

Foreign language curricula in Japanese high schools: A case study in Miyagi prefecture

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the foreign language curricula in Japanese high schools for the purpose of gaining insight into alternative views of foreign language education. Teachers, administrators, and staff at two high schools in Miyagi Prefecture were interviewed. Teachers were asked about testing, placement procedures, standards, textbook selection, and educational requirements of English teachers. Administrators and staff were asked about facilities, situational needs, and the hiring process for assistant language teachers (ALTs). The results suggest that, while educators in the United States would have much to gain from adopting the systematic and comprehensive approach to foreign language education, the Japanese system would benefit from reforming standards so that they are more in line with expectations at the university level.

Introduction

The Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program was created in 1987 with the dual purpose of improving Japan's foreign language education and promoting internationalization at the grass-roots level (JET Program, 2006). To accomplish these goals, the Japanese government recruits foreign nationals from 55 different countries to spend between one and five years immersed in the local communities. While participants can apply to one of three positions –Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), Coordinator for International Relations (CIR), or Sports Exchange Advisor (SEA)– 93 percent of all participants are ALTs teaching English in public schools throughout Japan (JET Program, 2006).

As a result, the ALT experience provides a rare glimpse into Japan's public school system and a unique perspective from which to explore its foreign language curricula. Such a system is worth examining in detail precisely because it is not easily accessible to western educators and administrators. Even so, the study of a long running and globally renowned exchange program may offer additional benefits.

Despite Japan's long term commitment to improving English education, few from within the system believe it is accomplishing this goal. Toshitaka Sato, a Teachers' Consultant at the Miyagi Board of Education said that "in spite of our continuing efforts, I don't think [JETs] have succeeded in boosting the quality of students' learning" (2007). While the program was expanded in 2003 in response to growing demand, there is reason to believe this trend is reversing, as many prefectural and local school boards throughout Japan are abandoning the JET scheme in favor of alternative programs. Most noticeable is Kanagawa prefecture and Kawasaki city, two of Japan's larger contracting

prefecture

organizations who have stopped recruiting new JETs as of 2006 in favor of privately contracted ALTs. Beginning in September 2007, the Miyagi Board of Education will no longer be hiring new JETs as well (A Sato, personal communication, April 25, 2007).

Not only will a case study of the foreign language curricula in Japanese high schools enable us to gain insight into alternative views of curriculum design, the controversial nature of the JET Program and its impact on the Japanese education system will allow us to assess both the strengths and weaknesses of English education in Japan. To this end, the following study will be based on two high schools in Miyagi Prefecture: Sendai Third Boys' and Third Girls' High School.

Overview

High Schools

Japanese high schools are generally comprised of three grade levels: first, second and third grades. Compared to American high schools, the first, second and third grades roughly correspond to the tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades respectively. Students are typically between 15 and 18 years old. Though high school is not compulsory, "97 percent of students continue their education at this level" (Brown & Grace, 2006).

For most high schools in Japan, the academic year begins in April and ends in March with two terms or semesters. The first semester runs from early April to late September. During this term, students will have a four or five-week break in August and resume study at the beginning of September. The second term runs from early October to early March, with a ten-day break in the winter. There is also a two-week break in March and about twelve national holidays distributed throughout the year.

According to Ellington, “Japanese students spend at least six weeks longer in school each year than their American counterparts” (2005). However, Ellington later notes that the school week was shortened in 2002 when students were no longer required to attend half-days on Saturday. Therefore, the actual time students spend in class may be less.

Japanese high schools are also specialized. A student planning to attend a university will apply to an academic school, while a student interested in learning a trade or skill, such as computer graphics, might choose to attend a technical or industrial high school. Rather than entering a high school based on its geographical location, students must take entrance exams and compete for admission based on an institution’s specialty or level of academic achievement.

One feature that is unique to Japanese high schools is the use of ALTs. Assistant language teachers design and teach conversational English lessons along with a Japanese teacher of English (JTE). They may also be responsible for correcting homework or in-class assignments, judging essay competitions, helping students with speeches, university applications, entrance exams, and participating in an after-school English club. ALTs do not teach writing, reading, or grammar classes, only oral communication.

In Japan, ALTs and regular public school teachers are *koumuin* workers, which is similar to a civil servant or public employee. The primary difference is that they are forbidden to accept monetary compensation for any work they might perform outside of their normal teaching duties. Even so, ALTs who are part of the JET scheme may occasionally have other responsibilities that are not related to language teaching whatsoever. For example, Doug Dupree, an ALT at Ishinomaki high school in Miyagi

prefecture

prefecture is occasionally asked to host international parties or attend international gatherings as a representative of the United States (personal communication, February 10, 2007).

Sendai's Third High Schools

Sendai Third Boys' High School (Boys' school hereafter) is an academic, boy's-only school located in north Sendai. There are approximately 980 students, and unlike the vast majority of public schools in Sendai and throughout Japan, students wear plain clothing instead of uniforms. According to Shingo Akihiko, head of first grade, "Students were required to wear uniforms when it opened, but there was some kind of revolt at [the Boys' school] and three other schools in Sendai" (personal communication, January 17, 2007). Sendai Third Girls' High School (Girls' school hereafter) is an academic, girl's only high school located in south Sendai. There are approximately 920 students, and uniforms at the Girls' school are mandatory.

Since the schools are academic, the atmosphere tends to be serious. After the 2006 graduation, approximately 98 percent of the boys and 92 percent of the girls enrolled in a university or college (E. Fukushima, personal communication, March 30, 2007).

Students also spend much of their after school time participating in academic or Japanese cultural activities, such as the English club, math club, *shodou* (calligraphy), *sado* (tea ceremony) or *ikebana* (flower arrangement). Some students are also active in a wide range of sports clubs, such as badminton, handball, baseball, rugby, *judo*, and *kendo* (Japanese fencing).

A student's choice in activity plays a significant role in the way they are placed and assigned to a class. Students are first divided based on their entrance examination scores, which cover a wide range of subjects, such as math, science, English, and Japanese. Administrators average a student's scores and assign them to a group based on this average. For example, if a student scores high in mathematics but low in English, he or she will be placed in a medium level group. Therefore, low, medium or high *averages* are placed in low, medium, or high ability groups respectively (C. Takahashi, personal communication, January 10, 2007).

Students are further subdivided depending on the sport and after school activity in which they choose to participate. At the Boys' school, this subdivision is based on whether students will join the kendo or rugby club. At the Girls' school, this subdivision is based on whether the students will join clubs related to music, calligraphy, or fine arts.

In American high schools, students typically move to new classrooms between periods depending on the subject they are learning and the level at which they are placed. At the Boys' and Girls' schools, students stay in the same classroom throughout the day, regardless of the subject. In fact, a student will stay in the same class of students for the duration of their high school experience, even if their performance improves or declines over the years (C. Takahashi, personal communication, January 10, 2007).

Teachers, rather than students, move to new classrooms between periods. In addition, teachers are often assigned to instruct the same class of students every year. Generally, as a class of students progress to the next grade, the same teacher will move with them, instructing the same group of students until they graduate. After graduation, the teachers will either go back to the first grade and repeat the cycle with a new group of

students or be transferred to another school, depending on the institution's individual needs. The high school's *kochosensei* (principal) is the ultimate determiner of where and how teachers are moved within the system, and exceptions to this general practice are commonplace.

Class Structure

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) divides foreign language education into two categories: English I/II and Oral Communication I/II (MEXT, 2003). They offer the following guidelines with respect to curriculum design:

- (1) Aural/Oral Communication II should, in principle, be taught after Aural/Oral Communication I, and English II after English I.
- (2) Reading and writing should, in principle, be taught after either Aural/Oral Communication I or English I. (MEXT, 2003)

At Sendai's third schools, reading is a subdivision of English I and is taught at the same time as Oral Communication I; however, writing is taught only after English I and Oral Communication I (C. Takahashi, personal communication, January 10, 2007). The following table illustrates this arrangement:

MEXT Requirement	Resulting Class
English I	Reading & Grammar
Oral Communication I	Communicative lessons with ALT (First year students only)
English II	Reading & Grammar
Oral Communication II	Writing & Composition (Second and third year students only)

The result is that students take a combination of three English classes: reading, grammar, and Oral Communication. However, for second and third year students, “oral communication” is actually taught as a writing and composition class, even though it is still labeled, “oral communication.” ALTs teach only Oral Communication I (OCI) for first year students. Japanese English teachers teach Oral Communication (OCII) for second and third year students.

Needs Assessment

Brown (1995) makes an important distinction between situational needs and language needs (p. 40). Situational needs are those related to the physical resources students require in order to learn a second language, while language needs refer to “linguistic behaviors” that are related to the direct process of language learning. In this case, the situational needs at both schools are significant.

The Boys’ school was built in 1964, and only a few rooms were originally equipped with modern conveniences, such as electricity and plumbing. Over the years, the school has undergone many improvements and additions, but its declining condition has prompted the city to begin constructing a new building, which is scheduled for completion in 2009. When finished, the school will be coeducational and will likely change its name to “Sendai Third School.”

The situation at the Girls’ school is very similar. Built in 1983, it is slightly newer but also in a constant state of disrepair. Sendai city is also in the process of constructing a new building for the Girls’ school, which is scheduled for completion in 2010. At this time, it will also become a coeducational institution; however, many of the

parents and students are resisting this change and are organizing to maintain a girls-only status.

The new facilities at both schools will contribute to the students' English language learning needs. At the Boys' school in particular, students often complain that their buildings are old, rundown and dirty; however, the new facilities should provide the students with a clean and comfortable environment in which to learn.

Both schools will have at least two multimedia rooms, which will have CD players for the students to listen to recorded dialogues and other forms of spoken English. They will also contain DVD players so the students can watch movies, newscasts and other programs in English. The new schools will also provide wider access to computers and network connectivity, allowing easy access to a wide-range of authentic, written English on the Internet. The computers can also be used in connection with projectors and other media devices so that the ALT and JTE can use this technology for various classroom activities.

The language needs at both schools are well established. According to Chika Takahashi, ALT supervisor at the Boys' school, "the students' main academic needs are university preparation" (personal communication, January 10, 2007). In Japanese universities, English proficiency is part of the entrance requirements. Therefore, regardless of a students' major or course of study, they must demonstrate a minimal level of English ability by passing a standardized university entrance exam. Almost all students applying to a university throughout Japan will take what is known as the *sentashiken* (Center Exam). Students must also prepare for college level English courses, which are part of the university general education requirements.

According to Eiko Takada, head of the English department at the Boys' school, native English speakers are another language need at Sendai's Third schools (personal communication, 2007). While Japanese teachers of English are generally well trained and educated, they are rarely able to provide fluent, natural spoken English; therefore, the Miyagi Board of Education employs ALTs.

Goals and Objectives

Brown (1995) describes a curriculum's goals as the "general statements of the program's purposes" (p.71). According to the standards listed by MEXT, this begins with students developing their "basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages" (MEXT, 2003).

However, according to Chika Takahashi, skills such as "practical communication abilities" are not enough. She says that "even non-academic high schools have to achieve more than what's required by the Ministry of Education" (personal communication, January 10, 2007). This is primarily because university, college, and specialty school entrance requirements demand more from students; therefore, high schools raise their standards so they can adequately prepare students for post-secondary education.

While the relationship between curriculum goals and university preparation can sometimes motivate teachers and students to achieve more, it can also motivate them to achieve less. As previously mentioned, a student planning to attend a college or university in Miyagi Prefecture will most likely take the Center Exam. The Center Exam does not have a speaking component whatsoever and only a limited listening component;

therefore, teachers and administrators have little incentive to make speaking and listening skills a priority among the larger English education goals.

Minae Oyama, second-year English teacher at the Girls' school, offers a different, though minority view. She says that the goal of English education at the Girls' school is to enrich the students' lives. Learning English teaches them about their own language and culture, and it teaches them new ways to solve problems. Students need that even if they don't go to college (personal communication, February 12, 2007).

Brown (1995) describes a curriculum's objectives as the specific aims of the program. However, Graves (2000) describes a program's objectives as individual statements "about how the goals will be achieved" (p. 76). MEXT outlines these objectives:

- a) To pronounce English with due attention to the basic characteristics of English sounds such as rhythm and intonation.
- b) To understand the role of nonverbal means of communication such as gestures and use them effectively in accordance with the situation and the purpose.
- c) To discuss or debate a wide variety of topics. (Mext, 2003)

Again, most teachers at Sendai's Third schools regard these objectives only as a starting point. Activities must also incorporate the four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking; however, reading and writing are stressed above listening and speaking due to what and how students are tested on university entrance exams. In addition, ALTs must create activities that develop skills students need for success at the university level, such as how to summarize text or how to debate. The Girls' school also has ten required conversation topics that ALTs must integrate into their lessons.

Testing:

At both schools, students take English achievement and proficiency tests throughout the year. According to Chika Takahashi, there are four English-related exams each semester, eight per year (personal communication, January 10, 2007). Two are general achievement exams given at the middle and end of the term, one proficiency test for English I / II, and one proficiency test for Oral Communication I / II. Quizzes are given three times a week in English I / II, and listening quizzes are given only once per week in Oral Communication I / II.

Generally, ALTs are an integral part of the major oral communication proficiency exams, though they are rarely used for the smaller, more frequent tests and quizzes. At times, the ALT will be asked to develop the larger exams entirely. Other times, the ALT will work with a JTE to determine test material or to develop an appropriate format. ALTs are also asked to administer the listening portion of the oral communication tests. This is accomplished by recording a prepared monologue/dialogue for playback in multiple classrooms, or the ALT may visit the classroom on test day and read the material in person.

Teachers incorporate many different testing methods, including multiple choice, fill in the blank, short answer, and sentence completion; however, they do not use essays. Tests receive a score from 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. Eighty percent of the students' scores come from the major proficiency and achievement exams at the beginning and end of the terms. The remaining 20 percent is calculated by combining the students' quizzes, homework, and scores for attitude and behavior.

Materials

Graves (2005) says that “materials development encompasses decisions about the actual materials you use—textbooks, tests, pictures, worksheets, videos, and so on, as well as the activities students do, and how the materials and activities are organized into lessons” (p. 150). At Sendai’s Third schools, ALTs are required to adapt a large portion of their lessons and teaching materials from the oral communication textbooks. Yet this can be somewhat challenging because the textbooks and manuals are usually, though not exclusively, written in Japanese.

According to Ellington, “All Japanese texts are written and produced in the private sector; however, the texts must be approved by the Ministry of Education” (2005). At Sendai’s third schools, teachers select new textbooks every year for most classes. In addition, the texts are chosen in December by the teachers from the previous grade level. For example, the first grade teachers will choose the textbooks for the second grade class; the second grade teachers will choose for the third grade class, and the third grade teachers will choose for the first grade class. The reason is because teachers usually advance to the next grade level at the start of the new term.

Oral communication textbooks are typically organized around topics that are relevant to Japanese students. The first lesson, for example, tends to be an introduction lesson where students learn how to meet and greet their ALT in English. Topics usually relate directly to what students might be experiencing in school, such as the kind of after-school club they want to join, what their favorite hobbies are, Sports Day, or their school festival, which is held every year in September. More general topics are covered as well, such as weather, directions, and health and sickness. Each lesson is typically made up of vocabulary, reading, and one or more listening and speaking activities. Most lessons tend

to cover the four skills, though more weight tends to be given to reading and writing than to listening and speaking.

ALTs have other sources from which to plan and design their lessons. The Council of Local Authorities and International Relations (CLAIR) manage and implement the JET Program along with three other government agencies. Every year, CLAIR culls together dozens of lesson plans contributed by JETs throughout Japan and publishes them in a resource handbook called, *The Resource Materials and Teaching Handbook*. The lessons are generally games, puzzles and some communicative activities that cover many topics, ranging from good to poor in quality. One, for example, is called “Decision at Sea,” a fun vocabulary building activity that uses a combination of Total Physical Response and pair work (Brown & Grace, 2006, p. 102). However, another activity, “Guess Again,” is merely a variation on the popular word guessing game known as hangman (p. 123).

There are many similar resources for JETs printed by MEXT and private publishing companies that ALTs can purchase at local foreign book stores or online. Teachers at both the Boys’ and Girls’ schools encourage ALTs to use the oral communication textbooks and other materials only as a starting point, a way to generate ideas for presenting topics that are more relevant to the schools’ objectives and to what teachers feel is most relevant in preparing them for examinations. These topics are generally chosen the previous year and are only loosely based on chapters from the students’ textbooks.

Teacher Qualifications

The JET Program has very specific and lengthy eligibility criteria, such as age, health, residency, fluency, and interest in Japan (JET Program, 2006). However, ALTs that are part of the JET scheme are not necessarily required to have teaching experience or Japanese language ability. In terms of education, applicants are required only to have a bachelor's degree in any subject area from an accredited college or university. New in 2007 is the option to renew for a fourth and fifth year, subject to a review process that may involve additional interviews, demonstrated Japanese language ability, and demonstrated need on the part of the contracting organization --usually the local Board of Education (CLAIR News, 2006).

In contrast, Japanese English teachers must go through a teacher licensing process at the same time they are earning their university degree (C. Takahashi, personal communication, January 10, 2007). During their final year of coursework, prospective teachers spend three to four months in a public school as an assistant teacher. After graduating and successfully completing the training program, teachers in Miyagi Prefecture must also take the *kyouin saiyo shaken*, a two-step qualifying exam that is offered only once per year. The first step is a written exam given in late July. The second test is given in late September and involves both an oral interview in English and a written essay. Japanese English teachers are not required to undergo any additional training or review once they have successfully fulfilled these requirements and become regular, licensed teachers.

Teaching Activities: Techniques and Exercises

The standards established by MEXT require language activities to be done in such a way that the students are both “receivers and senders of information, ideas, etc”

(MEXT, 2003). Specifically, activities must be topical and interesting, organized and presented so that information is sent and received by listening and reading, and they must be presented in a way that is correct for the situation and context of the conversation (MEXT, 2003).

The training manuals and information resources that JETs receive upon arrival stress the importance of creating and using communicative activities. However, JTEs use the grammar translation method almost exclusively for reading and grammar classes. Despite this, they are generally open to the idea of incorporating communicative activities when teaching with ALTs.

Some teachers like to participate in the lesson designing process, but some do not. Teachers who choose to play an active role in the lesson design process typically choose a topic and suggest one or two activities that also relate to the reading or grammar classes. The ALT uses their input in concert with the textbook and other material to design the lesson for the whole class. Balancing the desires and expectations of the JTEs with the desires and expectations of the ALT can be daunting, but a constant flow of communication and flexibility make it a workable and worthwhile process.

Not only are ALTs responsible for designing and implementing each lesson, they must also assign roles for each Japanese teacher. This does not necessarily mean that JTEs shoulder half of the lesson equally. Generally, the ALT will have more of an active role in presenting the lesson than the JTE. In some situations, the JTE will rely entirely on the ALT in both designing and presenting the lesson. However, in a team-teaching environment, ALTs must keep in mind that JTEs have a role to play and should design lessons accordingly.

Program Evaluation

In November 2006, MEXT announced that about 9 percent of all high schools in Japan were missing some credits and failed to meet the national curriculum requirements. Sendai Third Boys' high school was one of these schools, and the situation caused a great deal of anxiety among the teachers and students because, without the proper number of credits, students would not be able to graduate (Ito, 2006). The mistake was honest, and requiring students to take make up credits during the winter break easily rectified the problem. However, this setback was a direct result of local Boards of Education administrators failing to properly evaluate their curriculum requirements against the national standards.

Both Brown (1995) and Graves (2000) see program evaluation as a continuous process. It allows administrators to assess the curriculum as it adjusts to new situations, such as changes in student needs, educational facilities, or, in this case, revisions in the national standards. It is also the point where teachers and administrators can determine if students are learning what they set out to learn.

One important aspect of program evaluation is what Brown refers to as summative evaluation: it is not only an assessment of the goals but whether the program has the right goals from the beginning. This subject is often debated among English teachers in Japan because some feel that the goals of English education have little to do with actually understanding and speaking English. One side recognizes that, while students are not learning to speak and understand English well, they are learning a skill – grammar– and it has practical value –university entrance. The other side says that the

entire point of language is to communicate orally and verbally, and students should be able to do this with minimal effort after studying a language for six years.

Conclusion

The final portion of this essay is an evaluation of both the strengths and weaknesses of the English high school curricula and Sendai Third Boys' and Third Girls' schools. One of the assumptions in this essay is that the students within any given class should, as much as possible, be at the same or similar level of English ability. Yet, at Sendai's Third schools, a student's English level is measured and assigned based on a wide range of subjects, rather than English alone. In addition, administrators use non-academic standards for grouping students into their respective classes, such as the type of after school club or sport they will join. The result may be that, within a single class, there is a significant difference between the highest and lowest achieving student.

It is worth repeating that university entrance exams, such as the Center Exam, generally do not assess a student's listening or speaking ability and, as a result, teachers and administrators have little incentive to make these skills a priority among the larger English education goals. If universities do not see the value in their future students being able to speak and listen to language with the same level of proficiency that they can read and write a language, educators at the high school level will likely not see the value in it either.

Testing is another issue that may need to be evaluated. There are a total of eight major exams every year and dozens of shorter tests and quizzes throughout the year. By itself, this may not take up much of the time that is allotted for learning; however, students are taking the same number of exams and quizzes for every class in which they

are enrolled, not only English. In addition there are also many other exams that interrupt regular classes for which students do not even receive grades, such as entrance exams. Related to this is a problem of proper utilization of ALTs. During major exams, students might be testing for a total of four and five days. At this time, ALTs generally have no duties to perform and are largely sitting idle for long periods of time.

Finally, one issue that is repeatedly criticized from behind the scenes is the requirements for accepting new applicants into the JET Program. While JETs are required to have at least a bachelor's degree, it can be in any subject and participants need not have any teaching experience or training whatsoever. Though JET is also a cultural exchange program, the vast majority of participants are Assistant Language Teachers. Thus, the result may be that most students in Japan do not have the benefit of an experienced and well-equipped teacher to design and present quality English lessons.

On an administrative level, this is not considered a serious problem because JETs are supposed to work with well-trained and well-qualified Japanese English teachers; however, the reality is that, due to an already heavy class load, most Japanese English Teachers rely heavily on ALTs to design and present the lessons themselves. This is certainly true at Sendai's Third schools.

One of the strengths of the program at Sendai's Third schools is their consistent and systematic approach to foreign language education. Perhaps one of the reasons why administrators are not concerned about varying levels of achievement within a classroom is because students seem to reach similar levels of proficiency as they move from grade to grade. This suggests that they are at least achieving the goals of their program.

Graves (2000) says that determining students' interests and learning preferences are among the most important pieces of information in understanding students' needs. If that is true, Sendai's Third schools do are assessing these needs well, as lesson topics tend to focus on typical Japanese high school activities, such as after school clubs, local festivals, and school events --the annual sports day and school festival.

Many English teachers have little experience speaking and interacting with native English speakers (hence the reason for recruiting ALTs), but that is not to say that they are not well trained and well educated. In addition, their dedication and commitment to providing students with the best education possible is somewhat remarkable. For all the problems that may be associated with foreign language education in Japan, the results are striking compared to foreign language education in the United States. As one ALT suggested, "The kids here learn more English than I learned French back home" (J. Talder, personal communication, October 12, 2006).

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