for effectively teaching English to Japanese university students. However, most schools and universities in Japan employ native speakers despite their lack of sufficient, officially sanctioned teaching qualifications and experience. The situation seems to be better in schools, where the employment of native speakers has been limited to the position of 'assistant language teachers' who must co-teach alongside a professionally trained teacher with official teaching qualifications. However, universities allow untrained native speakers of English to take on main teaching roles where they are solely responsible for designing lesson plans, conducting lessons, devising assessment tasks, and judging students' overall performances.

Officially initiated discussions on how to boost the teaching skills of instructors at the university level in Japan should be prioritised in order to bring about improvements in university students' English abilities. MEXT's strategic plans to improve Japanese students' English communication skills should be made concurrent and synchronous with university teachers' teaching skills through training programs, especially those that award officially recognised

certificates or degrees upon successful completion. It is rare to see Japanese students wishing to undertake supplementary academic courses after graduating from their university undergraduate courses, and the higher education system in Japan does not usually provide any official, isolated teaching training courses. In addition, it is uncommon to find postgraduate students who return to university postgraduate courses after leaving undergraduate university courses or after being in employment for some years. Considering this conventional higher education culture in Japan, it is extremely rare that academic staff with PhDs who have secured tenured university positions would be prepared to do further study to obtain teaching skills that are not directly related to their research fields. In order to encourage teaching academics to do this, it would be helpful to establish official training courses for teaching teachers how to teach. Courses equivalent to the graduate certificate or graduate diploma in Australia, for example, would be appropriate. This action could be accelerated if MEXT financially supported English programs to this end, providing university teaching staff with appropriate teaching training by professionally trained trainers, individual academics might be encouraged to study extra courses in order to be more teaching-ready.

In cases where providing and/or studying extra postgraduate certificate/diploma courses may not be realistic, ongoing professional development is still possible and necessary to improve and maintain the quality of teaching skills in universities. Even though undertaking teacher training not garner official recognition or direct benefits to an academic's research career, it could help university teachers to align their teaching content and methods with their students' academic backgrounds and learning attitudes. Academic staff who do not have appropriate teaching skills and lack opportunities to develop these skills might also become inappropriate role models for students wishing to become school teachers in the future, as their own teaching style may be influenced by the way they are taught.

In addition, Japanese universities do not seem to monitor the quality of education they provide, in terms of "... private accrediting associations, university assessments, course evaluations, departmental reviews, inter-university evaluations, inspection committees, and peer review" (Poole, 2003, p. 156). On the other hand, universities in some English-speaking countries, such as Australia, UK and USA, employ an internal monitoring authority to ensure and validate the quality of the courses offered by their department, school, and faculty. This includes the monitoring of teaching and students' learning, with a focus on fostering excellence in teaching and learning scholarship. Universities often organise a range of programs, including seminars, workshops and conferences, and provide useful information and resources to support

teaching staff and students, as well as establishing policies to maintain academic standards for both teaching staff and students, and ensuring that both sides agree on target outcomes and indicators of achievement. Naturally, this also includes monitoring each subject coordinator's assignment rubrics and subject outlines. In addition, the official team entrusted with systematic monitoring of teaching and learning also functions as a liaison between the faculty and teaching staff. The adoption of a similar system in Japan may help to ameliorate the current situation in many universities in Japan where there is still not much interest in improving teaching and learning quality.

The Japanese public generally fails to consider the significance of university teaching, despite the fact that students, being the main source of university revenue, are there for learning, and thus successful learning should be the primary reason for the university's existence. Since improvement of students' English language competence is now being discussed more openly than ever, there is a need to synchronously discuss students' learning environments and academic teaching skills.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that the inclusion of English oral communication in Japanese university entrance examinations could create a positive domino effect that encourages high schools, junior high schools and primary schools to place more emphasis on improving students' English oral performance. Secondly, this paper argues that MEXT should consider mandating the establishment of coherent and achievable learning outcomes for each level of university English courses. Thirdly, the paper contends that the improvement of teaching standard at university is crucial if students are to achieve higher levels of English proficiency, as desired by MEXT.

Despite the fact that the five proposals put forward by MEXT's specialised committee include attempting to better align university entrance examinations with the need to be part of a global society, their detailed strategic plans to achieve this proposal only touch on the roles of tertiary educations, but do not go beyond encouraging universities to base their entrance examinations on the four macro-skills, national educational guidelines, and the use of proficiency tests such as TOEFL or TOEIC. By including the initiatives raised in this paper, MEXT could improve their strategic plan and their chance of achieving their aims.

The success of the entire English language education system in Japan depends not only on MEXT's but also, and more importantly, on how much importance the higher education

institutions can take on as key players in developing English communicative ability in Japan. The top-down political action initiated by MEXT should explicitly target university reform using the holistic approach described above. It is likely that systematic changes at the university level will initiate reform of the English education curriculum at the high school, junior high school and even primary school levels, which will help to provide further and better opportunities for students to practise their oral English communication.

References

- Abello-Contesse, C. (2009). Age and the critical period hypothesis. *ELT Journal*, 63(2), 170-172. Retrieved from <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/63/2/170.full.pdf+html> <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccn072>
- Arimoto, A. (2015). Introduction: The changing academic profession in Japan: Its past and present. In A. Arimoto, W. K. Cummings, F. Huang & J. C. Shin (Eds.), *The changing academic profession in Japan* (pp. 1-26). Retrieved from http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-09468-7_1#page-1 https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-09468-7_1
- Ayadogan, H., & Akbarov, A. A. (2014). The four basic language skills, whole language & integrated skill approach in mainstream university classrooms in Turkey. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(9), 672-680. Retrieved from <http://www.mcses.org/journal/index.php/mjss/%20article/viewFile/2687/2655>
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Byers-Heinlein, K., & Lew-Williams, C. (2013). Bilingualism in the early years: What the science says. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 7(1), 95-112. Retrieved from <http://www.learninglandscapes.ca/images/documents/ll-no13/byers-heinlein.pdf>
- Canagarajah, A. (1999). Interrogating the “native speaker fallacy”: Non-linguistic roots, non-pedagogical results. In G. Braine (Ed.), *Non-native educators in English language teaching* (pp.73-92). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Chalmers, D., & Gardiner, D. (2015). The measurement and impact of university teacher development programs. *Educar*, 51(1), 53-80. Retrieved from http://ddd.uab.cat/pub/educar/educar_a2015v51n1/educar_a2015v51n1p53.pdf <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/educar.655>
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Dornyei, Z. (1998). Motivation in second and foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 31(3), 117-135. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S026144480001315X> <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144480001315X>
- ETS TOEIC. (2010). User guide, speaking and writing. Retrieved from https://www.ets.org/s/toEIC/pdf/toEIC_sw_score_user_guide.pdf
- Gardner, R. C. (1968). Attitudes and motivation: Their role in second-language acquisition, *TESOL Quarterly*, 2, 141-149. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3585571>
- Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1959). Motivational variables in second language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 13, 266-272. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0083787>
- Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning*. Massachusetts, MA: Newbury House Publishers Inc.
- Hasegawa, H. (2015). Towards a breakthrough in the deadlocked English language education in Japan. In L. T. Wong & A. Dubey-Jhaveri (Eds.), *English language education in a global world: Practices, issues and challenges* (pp. 193-202). New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers.
- Hirsto, L., Lampinen, M., & Syrjakari, M. (2013). Learning outcomes of university lecturers from a process-oriented university pedagogical course. *TRAMES*, 17(67/62)(4), 347-365. Retrieved from http://www.kirj.ee/public/trames_pdf/2013/issue_4/Trames-2013-4-347-365.pdf <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2013.4.03>
- Holliday, A. (2006). Native speakerism. *ELT Journal*, 60(4), 385-387. Retrieved from <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/60/4/385.full.pdf+html> <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccl030>
- Kachru, B. B. (1986). *The alchemy of English: The spread, functions, and models of non-native Englishes*. Oxford, NY: Pergamon Institute of English.

- Komatsu, S. (2002). Transition in the Japanese curriculum: How is the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools in Japan determined? *International Education Journal*, 3(5). Retrieved from <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/iej/articles/v3n5/4komatsu/paper.pdf>
- Kyodo, J. (2016, January 17). Japan university unified entrance exams begin. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/01/17/national/japan-university-unified-entrance-exams-begin/#.WB3HJcnim3Y>
- Lamie, J. (2005). *Evaluating change in English language teaching*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230598638>
- Leong, C., & Ng, P. (2016). Primary school English reform in Japan: Policies, progress and challenges. *Current Issues in Languages Planning*, 17(2), 215-225. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14664208.2016.1147118>
- Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned (4th ed.)*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McLaughlin, B. (1992). Myths and misconceptions about second language learning: What every teacher needs to unlearn. *Educational Report 5*. Retrieved from <http://cmmr.usc.edu/FullText/McLaughlinMyths.pdf>
- MEXT-Japan. (2011). Kokusaikyotsugo toshiteno eigoryoku kojyo notameno itsutsunoteigen to gutaitekiseisaku. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/component/b_menu/shingi/toushin/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/07/13/1308401_1.pdf
- Ministry-Japan. (2012). *Press release*. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/component/b_menu/other/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2012/09/04/1315583_1.pdf
- MEXT-Japan. (2014) Minutes. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/102/102_2/gijiroku/1349153.htm
- MEXT-Japan. (2016). *Press release*. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/component/b_menu/other/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2016/08/04/1375035_1.pdf

- Munoz, C. (2014). Contrasting effects of starting age and input on the oral performance of foreign language learners. *Applied Linguistics*, 35(4), 463–482. Retrieved from <http://applied.oxfordjournals.org/content/35/4/463.full.pdf+html> <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu024>
- Nitko, A. J. (2001). *Educational assessment of students (3rd ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- Obunsha. (2016). 2016 nendo nyushieigogaibushikenriyojyokyo. Retrieved from http://eic.obunsha.co.jp/pdf/exam_info/2016/0526_1.pdf
- Pierrel, J. (2009). The native speaker fallacy. 1-17. Retrieved from http://jonathanpierrel.blogspot.com.au/2010/02/native-speaker-fallacy_16.html
- Pfenninger, S. E., & Singleton, D. (2016). Affect trumps age: A person-in-context relational view of age and motivation in SLA. *Second Language Research*, 32(3), 311-345. Retrieved from <http://slr.sagepub.com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/content/32/3/311.full.pdf+html> <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658315624476>
- Poole, G. S. (2003). Higher education reform in Japan: Amano Ikuo on ‘the university in crisis’. *International Education Journal*, 4(3), 149-176. Retrieved from <https://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/iej/articles/v4n3/Poole/paper.pdf>
- Reeves, S., & Stanford, B. P. (2009). Rubrics for the classroom: Assessments for students and teachers. *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 76(1), 24-27. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/docview/665019460/fulltextPDF/4F25B63AFE704D45PQ/1?accountid=10382>
- Robinson, T. L., & Hope W. C. (n.d.). Teaching in higher education: Is there a need for training in pedagogy in graduate degree program? *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 131564, 1-12. Retrieved from <http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/131564.pdf>
- Shutoken Moshi Centre. (2015). 2016nen nyuushidewa 64kou gaeigo(sentaku)nyushi wo jisshi. Retrieved from <http://www.syutoken-mosi.co.jp/blog/entry001115.php>
- Strakova, Z. (1997). Second language acquisition and the role of input in the classroom. Retrieved from http://www.pulib.sk/elpub2/FHPV/Kesselova1/pdf_doc/16b.pdf

Sugimoto, Y. (2003). *An introduction to Japanese society (2nd ed.)*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1143/JPSJS.72SC.123> <https://doi.org/10.1143/JPSJ.72.2173>

Takahama, I. (2016, August 1). Shogaku Eigo Kyokani Kakuage e: Shingakushuushidoyoryo Matomean. *Asahi Shinbun Digital*. Retrieved from

<http://www.asahi.com/articles/ASJ7W41RCJ7WUTIL01P.html>

Wolf, K., & Stevens, E. (2007). The role of rubrics in advancing and assessing student learning. *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 7(1), 3-14. Retrieved from

http://www.uncw.edu/jet/articles/vol7_1/wolf.pdf