

Explaining policy failure in the case of foreign language education in Japan

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Introduction

In his 1991 book *Education Reform in Japan: A Case of Immobilist Politics* Leonard Schoppa analyzed the failure of education reform in 1980s Japan. In order to explain why Prime Minister Nakasone was unable to get his reform agenda implemented Schoppa examined the roles of the various actors in the policy-making process. He found that actors in the political parties, the bureaucracy and the unions all had a role to play in stifling reform. This tendency in Japanese politics has been labelled “immobilism” by political scientists interested in Japan (particularly J.A.A. Stockwin). It helps to explain the problems reformers have trying to achieve any serious change in contemporary Japan.

Recently Schoppa’s thesis about immobilism has been challenged by the work of Christopher Hood who argues that although Nakasone did not achieve the reforms he wanted to during his time as Prime Minister, he was, nevertheless, able to establish a programme for change that outlived his premiership and bore fruit in the 1990s and later. However, in his study about Nakasone and the effects of his reforms Hood does not examine in detail the policy-making *process*. There is a clear need, therefore, for an up-to-date detailed study into policy making in Japan’s education system aimed at seeing if the immobilism that prevailed in the 1980s is still evident.

This paper is concerned with the subject area of foreign language education. By selecting a subject that is compulsory in junior high schools, *de facto* compulsory in senior high schools and in the early years of higher education, and currently being extended to primary schools, foreign language education provides a useful insight into the entire formal education system in Japan. Thanks to the large amount of private schools that also offer language courses, this topic also allows us to look at the interrelations between the state and private sectors.

Foreign language education is also a good choice for a case study for one more reason: it is the area of Japanese education that has consistently been criticised both at home and abroad. At a time when Japan was leading the world in science and mathematics education, and achieving enviable levels of literacy, it was noticeably failing its children in foreign language acquisition. Former U.S. ambassador to Japan, Edwin Reischauer, wrote in 1981 that “Japan’s relations with the other countries of the world face a severe language barrier.”¹⁾ Of the dozens of cabinet ministers he had known personally, he could think of only three who could conduct a serious intellectual discussion in English. Have things improved since Reischauer’s day? Jean-Pierre Lehmann, a professor of international political economy, writing in a series of articles for the *Japan Times* in 2002 wrote “[t]he great difficulty the Japanese experience in speaking the language of globalization fluently is a major indictment of Japan in the global age.”²⁾ He went on to make the often-heard criticism that Japanese school children who spend years studying minute details of grammar are unable to even order a cup of coffee in English. Because of this unfortunate state of affairs, there has

1) Reischauer (1981) p.385

2) *Japan Times* February 4th, 2002

been constant pressure on the government and the education establishment to improve performance in English language education. If this improvement has not been forthcoming and if it is not due to the immobilism described by Stockwin *et al* could it be due instead to obstacles of a different variety? Alternatively, could it be the case that improvement is being achieved, albeit at a slow pace?

The Consensus on the Need to Improve Foreign Language Education

English language education was always a cornerstone of Japanese government policies on “internationalization” (*kokusaika*). Schoppa noted at the start of his book that recommendations calling for more internationalization of the education system “enjoyed broad support and looked likely to win gradual approval.” (pp. 5-6) Some voices in Japanese academia have been raised against the perceived “threat” to Japanese culture of too much foreign influence, and these will be dealt with later in the paper. However, among the vast majority of academics, policy-makers, teachers, parents and business groups it is hard to find anything other than the wholehearted approval of efforts to improve international education in general and English language education in particular.

A short but representative sampling of the opinions of some of the major actors in the educational policy-making world will make it clear about the depth of the consensus that exists in Japan for improving English language education. In its official report for 1999 the Ministry of Education made the following statement about the school foreign language curriculum.

In the past we have aimed to develop a willingness to attempt active communication in a foreign language. In future, by focusing more on

actual speaking and listening, we are working to develop the basic and practical ability to communicate in terms of daily conversation and simple information exchange, for example, using a foreign language for greetings and self-introductions, shopping and travel. In addition, children at elementary schools will also learn English conversation through the introduction of hands-on learning appropriate for elementary school students.³⁾

The report also outlines the expansion of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme which invites young graduate native speakers of foreign languages (overwhelmingly English) to Japan to teach in schools, and which has expanded from 813 participants in 1987 (its first year) to 5,241 in 1999, after which it plateaued out. English is a central part of the curriculum in all junior high schools and in the vast majority of senior high schools. The fact that the ministry is now extending English language education down to elementary schools as well indicates the importance placed on this subject. The above quotation also shows that, more and more, it is communicative ability in the language that is being stressed by official sources.

Traditionally the main mouthpiece on education for Japan's business community has been Keidanren (The Federation of Economic Organizations). A survey that it conducted of its member companies in 1999 found that their biggest concern from the perspective of industrial competitiveness was "the shortage of English language skills" of new recruits.⁴⁾ Many also

3) Ministry of Education (2000) p. 172. The annual report three years later [Ministry of Education (2003)] repeated the assertion that "it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English." (p. 27)

4) Keidanren (2000) p.19. NB Keidanren (the Federation of Economic organisations) merged with Nikkeiren (Japan Federation of Employers' Associations) in May 2002 to form Nippon Keidanren (the Japan Business Federation).

remarked upon the considerable time and cost they had to expend providing English language education themselves. Keidanren, therefore, published a report the following year that called for a greater emphasis on communicative skills in language class in schools, for more native English speakers as teachers,⁵⁾ and for smaller class sizes.

Under the “two camp” system analyzed by Schoppa, Keidanren and the MOE would both have been in the conservative camp. When it came to educational issues, their main opponent in the progressive camp was the Japan Teachers’ Union (Nikkyōso). After infighting partly caused by disagreements about how to respond to the government’s education reform proposals, Nikkyōso split into two in 1989. Roughly two-thirds of the affiliated members and institutions stayed with Nikkyōso as it adopted a more moderate line towards its adversaries in the conservative camp. The other one-third broke away to form a new organisation called the All Japan Teachers’ Union (Zenkyō) which maintained a hostile attitude to the LDP and the MOE. After the schism both unions drew up official positions on various educational issues. Although they had serious disagreements in other areas they had virtually identical positions when it came to foreign language education. Furthermore, these were positions that were in almost complete agreement with the proposals of the MOE and Keidanren outlined above. In its most important post-schism report Nikkyōso drew up plans that were a “response to internationalization” that included the following: introduce English to elementary schools; increase the amount of training that Japanese teachers of English receive overseas; emphasize the ability of students to express themselves; smaller class sizes.⁶⁾ Zenkyō too, supports more

5) It should be noted that Keidanren also called for a greater emphasis on communicative language learning in Japanese classes (*kokugo*) as well as foreign language classes.

6) Nikkyōso (1995) p. 17

communicative language teaching and smaller class sizes, although, in its rhetoric it is very critical of the kind of globalized capitalism that Keidanren stands for. In the case of proposals for improving language teaching, broader ideological differences do not stand in the way of different political actors coming to a consensus of the main measures that need to be taken.

If there is a consensus on the need for communicative English among teachers' organisations, the government and business representatives, then could the problem be a lack of demand from Japanese people? School pupils, university students and adult learners may be being led to the water of communicative English but refusing to drink. A look at the amount of money private individuals spend on English language learning will show that that is clearly not the case. There is a massive, private *eikaiwa* industry in Japan upon which Japanese people spend each year roughly 3000 billion yen (Gottlieb, 2001, p. 44).

Problems of Implementation

If there is a consensus about the need for improved English learning, and if there is a clear demand for that learning, then it is possible that a failure to achieve satisfactory results could be due to mistakes or difficulties in how foreign language education policies are implemented at the *genba*. One problem that has been pointed out in this respect is the poor levels of spoken English that are often exhibited by Japanese teachers of English. The generation who were taught under the old, grammar-translation regime, it is argued, are unable to communicate in spoken English themselves and therefore found that they were unable to teach that subject properly when they become teachers. Also, exhortations to improve communicative compet-

ence, whether they came from on high or from 'consumer demand' came to nothing when confronted with the reality of high school and university entrance exams which, for a variety of reasons proved to be incapable of being transformed into exams that would test genuine communicative skills. When the Ministry of Education added "communicative foreign language learning" to the official course of study (*gakushū shidō yōryō*) for senior high school English in 1992 this had almost no impact because high school students, their teachers and their parents were overwhelmingly concerned with passing exams.

It is in this crucial area of implementation that the fundamental causes of policy failure in the area of foreign language education in Japan lie. It should be clear by now that this failure at the implementation stage is not due to deliberate, organised political opposition. This represents a departure from the previous state of affairs. Under the old "1955 system" Nikkyōso compensated for its lack of access to the central government policy-making bodies by organising opposition to policy at the school level. The most important example of this took place in 1957-9 over the government's Teacher Efficiency Rating System (Aspinall, 2001, pp. 43-44). Nikkyōso was opposed to the government's plan to rate individual teachers according to their ability because they saw it as a way of extending central government control over teachers. After failing to block the introduction of the scheme by strike action, Nikkyōso adopted the tactic of negotiating deals with school principals and local education administrators that allowed teachers to have a strong influence over the ratings they received. By doing this the union rendered the scheme useless as an instrument of government control. Conflict over the Teacher Efficiency Rating System set the pattern for relations between government and union during the "1955 system".

The government could exclude the union from central decision-making procedures but could not ignore its strength and influence at the *genba* i. e. the place where policy is actually implemented. Where there was no conflict between union and government, of course, there would be no organised opposition at the school level. Since we have been unable to find any disagreement between union and government over foreign language education policy, then the failure to implement policy in this area must be due to other factors. This paper proposes that these factors can be grouped under two headings: ideological-cultural factors; and structural factors. We will now deal with them in turn.

Ideological-Cultural Factors

There is no great mystery to learning a foreign language. Given time, motivation and a good learning environment, a person who does not suffer from a relevant learning disability should be able to make progress in this endeavor. If so many young Japanese are continuously putting in the time and effort, but are unable to master communicative English, then the problem must lie with the learning environment. If modern Japan has been so successful in the creation of good learning environments in mathematics and the sciences, then why has it been such a failure in the case of foreign languages? The answer to this question lies in the culture of learning in Japan. Although claims to cultural homogeneity in Japan are usually overstated, there is no doubt that useful generalizations can be made about the cultural environment that Japanese people are subject to when they are involved in teaching or learning. In 1996, anthropologists Thomas Rohlen and Gerald LeTendre compiled a series of ethnographic studies into a broad variety of teaching and learning situations in Japan and concluded

that there are common characteristics that can be ascribed to the *Japanese* learning environment. Drawing on other sources as well as my own experience as a teacher in Japan I have drawn up the following list of customs, expectations and beliefs that inhibit the teaching of language as a communicative medium in Japan. First of all I will make a general list.⁷⁾ This will be followed by a list of the ways in which these cultural traits inhibit foreign language learning in Japan.

1. The learner must show deference and respect to the teacher and must always follow his or her instructions and example. Learners are encouraged to be humble. In the early stages of learning a subject or skill they are also encouraged to be aware of what they do *not* know. They will achieve knowledge and understanding slowly but surely, by following the path that is revealed to them by their teacher.
2. Because of this emphasis on humility, it is considered immature and bad-manners for the learner to “show off” something they have learned, or be ostentatious in any way. The model of the good pupil is one who quietly and without complaining gets on with the work they have been told to do.
3. The idea that the teacher has knowledge while the pupil has none is linked to the notion that a given problem or task will only have one correct solution - the one that is known by the teacher.
4. Not only is there a difference in status between the pupil and teacher, there is also a clear hierarchy between different groups of learners based on age and how long they have been studying. Often this is formalised in the *senpai-kohai* relationship. This arrangement has the function of reinforcing social divisions that exist between the different

7) It should be noted that this list applies to the teaching of adolescents and adults. The culture of learning in kindergartens and the early years of elementary schools is quite different. See Lewis (1995).

groups or classes. It also helps to reinforce the solidarity that exists within the group. It is expected that the group will advance together through the various stages of the learning process.

5. There is the pervasive belief that "you can do it if you try". In contrast with the West where it is often believed that children have innate abilities (especially in creative subjects like music and art) the belief in Japan is that proficiency at any subject can be acquired by effort.
6. Linked to numbers 2,4 and 5 above is the strong ideology of egalitarianism that runs through the formal Japanese education system. Because all children have to be educated equally, streaming and setting by ability is frowned upon within schools. During the years of compulsory education (six years old to fifteen), academic differences *between*⁸⁾ schools are also not supposed to exist.

There now follows an explanation of how the above six points inhibit foreign language learning.

1. When they enter an English language classroom, Japanese learners wait passively to be shown what to do by the instructor.
2. Students who have progressed further with the acquisition of English communication skills than others in their class are self-conscious about displaying their skills in front of their peers. English teachers can also be inhibited in displaying their skills in front of colleagues who have limited abilities.
3. Teachers who orally ask a student a question in English as part of a class activity often have to wait while the student sits in silence, racking his or her brain for the correct answer. This phenomenon is largely a result of the fact that students are taught English first as a writt-

8) This was always more a case of *tatemaie* rather than *honne* especially where junior high schools were concerned. Even the *tatemaie* is now threatened by reforms that are introducing more choice for parents into the system.

en language. When required to focus on spoken English they have a lot of trouble getting out of the habits they learned while studying the written language. They will try to “write” answers to questions in their heads before speaking. This habit is a barrier to the development of good, conversation skills. The problem is reinforced by the cultural trait of believing that when the teacher asks a question there must be one “correct” answer.

- 4 . 5 . 6 . The egalitarian nature of education in Japan means that (at least in the formal education system) English is usually taught to mixed-ability groups. Given the fact that class size is usually large (in secondary and higher education English classes are usually consist of 35-45 students), this means that the more-able students are held back.

When other school subjects are considered in the light of the above-listed cultural traits, reasons why they have not suffered the same stunted growth as English can be understood. In mathematics and science the attitude that there is only one correct answer to a problem is not usually a barrier to progress. These are also subjects in which students can sit quietly with their heads in their books and still achieve excellent results. Clearly, the nature of communicative English as an academic subject that requires an extra dimension of activity above and beyond “book learning” creates serious problems for the established Japanese culture of learning in schools. The successful learning of sports, musical instruments, arts and crafts also requires more than just book learning of course. In different ways the Japanese culture of learning has had its impact on these areas too. Japanese musicians, for example, are known for technical excellence but are criticized for a lack of creativity in how they interpret compositions. In a similar way sports teams are praised for fitness levels, perseverance and team

spirit, but criticized for being too predictable in their tactics.

What are the reasons for the Japanese culture of learning being the way it is, and can it change over time? A detailed analysis of the origins of cultural habits and traits is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in the case of Japanese problems with English language learning I believe that there are two lines of inquiry that would be worth pursuing. In the present paper I will only introduce these briefly. Firstly there is the role that language plays in the Japanese conception of identity. Secondly there is the connection between the culture of learning in Japan, and the cultural responses made by certain social groups and classes to their place within Japan's changing political economy.

Language and identity. Japanese nationalists have traditionally stressed the importance of the Japanese language in relation to national identity. During the *Nihonjinron* boom of the 1970s (see Befu, 2001 and Dale, 1986) links were constantly made between the supposed uniqueness of the Japanese language and the uniqueness of Japanese culture. Nationalists argued that there were links both ways: a unique language brought about a unique form of consciousness, and at the same time the long isolation of the Japanese people from the rest of the world had brought about the evolution of a unique language. These notions celebrated the idea that Japan could have a linguistic barrier around itself to isolate it from the rest of the world. Linked with this notion is the zero-sum notion that if a Japanese person learns another language well, then he or she must inevitably lose a bit of their "Japaneseness." Thus, Japanese people who became too good at English aroused suspicion in some quarters. *Kikokushijo* (children educated abroad who returned to Japan) were often made to feel uncomfortable if

they spoke English (or another foreign language) too well (see Goodman, 1993, p.140). There are stories of these children artificially speaking broken English in class so as not to stand out from the other students or to avoid embarrassing the teacher whose spoken English was not as good as theirs. Some nationalist authors have called upon Japanese people not to be ashamed of their poor English aptitude. Rather they should be proud of it, and regard it as an assertion of their Japanese identity (see Suzuki 1999 and Tsuda 2000).

Culture and political economy. In a classic sociological investigation carried out in Birmingham, England in 1977, Paul Willis argued that social classes were reproduced by the school system, not due to simple indoctrination of the masses, but due to more subtle reasons. Willis followed a group of working class boys in their last months of school before leaving to take mostly low-paid manual jobs. The teachers at their school had tried to encourage them to study hard in order to "better themselves", but the group of "lads" that Willis studied rejected this advice, and instead waged a continuous battle against the authority of the teachers. They reacted this way because they knew instinctively that, while it may have been possible for one or two individuals to climb up the social ladder, it was not possible for the class as a whole to do so within the existing class system. The reality of the class system had translated itself into a working class lad's culture that rejected middle class notions of "bettering oneself". Rather than play the middle class aspirational game, which they knew they would probably lose, it would be better to take pride in one's identity as a rebel against that middle class culture.

How does Willis's analysis help us to understand the problem of English

teaching in Japan? It does so by showing us that there can be links between the culture of social classes or groups and the reality of those groups' position in the socio-economic order. Middle class teachers in 1970s England wanted the working class boys to better themselves academically, but the boys refused to co-operate "knowing" that betterment could only be achieved by a few - not the class as a whole. English teachers in present day Japan try hard to get children and adults to become good at communicative English, but the students fail to take advantage of the opportunity because they "know" that they do not need English in order to have a successful career in Japan (whatever their socio-economic status).

Crises can arise when the broader socio-economic reality changes, but the culture of the social groups discussed above remains the same. Thus, in 1980s England working class lads expecting to get the kind of jobs their forerunners in the 1970s got found that economic change had eliminated many of these jobs. Serious social problems in England's economically depressed areas followed. In Japan, the period of catch-up economic growth that came to an end in the 1980s did not require foreign language proficiency from most of the workers involved. According to the Keidanren report quoted earlier in this paper, that period is now over. Japan's economy now needs workers that can communicate in English, but the culture of mainstream society is distrustful of people who are too good at English. In the same way that working class culture in England kept back individuals who might have been able to continue their education and become qualified for better paid jobs, Japanese mainstream culture keeps back individuals who may be able to go on and improve their English skills to a higher level. For the working class lads, becoming too good at school subjects was a sign of betrayal. For Japanese people, becoming too good at English may

also be a sign that you are turning your back on your real community (see McVeigh, 2000). Teachers in both situations exhort their pupils to improve, but in both cases the social forces holding individuals back are very powerful.

Structural Factors: Exams

High school students in Japan know that they need to memorise vast lists of vocabulary as well as minute details of grammar in order to pass the very difficult English exams that will lead them into the “good” senior high schools and universities. One reason for setting such difficult exams is to make sure that only those who are willing to dedicate themselves single-mindedly to study for most of their teenage years will pass. This is the kind of dedication and stamina that most Japanese employers looked for during Japan’s period of rapid economic growth.

Structural factors make English exams very difficult to reform. The main problem is that Japan has a system of *entrance* exams rather than *leaving* exams. Every institution - senior high school or university - must set its own exam each year (and usually more than once a year). This is a heavy extra workload for the staff concerned. Usually each member of staff will have several hundred questions to mark and only a short time in which to do it. This fact dictates that entrance exams must require only short written answers. Except in very special circumstances one-on-one oral interviews to test communicative competence are impossible.⁹⁾ Therefore, the vast majority of candidates do not waste time practicing this skill. English is learned as a written language (much like Latin and ancient

9) Henrichsen writes that “administrating oral tests to the hordes of Japanese students who take the entrance exams every year would be next to impossible.” (1989, p.178)

Greek are usually learned in the West). Students wishing to learn the spoken language find that they have to start from scratch. They often find that the habits they learned in high school English class are a handicap when trying to learn communicative English.¹⁰⁾

Reforming the school curriculum to include spoken English in important exams would require drastic changes to present structures. If the system were changed to a school leaving exam like the 'A' level in England and Wales then oral interviews as part of the exam would be possible. However, universities are reluctant to give up their right to make entrance exams. In the case of private universities, entrance exam fees are a major source of income, and so it is unlikely they would willingly consent to such a drastic reform without massive compensation from the government.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the problem of how Japan has failed to improve its performance in a subject area which everyone agrees is vital to its national interests. Politically there is a consensus on the need for reform, and there is also a great demand for English language improvement from "consumers". In the face of such a consensus, why is it that efforts to improve English language teaching and learning have had such uniformly poor results? This paper has considered two areas where explanations could be sought. Firstly, it is argued that there is a cultural problem arising from cultural habits and feelings of identity that were developed in a

10) The difference between school English and English for communicative purposes is shown by the fact that the two things are described differently in Japanese. At School, students learn *eigo*. If they want to learn English they can actually use, they learn *eikaiwa*. (See McVeigh 2000).

different period in the evolution of Japan's political economy. It will take time for these habits of learning to adapt to the challenges of a new age. Secondly it is argued that the structural problems peculiar to Japan's entrance exam system make reform difficult without a whole-scale (and very expensive) restructuring of the secondary and higher education system.

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