

## Needs of Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) Program for Foreign National Students in Japanese Schools in Japan

Minako McCarthy

Globalization has enabled people to mobilize beyond the boundaries of continents. The foreign population in Japan has been steadily expanding since World War II and has rapidly increased in the last two decades. The foreign national population was 1.3 % in 2000 (n=1,686,444) and 1.6 % in 2014 (n=2,121,831) and its growth rate is 2.6 % from 2013 to 2014 (Statistics Bureau, 2014). The major reasons for the rapid expansion of the foreign population is a domestic labor shortage, since the society is faced with the issues of a low birth rate and a large elder population (Boocock, 2011; Fujiwara, 2011). In order to meet Japanese economic demands, the Japanese government has allowed various foreign people to reside in Japan.

In the 1980s, as the foreign population in Japan started increasing, the Japanese government established an education reform initiative called internationalization (Kodama, 2005). When discussing Japanese education, this reform explains the current status of Japan because internationalization is a priority agenda for developing Japanese education. Internationalization refers to “international understanding (*Kokusai rikai kyōiku*) [using] cultural exchange or intercultural communication” (Kodama, 2005, p. 645). This educational reform suggests fostering globally prepared individuals at every level of education. For example, compulsory English curriculums have been implemented in Japanese primary schools since 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2014b), and the Super Global High School Program was launched in 2014 to foster global leaders in selected Japanese high schools (Ministry of Education, 2014a). In higher

education, a new project called Top Global University has been implemented in the selected thirty-seven universities to conduct international-level research and education since April 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2017a). Each selected university has established its objectives for the internationalization project. Kanazawa University, for example, promotes English-focused objectives to foster globalized individuals, such as “50 percent of Japanese students with overseas experiences, [and] 50 percent of undergraduate courses offered in English” (Ministry of Education, 2017b). Other universities, such as Chiba and Aizu, emphasize similar objectives. All stages of Japanese education highlight promoting global leadership by strengthening English communication skills (Ministry of Education, 2017c). English acquisition and English instructions are the center of a topic in current Japanese education.

Japanese-national students benefit from these extensive internationalization programs; however, foreign-national students may not always share equitable access to similar educational programs as Japanese students. While Japanese students take advantage of gaining their English proficiency from the current Japanese educational reform, foreign-national students in Japanese schools encounter challenges. When foreign-national students are unable to speak Japanese and lack Japanese literacy, these students encounter a major language barrier in Japanese schools. As a result, the barrier hinders foreign-national students learning lessons in schools.

Bilingual education supports foreign-national students in their Japanese proficiency in schools in

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order for them to understand daily school lessons. Therefore, it is crucial to examine what types of bilingual education programs are implemented in current Japanese schools. This paper analyzes the strength and weaknesses of Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) programs and evaluates the future direction of the second language programs for the academic development of foreign-national students in Japanese schools in Japan.

### Challenges of Foreign National Students in Japanese Schools

Since the Japanese constitution does not accept immigrants, the term *foreign-nationals* is used to refer to people who do not have Japanese nationality (Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, 2014). The Ministry of Education (2016a) acknowledges the need for Japanese language assistance for foreign-national students due to the rapid expansion of a foreign population. Government statistics show that foreign students, who need Japanese language assistance, accounted for approximately 0.15% ( $n=29,198$ ) of the total enrollment of students from primary and secondary schools ( $n=19,127,474$ ) in 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2016a). The breakdown is as follows: 8,340 Portuguese-speaking, 6,410 Chinese-speaking, 5,153 Filipino-speaking, 3,576 Spanish-speaking, 1,215 Vietnamese-speaking, 777 English-speaking, 614 Korean-speaking, and 3,113 other languages (Ministry of Education, 2016a). The number may not be described as significant; however, over the last ten years, the number of foreign students has steadily increased from 19,678 to 29,198 (Ministry of Education, 2016a).

Language barriers impede the educational development of foreign students. In a study of perceptions of Chinese and Korean students regarding their language learning experiences in Japanese schools, a participant has expressed, “when I see my classmates [are] talking about something interesting and laughing out loud, I have no idea what to say” (Burgess, 2011, p. 201). In daily school life, foreign students, who do not have Japanese language proficiency, encounter various

challenges in the school community. Another student says, “sitting in the classroom, listening to the lesson—well, I couldn’t understand anything” (Burgess, 2011, p. 201). When students are unable to understand because of the language barrier, they feel distressed or incompetent. Language has played an essential role for the foreign students.

Literacy barriers also impede foreign students’ academic progress. Galan (2005) explains that students in Japanese schools learn a tremendous amount of Japanese written characters (*kanji*) throughout their compulsory school years. Even if students’ first language is Japanese, they confront significant challenges due to learning the complex written characters. At the same time, foreign-national students also struggle with Japanese literacy skills. They would take extra time learning the unfamiliar Japanese characters. In addition, the foreign-national students must enhance their communication skills in order for them to improve their literacy ability. Therefore, foreign-national students require time to improve their Japanese proficiency with external support.

### Bilingual Education in Japan

When foreign-national students are unable to understand school lessons, bilingual education serves a need for language proficiency. Bilingual education in Japan refers to the students who need to use two languages in schools. Those students include Japanese students who returned from abroad, foreign national students who have difficulty understanding school lessons, and Japanese-national students who want to acquire a second language (Kanno, 2008; Noyama, 2010). Based on the internationalization policy, bilingual education in Japan focuses on Japanese and English rather than Japanese and other minority languages because the government and schools recognize the essential need for English acquisition in order to foster global citizens (Ministry of Education, 2014b). In addition, Japanese parents endorse Japanese/English bilingualism for their children because this particular bilingualism becomes an essential advantage to their children’s futures (Kanno,

2008). Generally speaking, people who speak English tend to have social privileges in Japanese society. English has been a center of interest in Japan for over a decade (Okano & Tsyneyoshi, 2011). Kanno (2008) points out that Japanese/English bilingualism is perceived as an asset when students have an opportunity to learn a language in order to thrive in the competitive global world. In this sense, privileged students who are Japanese-nationals have an opportunity to learn in English in schools. On the other hand, unprivileged students in this context, foreign-national students, have fewer opportunities to learn Japanese as their second language in Japanese schools.

Many foreign-national students lack Japanese literacy and are unable to speak Japanese (Burgess, 2011; Kanno, 2008). As a result, they will be left behind in school. The Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) program is the only bilingual education program for foreign-national students in Japanese public schools. The objective of this program is to assist in developing the Japanese proficiency of foreign national students in schools (Ministry of Education, 2015).

The JSL curriculum was established in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001) and was officially applied to schools in eleven cities among only five prefectures out of forty-seven in Japan in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2010). In May 2014, 21 % (n=5,788) of foreign-national students received JSL instruction in public schools as the Japanese Language Special Education curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2016b). In addition, this curriculum is for both foreign and Japanese-national students who need assistance in the Japanese language. Some Japanese-national students (n=1,216) have also received some language assistances in the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2016b).

According to the Ministry of Education (2001), the program has only been implemented in schools with substantial numbers of foreign students enrolled. The JSL program had such a limited application in public schools because Japanese society and its government focus on its citizens and the internationalization agenda. In secondary

education, both private and public selected high schools in the Super Global High School Program use the Japanese/English immersion programs (Ministry of Education, 2012), for promoting Japanese-national students' English acquisition.

In the current Japanese schools, two types of bilingual programs are implemented: Two-Way immersion and JSL. The Two-Way immersion programs have generally become popular in private schools. A private institution, Nichiei Immersion School, practices two-thirds of instruction in English and one-third of instruction in Japanese (Kanno, 2008). Immersion programs fit the objective of fostering globalized citizens; however, the immersion programs do not serve the needs of foreign-national students. Japanese parents send their children to an immersion school to enhance their English proficiency (Kanno, 2008).

The ministry of education (2001) has published the JSL curriculum manual for educators. The manual includes four major elements: the JSL curriculum principles, case study findings, the encouragements of the curriculum, and advertisements of the JSL program. Although the government appears to support the program and its development, the current implementation rate is relatively low compared to that of the internationalization project. According to the educational budget plan of 2007 from the Ministry of Education (2006), the JSL program received 4.1 million yen (approximately \$36,000), whereas the English language programs for public elementary schools received 61 million yen (approximately \$550,000). This figure provides strong evidence that the government puts more weight on the English program.

Although the JSL program may have fewer funds than the English program, the JSL curriculum currently supports foreign-national students' Japanese literacy and communication skills in schools. The style of implementation is based on teachers' methods of instruction and students' needs. In some public elementary schools, foreign-national students, who need the assistance of their Japanese, move to a separate classroom three to four

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times a week during school instruction. JSL teachers help reinforce students' Japanese literacy and communication skills (Kanno, 2008). In junior high schools, the JSL curriculum has been implemented in five subjects, which are language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and English; foreign-national students take daily lessons in regular classrooms with a teacher's assistance (Ministry of Education, 2015). Teachers in junior high schools adjust lesson plans depending on these students' Japanese proficiency and help them to understand daily lessons during the instruction (Ministry of Education, 2015). When a single teacher manages class that consists of both Japanese and foreign-national students, the teacher tends to have a full load of work (Kanno, 2008). Therefore, two additional teachers are assigned as JSL teachers at each designated public school to assist homeroom teachers in class (Kanno, 2008). The JSL program is still a new program that started to be implemented in public elementary schools in 2003 and junior high schools in 2007.

The Ministry of Education (2012) has implemented a similar support program called Bridging Course in foreign-populated cities since 2009. The program supports language-minority students eventually entering Japanese schools. In March 2011, the Board of Education, University corporations, and NPOs operated forty-two Bridging Courses and 642 foreign-national students successfully enrolled in Japanese public schools (Ministry of Education, 2012). This model appears to benefit new foreign-national students who encounter substantial language barriers; however, the Bridging Course is not the school program because its objective is different from the JSL program.

### **Strength and Weakness of the JSL program**

In 2017, the JSL program reached its fourteenth year of operation. This program is the only current bilingual program for supporting foreign-national students' Japanese proficiency. The following section analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the current JSL program.

A major strength of the JSL program implementation is that JSL teachers are not required to have mastered the minority languages; they can practice the JSL curriculum in regular class lessons. Finding qualified teachers, who speak both Japanese [or dominant language] and students' native languages, is a challenge in bilingual education (Kanno, 2008; Pang, 2001). In the current JSL curriculum, two JSL teachers are assigned to the designated schools to lessen the burden of regular teachers. A homeroom teacher and JSL teachers work together as a team in some schools (Kanno, 2008). Any school that has an enrollment of foreign-nation students can implement the JSL curriculum by regular teachers, even though the school is not officially recognized as a designated school. This simple implementation concept appears to be advantageous for foreign-national students since they are receiving assistance for their Japanese proficiency even though they are not enrolled in a designated school.

Another strength of implementing the JSL program is to promote an inclusive viewpoint for foreign-national students who are members of Japanese schools and society. When foreign students are able to communicate with others in schools, they experience a feeling of competence. In a study from Burgess (2011), a foreign-national student shared his or her feeling; "I was trouble by Japanese language study, cultural differences, and relations with friends. However, bit by bit, I came to speak Japanese and school became fun" (p. 202). As foreign students improve their Japanese proficiency, they may recognize that attending school allows them to feel included in school.

The major weakness of the JSL program is that a level of Japanese proficiency for foreign-national students varies. One of the teachers of a JSL class comments, "there are children with whom you just cannot communicate [because of the lack of a mutually shared language], and that's an enormous stress for both the students and the teacher (Kanno, 2008, p. 109). Foreign-national students take years to be proficient in Japanese. Some

students may master Japanese in a few years, whereas other students may take many more years of practice. This variation of proficiency may not only be explained by the foreign students' ability, but it also varies based on teachers' methods of instruction. The Ministry of Education (2015) notes that there is no mandate for the JSL curriculum standard. Although the Ministry of Education includes the JSL instruction model to explain its objectives and guidelines, its implementation is based on teachers' methods of instruction (Ministry of Education, 2009; Suda, 2015). If foreign students have various backgrounds and demands, the Ministry of Education (2015) explains that teachers are not obligated to help with the students' Japanese proficiency. In short, the government may pay attention to the needs of JSL instruction; however, the implementation criteria are ambiguous and less standardized. As a result, the teacher's levels of motivation and knowledge may impact foreign-national students' Japanese proficiency.

Since foreign students have different levels of Japanese proficiency in schools, some students may demand to preserve their native languages (Fouser, 2011). Regarding the issues, Fouser (2011) suggests that hiring teachers who speak various minority languages makes these students feel safe in school. In the United States, the Two-Way Immersion program is an effective model for schools with a majority of immigrant students who speak a common native language (Kim, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2015). The Two-Way Immersion program is "the additive case [that] implies that an individual suffers no loss of the primary language and the associated culture" (Cazabon, Nicoladis, & Lambert, 1998, p. 2). The objective of immersion programs differs from the JSL program; however, if foreign students feel comfortable speaking their native languages during the school instruction, teachers may not need to limit them. If the teachers are able to speak foreign students' languages, the students can also use their native languages in their lessons. Consequently, students may feel positive taking the JSL curriculum

because the teachers acknowledge the students' languages and culture.

Since 2003, the JSL program has been implemented in public schools. This program appears to still be in a developmental stage. Both strengths and weaknesses of the program may become a baseline for the future improvement of the program. Currently, there is no other official bilingual program for foreign-national students in Japanese public schools. Without JSL classes, these foreign national students are unable to understand their class lessons. As a result, these students will have major difficulties in schools and create a substantial gap between Japanese and foreign-national students, which will make teachers and schools face additional challenges. Schools may need to hire qualified JSL teachers who speak minority languages of foreign students in order for them to understand class lessons.

### **Future Direction of Bilingual Education in Japanese Schools**

A simple implementation may be a major benefit for the JSL program, while the immersion program benefits the academic development of both foreign and Japanese national students. In terms of the wave of internationalization in Japan, implementing the Two-Way Immersion program may be better for Japanese students to boost their academic progress. Nevertheless, in the current Japanese education system, full implementation of such a program with Japanese/minority languages in public schools may be unrealistic because society and the government focus on fostering its own non-immigrant citizens by practicing the English curriculum in compulsory education (Ministry of Education, 2014b). In this circumstance, foreign-national students will struggle to learn English because they are still challenged when learning the Japanese language.

To consider the current point and analyze further circumstances, the JSL program may be the most appropriate and realistic bilingual program in public schools for foreign-national students and their Japanese proficiency because the JSL

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program is an official bilingual program for these students. Based on the strengths and weaknesses of the program, there are three recommendations. The JSL curriculum implementation could be made systematic. The Ministry of Education needs to set a specific standard of implementation criteria. Since a language barrier impedes the foreign students' academic progress, the criteria should be revised. In order to provide sufficient instruction for foreign-national students for their Japanese proficiency, the JSL program should include a concrete guideline. As noted earlier, two extra teachers are assigned as JSL teachers at the designated schools. This fixed number approach appears to be insufficient. Schools populated with large numbers of foreign students need more than two extra JSL teachers in order for the students to receive quality lessons. Therefore, the first recommendation is to establish detailed criteria for the teacher assignment. The regular class teachers in schools that are extremely populated with foreign students would also benefit from the guideline of increasing the number of JSL teachers. The regular class teachers will not have the burden of teaching additional assignments in the classroom, especially for teachers in junior high schools. The government may need to realize that this modification will support both foreign-national students and teachers in public schools.

The challenge of creating an effective program is not only to provide many teachers but also is to maintain the quality of instruction. The second recommendation is to hire sufficient numbers of qualified educators for the JSL program. Each teacher manages the current JSL program based on the teacher's own decision; however, a qualified JSL educator can assess the curriculum based on foreign students' Japanese proficiency. When the JSL teachers are able to continue practicing sufficient and coherent levels of instructions for foreign students, this can lead to the students' Japanese language improvement. As a result, these students may build confidence in working with Japanese people because they can communicate and understand school lessons. When a foreign

student's Japanese proficiency improves, the regular class teachers will be able to maximize their efforts in teaching class lessons.

The third recommendation is to develop guidelines for an implementation standard. Schools that have any foreign-national students, who need to have language assistance, should include the JSL program. In the current circumstance, the JSL designated schools are relatively few nationwide. The lesson plan manuals for each subject have been fully developed from the Ministry of Education (2009); therefore, implementation of the program should be all prepared. Foreign-national students would benefit from an expansion of the program in public schools.

Meanwhile, the preparation program, the Bridging Course for foreign children, who are going to enroll in a public school system, will help to alleviate these children's language barriers. When they enroll in Japanese schools, their Japanese proficiency will be improved. This implies that the Bridging Course also helps teachers in public schools to manage their school lessons efficiently. As a result, foreign students will feel competent and recognized that they are a part of Japanese society. Similar to the JSL program, the Bridging Course program is relatively new. Despite the fact that both programs have not been widely implemented in the society and public schools yet, these programs may have the potential to flourish in the future in Japanese education.

## Conclusion

The foreign population has expanded, and Japan has become a heterogeneous society. The government and its society are gradually recognizing the diversity. The government prioritizes internationalization for educational advancements for its own citizens and their English proficiency in Japanese education. Consequently, the government will not fully implement language support programs for foreign-national students. Therefore, these students encounter challenges in academia. One of the significant challenges, the language barrier, impedes their educational

development. Various types of mass media within its society, as well as from other countries, pay attention and criticize the current second language education of Japan (Maher, 1997). In this critical observation, the Japanese government needs to consider a full implementation of the JSL bilingual education program and enhance the program's quality for foreign-national students as well as teachers in public schools. The systematic implementation design of the program will help reduce the burden for teachers.

A language right is an educational right that ultimately leads to human rights. As global citizens, people need to focus on language rights in spite of cultural or language differences of different nations. The recognition of language rights will impact on Japanese and foreign-national students as well as the Japanese schools and its government. Japanese citizens will become real international individuals when they begin focusing on foreign-national students' language equity. Japanese education will benefit from the promising internationalization program, which fosters Japanese individuals in their English proficiency and also supports foreign-national students in their Japanese proficiency. The foreign national citizens and students will be content with residing in Japan, where its government fully endorses the quality and educational justice for foreign national students.

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