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Sayaka Meguro

The notion of “English as an international language in the era of globalization” is widely shared in contemporary society. In Japan, English used to be a requirement to *receive* higher education in the Meiji era as classes were taught in English for modernization. Afterwards, once the medium of instruction was gradually replaced by the Japanese language at university in the first half of Meiji era, English changed its position from an essential item to receive a higher education to one of the required examination subjects to *enter* a good university (Imura, 2003). In Japan today, English cannot be said an essential language in daily life, but the continued assumption that all Japanese citizens need English as one of their mandatory subjects at school, shows that the position of English in Japan has hardly changed for almost a century.

However, the fact that Japan has had an increasing number of foreign workers and inbound tourists (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019; Japan National Tourism Organization, 2019) may have made Japanese citizens think the possibility that they will need to communicate with foreigners has increased. Although the countries where those foreign workers and tourists come from are predominately Asian, there is no common language for Asian people and therefore English seems to be considered as the language to communicate with foreigners in Japan. The concept of English as an international language has been established historically, and in recent years the spread of the Internet has enabled people to become connected in a flash globally and this may bring more opportunities for Japanese to use English as an international language.

While the importance of developing English-language proficiency is claimed in many countries, some linguistic studies such as Robert Phillipson's *English imperialism* (1992) and Alastair Pennycook's *The cultural politics of English as an international language* (1994) have challenged the idea of English as a dominant language in the world from the perspective of political power by privileging the perspective of this notion being a socially and politically constructed discourse. Phillipson (1992) questioned the idea of English being appropriate for all people and criticized the English's supposedly dominate position as an assumption of superiority to other languages based on historical colonialism and continued politically-motivated English language promotion by the United States and the United Kingdom. From the perspective of inequality, Pennycook (1994) compared how English language is approached in English-speaking countries and in the third world, and pointed out the imbalance of “local” and “global” within English education.

Those criticisms are applicable to Japan's situation where people tend to believe the

“necessity of English is increasing to communicate with foreigners” as Japan’s Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; hereafter MEXT) states:

Globalization advances at a rapid pace in politics, economics, and other fields, and we live in the age of increasing borderless flow of things, people and money. Nowadays, command of English is required in many fields, in contrast to the past when it was only needed in large companies and some industries; it is also pointed out that the level of English-language skills has a great impact on one’s future including employment and career advancement. (Commission on the development of foreign language proficiency, 2011, p. 2)

The statement was made at the beginning of “Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication” published in 2011 as part of the English education reform which aimed to develop Japanese English proficiency nationwide.

The present study aims to examine the ideology seen in Japan’s English education reform plans published in the 2000s focusing on linguistic expressions such as “global” and “English as an international language” which frequently appear in those plans. Although English education reform plans show the idea that “all Japanese people” should become able to use English, and it may be unrealistic to deny the usefulness of English language in the modern era, this paper attempts to raise concerns about the ideology that accepts “the value of English” blindly and how it may lead to Japan being frantic to enforce curriculum reforms with unnecessary pressure.

The Symbolic meaning of globalization and English in Japan

Previous studies have tried to understand the formulations of “globalization”, “internationalization”, and “English” in the Japanese context. According to Yoneoka (2002), Japanese university students answered in a survey that the quality of “an international person [*Kokusai-jin*]”, is to have language ability and to understand the global affairs, while students from other countries such as Germany, the United States, and India answered that to be broad-minded and unprejudiced are the important qualities of being “an international person”. Terasawa (2015a) examines how the notion of “globalism” is used in English education research in Japan and claims that the concept is characterized in two ways: One is considering globalization as a phenomenon of the present day, especially after the 1990s, rather than a continuous historical phenomenon accelerating over hundreds of years. The

second point is an excessive focus on the cultural influence of globalization on Japanese society, which is an idea accompanied by the notion of English as an international language. However, he points out globalization is not just cultural, but rather a political, economic, and symbolic phenomenon. Especially for Japan, he argues, the impact of the symbolic meaning of “globalization” is more meaningful because it is assumed that Japan receives less impact in terms of material globalization compared to countries which are heavily dependent on other countries.

Likewise, English language has symbolic meaning in Japan. Yanase & Koizumi (2015) state that English has an aspect of symbolic capital and this may lead Japanese people to believe that possessing high proficiency of English means having a socially high status, while lacking English proficiency is miserable. When the ideas of globalization and English language are combined, it can be described as opportunities especially in elite discourse. Yamagami & Tollefson (2011) examined Japanese universities’ online advertisements which promotes programs using English as the medium of instruction, and found that the promotional campaign repeatedly featured a discourse of “globalization-as-opportunity” such as referring “to global changes in society in its online publicity”, highlighting “employment opportunities for its graduates”, and saying the goal is to have “students learn how to take appropriate action on the global stage” (p. 23). The authors also point out English promotional policies by the Japanese government are assumed to have influenced universities to adopt such attitudes. Seargeant (2009) questions the ideology that creates symbolic meaning of English in Japan and analyzes the discourse which lets English develop its dominant position in Japanese society focusing on the field of education, the media and popular culture. Seargeant argues that language use is affected by the attitude that individuals have toward the language such as its status and value that is constructed by their life experiences.

Given the situation in Japan explained above, there is a warning that the value of English is overrated. Kubota (2018) contends that in order to promote international communication, Japan should not have an uncritical acceptance of the logic that every person should acquire English as an international common language, an idea which ignores the speaker’s first language (p. 127). Mizokami (2001) argues this idea, widely shared and thought of as an indisputable fact, actually is ideological and Japan should be aware of who benefits from the idea of English as an international language.

There is an assumption that a situation where English is essential for all Japanese people would not come because even if the world were to experience a global economic boom and the volume of Japanese trade and the number of foreign nationals entering and leaving Japan would increase, it would be still be rational to have a division of labor and have both those who engage in international work and in domestic work. Even in this situation it is unlikely for laborers dealing with domestic issues to be driven into a wave of English

(Terasawa, 2015b, p. 188-189). If the idea that “you need English as an international language in a globalizing world to survive and have better life” is merely an ideological discourse, as shown above, it is just wishful thinking for people studying English hard to feel they will succeed in life, and it is just an empty threat for people who lack English proficiency that they will fail.

English education reform plans by MEXT

Before moving on to the discussion about how the idea about English in globalization is represented in Japan’s English education reform plans, it might be helpful to take a look at the requests from Japan Business Federation, *Keidanren*, to understand how English education is closely related to national politics and economics. Keidanren (2014) asked the government for education reform with the following background:

For Japanese companies, faced with a contracting domestic market amid the falling birthrate and aging population, as well as fierce international competition with emerging market economies, it is an urgent task to nurture global talents who can take the lead in achieving innovations or play active roles in global business scenes. (Keidanren, 2014)

This proposal does not just mention globalization, but specifically mentions that they have to seek a new market overseas as the domestic market is shrinking, which is not seen in MEXT’s documents. One of the requests made in this proposal is radical reform of English education, which includes starting and teaching higher-level English at elementary schools and assessing prospective students using external English proficiency test such as TOEFL. From this proposal it can be assumed the government had pressure from economic circles.

As documents of the government’s English education reform, the present study looks at the following plans. First plan is “An Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” [*eigo ga tsukaeru nihonjin’ no ikusei no tameno koudou keikaku*] (MEXT, 2003). This plan aimed to reform the educational system within five years to train Japanese who can use English. One element of the plan was to introduce a listening proficiency test to the national examination center’s test for university admissions, and this was realized in fiscal year 2006. In 2011, the new Course of Study came into effect for all public schools in Japan, which included the introduction of compulsory English activity in elementary school and using English as medium of instruction in English class in high school. In the same year, the Commission on the development of foreign language proficiency in MEXT published “Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English

for International Communication [*kokusai kyoutsu-go toshite no eigo-ryoku koujou no tame no itsutsu no teigen to gutai saku*]” (in Japanese the title was followed by a subtitle: For development of successful communication through enrichment of motivation and opportunity to learn English). The purpose of the proposal is explained that goals set for English proficiency of students and English teachers in “An Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” in 2003 were not achieved satisfactorily, and thus the revised policies are shown in the proposal “to truly cultivate Japanese with English abilities” (p. 2).

In 2013 MEXT announced the “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization [*Gurobaru-ka ni taioushita eigo kyouiku kaikaku jisshi keikaku*]”, which aimed to enhance English education throughout elementary to secondary school, using as a point of periodization and motivation the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. In the next year 2014, MEXT gave a concrete explanation in “Report on the Future Improvement and Enhancement of English Education: Five Recommendations on the English Education Reform Plan Responding to the Rapid Globalization [*kongo no eigo kyouiku no kaizen jujitsu housaku nitsuite houkoku: Gurobaru-ka ni taioushita eigo kyouiku kaikaku no itsutsu no teigen*]”.

In 2015 MEXT published the “Plan for Enhancing the Improvement of Student’s English Proficiency [*seito no eigo-ryoku kojo suishin puran*]” stating that MEXT judged their plan in 2013 which sought “the steady improvement of students’ English proficiency”, will not be attained based on the reported students’ English proficiency in the past few years, and therefore each prefecture should set their own goals under the government’s main goal (“GOAL” 2020) and they were encouraged to make their accomplishments public every year.

Desperate need for “English proficiency due to globalization”

As of 2003, in “An Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities”, the word “globalization [*gurobaru-ka*]” was used only three times in eighteen pages of the plan. The word was used in the context of rationalizing why Japanese people have to be able to use English stating that in various aspects such as the economy, society, and personal life globalization is developing rapidly, and surviving international economic competition and cooperating in international society is necessary. In “Report on the Future Improvement and Enhancement of English Education: Five Recommendations on the English Education Reform Plan Responding to the Rapid Globalization” (MEXT, 2014a), the expressions which contain “global” were repeatedly used (the number shown in parentheses following each expression shows how many times the expression appeared in the document). The most used expression was “ongoing globalization [*gurobaru-ka no shinten*]” (10), and the similar expression “globalization accelerates [*gurobaru-ka ga kasoku*]” (1) also appeared. The expression “correspond to globalization [*gurobaru-ka ni taiou*]” (2) and the title itself

“English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization [*gurobaru-ka ni taioushita eigo kyouiku kaikaku*]” (5), both includes “correspond” and appeared the second most. Other expressions were “global human resource development [*gurobaru jinzai ikusei*]” (2), “globalizing society [*gurobaru-ka shakai*]” (1), “super global high school [*supā gurobaru hai sukuru*]” (1), and “super global university [*supā gurobaru daigaku*]” (1). According to these expressions it can be assumed the government are desperate that the Japanese nation has to meet the challenges of a rapidly and ongoing globalized society and foster globally minded human-resources at “super” globalized high schools and universities.

As seen in “An Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’” in 2003, the expression of “ongoing globalization” was used again as a reason why Japanese students need to improve their English proficiency in expressions such as “amid ongoing globalization, the development of students’ proficiency in English, a common international language, is crucial for Japan’s future” (MEXT, 2014b) and “amid rapid ongoing globalization of society, the much greater enhancement of proficiency in English is an extremely important issue” (MEXT, 2014a). These statements show how strongly the government connects globalization to the necessity of English proficiency.

In “the Plan for Enhancing the Improvement of Student’s English Proficiency” (MEXT, 2015), according to a survey done for about 70,000 of public high-school 3rd-year students, more than half of students answered that they do not like English and those answers were often seen in lower level students, while higher level students tended to answer they like English, and their image of how English could be useful in their future was clear. To these results, the report labeled “problem with learning motivation” and added as the direction of improvement that setting a clear goal from the view of what English enables them to do, so that students can feel a sense of achievement. MEXT’s interpretation of the survey results and comments from the government implies the negative attitude toward English is a “problem” and has to be “improved” because if they have a positive attitude to English, they tend to study harder to have a better score in English tests, which is the government’s goal for English education reform. It seems it is only English as a subject at school that all students have to pass a certain level of proficiency test, although there are other common proficiency tests for other subjects such as *Kanji-kentei*, the Japan Kanji (Chinese characters) Aptitude Test for Japanese language, and *Sugaku-kentei*, a test for measuring practical skills in mathematics. MEXT’s attitude toward English education reform suggests that boosting Japanese student’s English ability is as if it is “the national general mobilization act” not allowing students to dislike English as a subject.

In “Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication” published in June 2011, the disaster which happened in March was mentioned in the introduction rationalizing why Japan needs nationwide efforts to develop English proficiency as lingua franca:

After the Great East Japan Earthquake, Japan received much support from abroad, and every Japanese felt connected with the world as a member of the global community; at the same time, we rediscovered the need for dissemination of information overseas and the importance of the English language as a tool to achieve this goal. (p. 2)

Although Japan might have received support by other countries, it must be surprising for every Japanese to be told that “every Japanese felt connected with the world” in the disaster. Also, it seems too naïve to mention the historical natural disaster in the context of English language reform rationale. This use of the Great East Japan Earthquake as a rationale can be interpreted as MEXT’s desperateness to justify their belief that developing student’s English skills is an urgent duty.

Educational implications

From MEXT’s statement, it seems they are impatient with the agenda, and obsessed with the idea of making all students fluent in English due to an overgeneralization of the belief that English is essential. This can close their doors to other possibilities for effective education reform such as reinvestigating the validity of having every student learn English obligatorily from elementary school to university, and exploring a new curriculum with intensive English courses for those who are interested at other stages of their education. MEXT’s plans have been censured from diverse perspectives. “An Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” (MEXT, 2003) is said to contain contradictory ideologies such as multilingualism versus only English, international understanding versus practical English skills, and educational equity versus each school’s individuality (Butler & Iino, 2005). Also, even though the plan in 2003 failed in achieving its goal, a similar plan “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization” was announced in 2013, and the series of plans were criticized as frivolous (Sato, Torikai, Otsu, Erikawa, and Nomura, 2016).

Not only from an ideological viewpoint, the feasibility of the plans is disputed. For example, “Plan for Enhancing the Improvement of Student’s English Proficiency” (MEXT, 2015) announced that all prefectures would have to set a goal and publish their achievement each year to fulfill the government’s objectives, which is said to be too much pressure on school teachers and students whose schedules are already occupied with current school affairs and tasks. The plans seem to lack imagination in terms of requiring all schools to achieve a goal of a certain level of English proficiency regardless of what features a school has such as student’s present English level and what human and economic resources they have (Erikawa, Saito, Torikai, & Otsu, 2014; Yanase & Koizumi, 2015). A study shows that India and Thailand did not achieve a successful outcome from their English education

reform, driven from an economic agenda that English is necessary for national development, and suggests reform plans, for example the starting age of English teaching, should be based on an educational perspective, not an economic or political one if the government wants to make the reforms practicable (Hayes, 2016). This viewpoint is endorsed by studies of the relationship between policy and school practice that teachers who are the agency to put policy into practice struggle with the feeling of rejection and accommodation to the new curriculum, and tend to compromise between the existing and new educational tasks according to their own beliefs and experiences (Coburn, 2004; Kawamura, Kurebayashi, & Ochi, 2012; Schweisfurth, 2006; Tomita, 2014). The key for the practicable policy can be how convincing and harmonious it is for the existing school policy. MEXT's plan seems to have a strong will to become successful from its rhetoric, however, as long as it has a top-down approach it will be difficult to achieve their goals. In reality, plans MEXT proposed in early 2000s such as the introduction of external English proficiency tests for university entrance selection turned out not to happen, and this led to the conclusion that MEXT's plan lacked in scrupulousness and validity to convince the individuals involved of its worth.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the ideology behind Japan's English education reform plans focusing on the idea of globalization and English as an international language. In the reform plans, the concept of globalization is immediately linked to English and the language is considered essential to survive in the global world, which leads to the idea that all Japanese people should become able to use English. However, studies have suggested that the idea that "the necessity of English is increasing in the global era" is merely a discourse supported by the government and the public without scientific evidence. The Japanese government seems to have never doubted the idea and repeated similar English reforms in the 2000s. However, reflecting that their plans seem unsuccessful based on what has been achieved and the implications from studies about education policy and its practice, it would be worthwhile for the government to re-examine English education policy privileging pedagogical rather than ideology.

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