

**Attitudes to the Introduction of English into the
Primary School Curriculum in Japan:
A Comparative Study**

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Abstract

The study of the English language was introduced into the Japanese upper-primary curriculum in 2011. The adoption of this subject has not been without controversy. The English language has a history of displacing and replacing languages in other countries. However it is not considered that language shift to English could occur in Japan. The teaching of English may be associated with certain cultural values, because there is no such thing as a culturally neutral language. Accordingly, a possible conflict exists between the desire to increase the next generation's English proficiency, and the awareness of English as a language with a history of intrusion into other cultures.

The introduction of English into the Japanese Primary School curriculum from April 2011 saw the implementation of a major shift in language education policy. This change in policy would appear to facilitate the learning of English by the next generation, since it has been well-argued that the earlier the commencement of a foreign language, the more complete the ultimate attainment. Japan has also recently made incremental steps towards recognizing the importance of English to the nation's future prosperity, with some multinational corporations (e.g., Nissan, Rakuten; Asahi Shimbun, 2010) even setting the goal of adopting English as the exclusive language used in these workplaces within a few years. And yet, perhaps surprisingly to many expatriates, the introduction of English into the primary curriculum has not received unqualified support from within the domestic community; instead, it has been criticized from a number of directions. A common objection is that English may be important for international business and relations, but it is seldom used within Japan. Hence, although children would receive increased exposure to English, the usefulness of this exposure to their future adult lives is questionable for the majority of the population, who will live and work within Japan.

Another concern expressed during opposition debates to public policy is that increased importance should be attached to subjects more directly connected to Japan's future, including Computer Literacy and Ecology. Or similarly, that there are other subjects in the primary curriculum that are more important, including: History, Ethics, Science, and Japanese. This type of resistance to changes in language education policy has seen parallels in Australia's linguistic evolution. Clyne (2005), for example, describes an attitude he identifies as the "monolingual mindset," in which the role of language education is fundamentally questioned in the face of increased demands for English literacy. Yet another major source for a range of substantial objections to the more widespread use of English in Japan may be the culture that accompanies the language, rather than the language itself. Languages are never culturally neutral, and in many ways the increased adoption of English tends towards the simultaneous import of a set of associated Western

values. Hence the issue of promoting the importance of English education is contentious and significantly more complex than at first appears. In this paper, we would like to investigate some of these complexities further, and present a number of relevant viewpoints from both linguistic and educational perspectives.

Comparison with Foreign Language Education in Two Countries

A useful comparison can be drawn to the state of English language education in South Korea, where English was introduced into the primary curriculum in 1997, starting at the third grade (Kim, 2011). Seven years afterwards, General Proficiency tests were conducted on the Year 10 students (who started English in primary school) and the Year 11 students (who did not). The effectiveness of the new policy was demonstrated in the test results, with the Year 10 group achieving a higher average proficiency than the Year 11 group (Kim, 2011). In recent years, enthusiasm for English education there has also further increased, as well as the financial investment, with South Korea now apparently spending three times as much on English education as Japan (Park, 2009). Further, and in contrast to the concern some Japanese currently express about the possible detrimental effects of the second language ('L2', English) on the first language ('L1', Japanese), some Korean parents even now fear the reverse situation, that is the potential negative influence of the L1 (Korean) on the acquisition of the L2 (English) (Park, 2009).

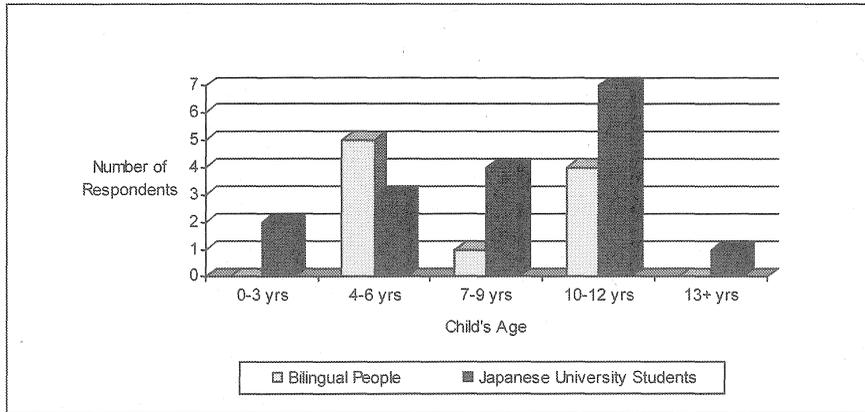
The situation of foreign language policies in Australia is markedly different, but serves the useful purpose of illustrating the direction taken by some of the more multicultural countries. Typically, programs of "additional languages" have been adopted in curricula in many English-speaking countries. For example, in the Australian national language policy Lo Bianco outlines social goals such as "cultural and intellectual enrichment", economic benefits related to "vocations and foreign trade", promoting equality through "social justice and overcoming disadvantages" and external goals concerning "Australia's role in the region and the world" (1987, p.11-12). Similarly, Clyne has indicated that

the benefits of learning additional languages are “social, cultural, economic and cognitive” (2005, p.63), and also takes a very strong position on the disadvantages of monolingualism: “it is monolingualism that is unaffordable because it denies some people social justice” (ibid). The national policy documents clearly reflect the preference for an early start to second (or foreign) language programs: “the fourth year of formal schooling has been adopted as an appropriate starting point for introducing the study of a second language” (MCEETYA, 1998, p.2).

Opposition to the Study of English in Japanese Primary Schools

Given the examples provided by South Korea and Australia, it would appear that Japan was taking a step in a similar direction by introducing English earlier into the school curriculum. However, the 2011 introduction of English into upper primary school has received some serious criticism domestically. Otsu (2007), for example, stresses the need for English education to be delayed until Junior High School because it could be detrimental to children’s acquisition of the L1 (Japanese). Similarly, Bostwick (2001) indicates that there is still a view held by some educators in Japan that the study of English may negatively impact upon either the children’s L1 or their general academic progress. To investigate this question further, Shimizu (2009) conducted a survey of 13 bilinguals from a range of language backgrounds, living in Australia, and 25 Japanese students living in Japan, asking them their opinions about the optimal timing for beginning the study of a second (or foreign) language. As can be seen from the graphs below, the Australian bilingual respondents considered the optimal starting age to be considerably younger than the Japanese students.

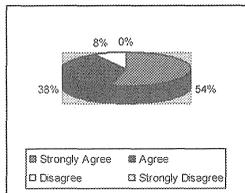
Figure 1: What age should children start to learn a Second Language?



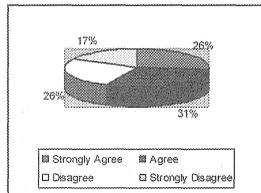
Source: Shimizu (2009), p.19

Figure 2: Do you think that the earlier children learn a second language, the better they will acquire it?

2a: Bilingual respondents in Australia



2b: Japanese students in Japan



Source: Shimizu (2009), pp. 22-23

Shimizu (2009) distinguishes between the learning of English by bilingual children inside and outside of Japan. Children inside Japan

receive adequate L1 support and are therefore highly unlikely to suffer any L1 attrition. In contrast, children outside of Japan may suffer L1 attrition because of the relative lack of L1 support. Shimizu's study compares Australian bilinguals who have been raised in a bilingual family with Japanese students who have learnt the L2 in the course of formal schooling, so the results should be interpreted with a degree of caution. However the results provide insights into the differences in opinion toward bilingualism between those who have acquired it and those who have not; those who have acquired bilingualism are more supportive of it than those who have not, suggesting perhaps a fear of the unknown on behalf of the latter.

Despite widespread fears of the potential threats caused by the implementation of English language education in Japan, Bostwick's (2001) study of an English language immersion program in a Japanese elementary school revealed that the children suffered no detriment to their L1, even though English and Japanese are languages that are very distant linguistically. Bostwick attributed his findings (to some degree) to the incorporation of supplementary L1 literacy classes within the school program. However, the argument that the study of a second language can be detrimental to the mastery of the first language in children is by no means limited to Japan. Clyne, for example, described the same attitude as it was occurring in Australia:

The monolingual mindset has, however, succeeded in creating the myth of the overcrowded school curriculum that has no space for any language other than English and the one that presupposes that learning and knowing another language detracts from English literacy. (2005, p. XI)

Issues of Infringing Cultural Values

Researchers and critics have argued that there is a close link between acquiring another country's language and importing the cultural values that are embedded within that language. Wierzbicka (2006)

discusses this situation at some length: “There is a widespread view that English can be used worldwide as a culturally neutral medium of communication, ... [but] this is largely an illusion: there are some values, assumptions, and expectations that one has to subscribe to, at least provisionally, to learn English” (p.308-9). She continues, arguing that the question therefore that needs answering is: “Can a country effectively say “yes” to English and “no” to all the assumptions embedded in it? To some extent, no doubt, it can. But evidence suggests that when this happens, English diversifies, and there emerge ‘nativized’ varieties of it that are no longer culturally ‘Anglo’” (p.311). Indeed, another famous linguist goes further to suggest that a language and its speakers could even be considered as inseparable: “Language has no existence apart from the people who speak it” (Crystal, 2009, p.74). In conclusion, while the degree of cultural infringement resulting from the process of importing a foreign language should be investigated further, the key point is that it is an entirely valid concern, since: “English is not a culturally neutral *lingua franca*” (Phillipson, 2002, p.12). Perhaps instead, therefore, and due to the lack of any ‘culturally neutral’ version of English, English (and other foreign languages) should be considered as ‘agents of values,’ some aspects of which may be incompatible with the host culture.

Although important studies (e.g., Bostwick, 2001) have indicated no detriment to the L1 was found by introducing English as an L2 at the primary level, there sometimes appears to be a perceived threat to the original national identity. This is a type of broad cultural infringement may be concerned with the loss of the uniqueness of the host culture. Indeed, the recent trend of increasing globalization has not necessarily been beneficial. This concern with the loss of the uniqueness of a culture may not be a general resistance to the learning of a foreign language, but rather a specific form of resistance to the domination of the English language (as the international language of business and trade) and the associated capitalist Anglo-American values. The increasing domination of English has, in fact, been shown to have long been associated with language loss, and therefore also with the loss of important aspects of cultural identity. McDermott (2011), for example, describes the gradual

shift from using Irish to using English as it occurred in Ireland. In the 1600's, Gaelic was the most commonly spoken language but by the 1800's, English had become the language of political power, and subsequently further evolved to become the dominant national language. Viewing the loss of linguistic identity as an important cultural detriment, McDermott calls for the revival of the Irish language in order to regain national identity and to provide an alternative means of communication.

Similarly, Phillipson (1992) describes the penetration of English into the Scandinavian countries, to the extent that it is now considered to be a second language there, rather than a foreign language (p.25). He makes an important distinction between English serving to 'replace' or to 'displace' the L1. Displacement refers to the dominance of a particular language in a particular domain, as he argues is the case with the use of English in Scandinavia (Phillipson, 1992, p.27). Displacement has also recently been evidenced in some locations in Japan, where it has become the language of workplace communication at a few large multinational companies, such as Uniqlo and Rakuten (Asahi Shimbun, 2010). In the face of these types of threats caused by English domination, there have been a number of successful language (L1) protection schemes initiated, such as those to protect the further loss of Irish (McDermott, 2011, p.28) and Welsh (Crystal, 2009, p.26). Crystal (1997) also comments that the awareness of the emergence of a lingua franca has in many cases stimulated efforts to protect languages which may otherwise have received little support for their maintenance.

Language Shift over Generations

Clyne (2003) discusses the process of language 'shift' (to English from various immigrant languages) as it occurred over several generations in Australia. He documents this according to the number of generations resident and the different immigrant language communities. In the case of the Japanese immigrants, the shift to English in the first generation was only 15% (p.25). This compares to the group with the highest rate of shift (from the Netherlands) at 62%, through to the group with the lowest rate

of shift (from Macedonia) at 3%. In the second generation, the shift from Japanese to English in endogamous families was 5%, and in exogamous families was 69% (p.28). This indicates that language shift from Japanese to English does not necessarily occur after relocation to another country, and may not even happen in the second generation. Accordingly, there is clearly no possibility of language shift occurring to children who remain resident in Japan and who are taught an L2 from the upper primary level.

The process of language shift is reported by Clyne as it typically occurs within immigrant communities over several generations, but there are other causes of language shift that we need to mention. For example, language shift may also occur when political forces cause the use of a language to be considered unfavourable. Sloboda (2009) reports on the case of the Belarusian language, which has lost significant ground to the Russian language in Belarus. But once again, such instances are clearly distinct from the status of the English language in Japan, where Japanese is clearly the prestige language and there appears limited chance of anything causing the domestic community to shift 'en masse' into using English (other than the few examples occurring at corporate multinationals, as mentioned above). English just cannot be considered to have the political force in Japan that it had in Ireland, or that Russian has had in Belarus. Therefore it is not the possibility of language shift that must be guarded against, but rather the possible transmission of unwanted cultural values.

Reasons for the Inclusion of English in the Primary Curriculum

One cannot criticize resistance to the introduction of English in the primary curriculum if it is in order to protect the traditional culture from detrimental values. However, the issue of protecting cultural values needs to be disentangled from the question of when is the best time to learn a foreign language. The broader question of whether to study English (or not) is an issue that would tend to be administered within Japan by the policy-makers. But for the purposes of our study, once the decision has been taken to include English in the school curriculum, it

should then be implemented as effectively and efficiently as possible. And given the significant linguistic distance between English and Japanese, it would appear advisable to begin the study of English at the primary school level, since an early start is likely to achieve the most effective results. The reason for this is not political, but rather that linguistic research has established there might be periods in children's lives when language acquisition is more easily facilitated than others. For example, Crystal (2009) describes the negative impact of a relocation away from Wales (at age ten years) on the "crucial period of consolidation" in Welsh (p.23). He argues that the early teens are a critical time for development of vocabulary and grammar in the language acquisition process. There are, however, others who continue to question the existence of a 'critical period' for second language acquisition (see: Abello-Contesse, 2009). Hence, there remain a range of opinions regarding the optimal age to begin the study of an L2.

With regards to a number of the other issues discussed so far, there are alternative ways to view many of the same situations. For example, Burton (2011) argues the common claim made by Japanese speakers that they cannot speak English even after completing six years of compulsory study is acceptable from the position of "threat to national identity" (p.32); however, she suggests that the act of becoming bilingual may in fact provide for an alternative identity in the new linguistic community. So L2 acquisition does not need to be conceptualised in terms of 'displacing' or 'replacing' the L1. This position is also developed in Crystal (2009), where it is argued that rather than constituting a 'threat' to identity, the acquisition of a foreign language can provide an alternative 'identity', which allows for new ways to express different parts of oneself. According to this viewpoint then, there is no 'loss' of the person's original identity, so much as the development of additional options for new forms of expression:

When you learn a foreign language you adopt a new persona.
You don't just talk differently, you hold yourself differently,
you look different, you talk about different things and in

different ways. (p. 35)

Concluding Remarks

We have discussed in this paper how the learning of an L2 by children in primary school has sometimes been opposed in both Australia and Japan. However anecdotal evidence, and Shimizu's (2009) study suggest that this resistance may be more widespread in Japan than in Australia. In the past, English has been associated with language shift in immigrant communities in Australia (Clyne, 2003), and with the decline of Irish in Ireland in the 1800's (McDermott, 2011). The associations of English with language shift and hegemony are well-known, and may (to a limited extent) account for the lack of support for early English education in Japan evidenced in Shimizu's survey. However, Bostwick's (2001) study of English language bilingual education in Japan demonstrated no evidence of L1 attrition actually occurring.

Given the current status of English as a global lingua franca, there is a straightforward case to be made for the importance of including English in the early education curriculum. Currently English is virtually compulsory in middle school and high school in Japan (Maher et al., 2010, p. 37), and features prominently at the end of secondary schooling through the commonplace use of high-stakes examinations, including university entrance exams and the TOEIC test (which can be used to secure employment opportunities). The status of English in late schooling suggests strongly that crucial questions concerning the optimal timing to commence English education need to be considered and addressed. Once again, the evidence appears to suggest that introducing English in primary school is likely to result in increased proficiency levels by the completion of schooling.

Finally, while some may consider the earlier introduction of English threatens to negatively impact upon Japanese acquisition, the English language should alternatively be conceptualized as providing for an additional linguistic identity, whereby new forms of expression can be realised. It also appears most likely that acquisition processes for L1

acquisition typically occurring in the L1 country are independent of acquisition processes for L2 acquisition occurring in the L1 country. There hence appears to be no sense in which the acquisition of the two languages could be considered to be in conflict. However, it is also accepted that languages are never culturally neutral, so some resistance may remain on the grounds of perceived cultural influence occurring in children's formative years.

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