

## A Policy Analysis of Compulsory English Classes in Japanese Universities

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### *Abstract*

*This policy analysis will explore the prevalence and purpose of compulsory practical English courses for students across all faculties in universities in Japan. Special attention will be given to English courses taught in two non-English major colleges within a large private Japanese university in Western Japan, which since their inception have been partially outsourced to external education institutions. The first part of this analysis will explore the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context of compulsory English courses in Japanese universities. The second part of this analysis will critically examine the policy of compulsory English courses regarding the role of teachers at Japanese universities and identify opportunities for positive change. This analysis should be particularly insightful for anyone teaching or designing curriculum for English language courses in a Japanese university, especially those who are less familiar with the policies and broader contextual forces that affect their classrooms.*

**Keywords:** *compulsory English education, educational policy, English medium instruction, Japanese university, policy analysis*

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## **Introduction**

As a language teacher, one's primary concern should always be meeting the needs of individual students in the classroom. However, there is research suggesting that effective educational leadership is second only to teaching in positively affecting student outcomes (Arafeh, 2014). Furthermore, it is important for educational leaders to have a broad understanding of the processes, and roles and responsibilities engaged in the creation of educational policy (Arafeh, 2014). Therefore, the first part of this analysis will explore the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context of compulsory English courses in Japanese universities. In doing so, we hope to gain insight into contextual factors that shape and influence the people and practices in the classroom. Specific policy knowledge enables one to see organizational restraints, understand policy actors, mechanisms and processes that exist, and uncover opportunities for potential change (Arafeh, 2014). Consequently, the second part of this analysis will critically examine the policy of compulsory English courses regarding the role of teachers at Japanese universities and identify opportunities for positive change. Although this analysis will draw from the authors' combined research and observations and experiences teaching at several universities, it will focus more specifically on their shared experiences teaching at several colleges within a large private university in Western Japan.

## **Understanding Compulsory English Courses at Japanese Universities in Context**

Students require some level of English to enter most Japanese universities, but English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is not a state-required subject at tertiary schools in Japan, and it is up to universities to set their own requirements for English language achievement (Liu, 2007, as cited in Terauchi, 2017). Most four-year university degrees in Japan require at least two years of language credits regardless of students' majors (Larson-Hall Stewart, 2019). These language requirements may be met by studying other foreign languages; however, for first-year students, English tends to be a compulsory subject taught 3 hours a week for two semesters for a total of 90 hours (Liu, 2007 cited in Terauchi, 2017). Additionally, most university English courses are taught in Japanese-by-Japanese instructors (Terauchi, 2017). However, on average, more than half of English teaching faculties are part-time lecturers, and 30% are native-English speakers (Liu, 2007 cited in Terauchi). Compulsory English courses taught to first and second-year students provide the majority of opportunities for part-time or fixed-term contract positions in the fields of English-language education or EFL in Japanese universities (Larson-Hall Stewart, 2019). This description matches our firsthand observations and experiences as native-English speaking part-time contract instructors who have taught and/or continue to teach compulsory English courses at several Japanese universities.

## **Global and Local Trends in English Language Education**

According to Noguchi (2020), "the teaching of English as a second or foreign language has become increasingly important with the rapid globalization of the world that needed a lingua franca" (p. 3). English as a lingua franca (ELF) is defined by Firth (1996) as a contact language used between persons who do not share a common native language nor national culture and

choose to use English as the foreign language of communication. Noguchi (2020) points out the growing awareness of ELF and a need to legitimize its usage in Japan and outside of Japan.

Evidence for a paradigm shift away native-speakerism to the recognition of ELF as a practical tool for communication in an increasingly globalized world can be seen in the evolution of the wording of Common European Framework of Reference of Languages (CEFR), a model which enables us to compare the communication levels of different languages spoken by an individual. Additionally, Nguyen and Hamid state that “A large amount of work was put into the establishment and publication of CEFR, as well as into the study of its employment and impact on the language education system across the globe (2021, p. 651). In 2018, CEFR revised their model of comparison to replace all mention of the words “native speaker” with “speaker of the target language” (Noguchi, 2020). Japanese higher education institutions have been interested in CEFR since its inception, and there have been numerous attempts to incorporate CEFR into foreign language curricula, teaching, and assessments in Japan (Rappleye et al., 2011). However, according to Matikainen (2019), the shift away from the misconception that native-English speakers make the best English teachers has been slower in Japan due to traditional language teaching discourse and a deeply ingrained dichotomization between native and non-native speakers of English. Traditional language teaching discourse in this paper relates to communication and how it is written or spoken in classroom settings. Moreover, when the instructor speaks authoritatively from the standpoint of someone who has learned English since birth; thus, natively, they have a background that is more pragmatical rather than theoretical. Japanese teachers tend to be far more “textbook” or theoretically minded while teaching English. Outliers would be those who either lived and/or studied outside of Japan in a country where English was used in daily interactions.

### **English Courses in Japanese Universities**

In our own classroom teaching experience, we have encountered similar attitudes of native-speakerism among students and teachers even among those who believe in using English primarily as a tool for communication. Furthermore, there seems to be an unspoken rule for English classes being taught by Japanese teachers to focus on listening and reading, as opposed to speaking and writing which are primarily reserved for native-speaking English teachers. This has been confirmed as unofficial policy in discussions with a Japanese professor (Professor B, 2018). In the compulsory English program in colleges in the private university in Western Japan (henceforth referred to as UWJ), tension between ELF and native-speakerism approaches are evident in the program’s stated goals and structure, which aims to equip students with the English skills to engage in research and presentation, but also clearly states that its communicative four-skill based courses are taught by native-English speaking teachers (PBEP, n.d.). This indicates an acknowledgement of the importance of English as a tool for communication, yet also implies the existence of a culturally engrained preference for native-English.

## **Social and Cultural Factors Influencing Japanese Learners of English**

Honna (2008) argues that Japanese teachers and students are indoctrinated with the concept of English as an American or British language, rather than a multicultural language or a tool for intercultural communication. According to Honna (2008), Japanese learners of English tend to compare themselves to native-English speakers, which results in feelings of failure, inferiority, and even guilt and shame. A solution for this could be the use and implementation of more non-native teachers who have a degree in English or TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). The continued lack of using non-native yet qualified and communicatively capable instructors is apparent in English education in countries such as Japan (Tsuchiya, 2020). Matikainen (2019) also describes how this unrealistic goal of speaking like a native-English speaker demoralizes students. For example, students lacking oral fluency are not viewed as being good language learners, even if they progress in reading, writing, or listening (Matikainen, 2019). Regarding attitudes, social culturally speaking, Japanese students, especially those who study for years, feel inferior if they cannot speak English fluently for several reasons. The importance given to testing from teachers, parents, and students regarding the passing of English tests is pervasive in Japan. Moreover, this focus on testing ignores any real focus on the development of complete language aptitude (Shiratori, 2019). Students tend to understand that the English they have learned, especially from Japanese teachers is mainly geared towards passing exams. What they have learned has not been paired with enough time using the language they have studied. Moreover, in Japan, students do not get enough chances to use the English they are learning. Basically, Japanese students tend to interact with written English the most. Another reason is that Japanese education promotes group mentality whereby making mistakes leads to fear of making language mistakes. In Canada, for example, Canadians are taught that by making mistakes, one can learn something new. However, this is a foreign notion in Japan. Additionally, there is a pervasive attitude that English is not necessary in Japan in the public. Katakana words hinder English language learning as well with one well known example as *eacon* which means “air conditioner.” Moreover, there is *Wasei Eigo* or Japanese-made English words. Two examples are, *skinship* for “physical contact” and another is *tension* which implies agitation in English whereas in Japanese it expresses excitement.

For some background, the authors believe that oral fluency regarding English is by and large the weakest component in the Japanese student repertoire. Although Japanese students who study in high school may be learning basic to intermediate reading, writing, and listening skills, it has been observed that communicative competency is not a priority when a non-native English teacher is teaching. This lack of real focus on English speaking practice in high school continues to university for the most part although there may be outliers as in any case. In one study of Japanese high school students’ English abilities, students average reading and listening were measured as A2 (A1 being the lowest level) on the CEFR scales, but their writing and speaking scores were too low to be measured with any statistical significance (MEXT, 2015, as cited in Iino, 2019). Considering this fact in light of the socio-cultural attitudes described above, we can predict that a majority of incoming students to Japanese universities will hold attitudes and self-



perceptions regarding English that will negatively impact how they approach or experience learning English in the classroom.

Even Japanese university students who choose English-medium instruction (EMI) courses have reported going out of their way to avoid speaking English (Iino, 2019). This type of instruction is becoming more common globally, specifically in non-Anglophone contexts, and most commonly EMI research is being supported in Europe, but increasingly in Japan as well (Aizawa & Rose, 2018; Galloway & Rugg, 2021). One study looking at a group of Japanese short-term exchange students in Sweden found that these students struggled being alongside “the high English language proficiency Swedes and the high expectations of the Swedish EMI course” (Siegel, 2022, p. 12). Therefore, the issue of overall low language proficiencies of the Japanese students was found to hinder the exchange students’ performance in their EMI classes; furthermore, similar findings have been shown true in a previous EMI study done on a group of international students in Sweden (Kuteeva, 2020). If students who are willing and able to participate in EMI courses are avoiding speaking English, we can reason that there will be greater reluctance among students of compulsory English classes. Anecdotally, this has been observed in recent years due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with increasing student hesitancy to speak in the classroom due to years of mask wearing. Furthermore, Iino (2019) notes that English in Japan is regarded more as an important measurement of academic skill, rather than as a tool for communication. Therefore, students’ attitudes and achievements in compulsory English courses could hypothetically influence the perceptions and identity of those students. This is especially true when it comes to less skilled students, who display many challenges “centred around a lack of both academic skills and language-related skills (Aizawa & Rose, 2018, p. 1134). However, in one study by Konakahara et. al., both students and teachers showed “fairly positive attitudes towards EMI” (2019, p. 137). To be clear, the study was done with various students, not only Japanese, who had various levels of English-speaking abilities and international travel experience. Regarding identity, the construction of identity has been studied before such as in Yoko Nogami’s study on Japanese ELF speakers’ construction of “identities and how different identities are related to their pragmatic language use in ELF communication” (2019, p. 177).

## **Education Policies Influencing English Classes**

The prevalence of EFL and EMI in Japanese higher education is not based on state-requirements, but government policies do influence the content and delivery of English language education in Japanese universities. Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology’s (MEXT) educational policies and initiatives are explicitly aimed at cultivating students able to deal with globalization, and to enhance the competitiveness of higher education in Japan (MEXT, n.d.). Awareness of other Asian nations’ push for intensifying English education and EMI, drove Japanese industries and the government to push educational institutions to better prepare for globalization by improving English education (Iino (2019). According to Hashimoto (2007), Japan began to heavily promote English language education to remain internationally competitive in the global economy after the collapse of the bubble economy. An example of this can be seen in the MEXT’s Top Global University Project, initiated in 2014 that provides

funding for 37 universities selected for their comprehensive efforts towards reform and internationalization (MEXT, n.d.). These universities are divided into two groups: Type A or “Top Type” includes 13 universities perceived to have the potential to rank in top 100 universities in the world; and Type B “Global Traction Type” includes 24 universities seen to show internationalization by increasing content courses in English, attracting international students, and increasing foreign faculty positions (Underwood & Glasgow, 2019). These Type B universities are said to make greater use of four-skill certification examinations in their admissions process (Underwood & Glasgow, 2019). Such examinations can be used in theory to select students with the English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening necessary for engaging in academic English. UWJ, the Japanese university, which is the subject of this analysis, is one of these notable Type B universities, and uses tests such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) to assess students’ English abilities, but it should be noted that TOEIC only measures students’ listening and reading skills.

## **Critical Analysis of Compulsory English Courses in a Japanese University**

Part-time instructors, especially foreign part-time instructors, teaching compulsory English language courses in Japanese universities often lack knowledge of national and institutional policies that shape their context (Nishikawa, 2020). This unawareness of educational policies can inadvertently shape educator’s teaching and learning in their classrooms. Additionally, the purpose of this policy analysis is to serve as a primer for any instructor teaching compulsory English courses at a Japanese university, especially those who are foreign, new to the context, or hired on a part-time or limited-time basis. To achieve this, the authors have reflected on their collective experience of teaching compulsory English language courses at over 20 different Japanese universities, drawn from informal discussions with colleagues, introduced relevant research, and summarized what they believe to be the overarching policies and broader social, cultural, political, and economic forces that shape the experiences of instructors and students in a compulsory English course at a Japanese university.

This part of the analysis will explore the impact of policy in compulsory English courses taught in Japanese universities by focusing on the authors' own research and first-hand observations and experiences while teaching in several of the colleges at one private university, UWJ. In particular, the analysis will center on UWJ's Project-Based English Program (PBEP), which provides the organizational and conceptual framework for several of UWJ's college's compulsory English courses. Though specific to the English language program at UWJ, this analysis references the broader contextual factors introduced in part one and discusses them from an instructor point of view. Therefore, this analysis should be particularly insightful for anyone teaching or designing curriculum for English language courses in a Japanese university who is likely to have less awareness or understanding of the policies and broader contexts that influence their classrooms, such as instructors who are part-time, outsourced via external education institution, or new to Japan.

## **The Project Based English Program in Two Colleges at UWJ**

The reasoning behind the decision to have compulsory English classes may differ greatly depending on the institution and faculty. During their years working at UWJ, informal interactions with colleagues, and their own exploration of the university's official websites, the authors have learned have gained a deeper insight into the policies that shape and influence compulsory English courses they have taught in two of the colleges at UWJ: the College of Pharmacy, and the College of Psychology.

According to Professor B (pseudonym) of UWJ's College of Pharmacy, the college's current English language program was decided on based on the belief that students should develop sufficient English skills to acquire and examine information and to present their own ideas and thoughts in English so that they can play an active role in a global community (Professor B, 2020). Professor B explained that the policy of each college in the university is set when the college opens whereby the most common route by which decisions are made is by first submitting ideas to the executive board where the merits are discussed. The board then makes a proposal that is submitted to the faculty meeting, consisting of all professors and associate professors, where it is approved or disapproved. The most common route by which decisions are made is by first submitting ideas to the executive board where the merits are discussed. The board then makes a proposal that is submitted to the faculty meeting, consisting of all professors and associate professors, where it is approved or disapproved (Professor B, 2020). UWJ's College of Psychology follows this same policy making process. Like the College of Pharmacy, it is one of the few colleges in the university that requires their students to take English courses under the auspices of its Project-Based English Program (PBEP). According to UWJ's PBEP website, the PBEP program consists of two components: Project classes where students research and present their own themes and topics; and Skill Workshops where students work on and improve the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English (PBEP, n.d.). Project-Based Language Learning (PBL) is becoming more common in the field of language learning. PBL is the foundation of PBEP's as it especially allows students to focus on real-life enquiries and student-centered activities (Meri-Yilan & Konca, 2021).

## **Strengths and Weaknesses of Project-Based English Program's Skill Workshop Course**

The PBEP website openly states that Skill Workshop classes are taught by native-English teachers and carried out by external education institutions (PBEP, n.d.). However, they do not specifically name any institutions that have taught Skill Workshop classes in the university. One reason for this is that the external education institutions contracted to teach the Skill Workshop must periodically compete with other institutions. This competition requires delivering presentations, demonstration lessons, and comprehensive proposal packages that cover course content, delivery, and financial terms and conditions. This process allows the university to select the educational service provider that best suits their needs or priorities. However, it also means that for the students, the teachers, content, and methods used in half of their compulsory classes in the PBEP program could change considerably depending on the institution contracted to teach them.

As mentioned in part one of this analysis, while there is a consensus regarding the importance of using English as a tool or ELF, there also exists a deeply engrained cultural preference for native-English speakers. The university's PBEP program seems to enjoy the best of both worlds, by explicitly encouraging students to use English as a tool for global communication, while at the same time offering students the opportunity to gain experience from the native-English speakers that they idealize. However, based on our observations, the PBEP does not explicitly address nor attempt to mitigate the detrimental effects of comparing one's spoken language skill to that of a native speaker discussed earlier.

## **Limitations**

Part-time native-English speakers make up a large number of the instructors teaching compulsory English courses in Japanese universities, especially courses focused on speaking and communication skills. The cultural background and employment status of these instructors may present many challenges to implementing effective or appropriate classroom practices. According to the results of a national survey, American and British junior faculty from the Humanities in Japanese universities reported more difficulties than any other category of international faculty at the national, institutional, and personal level (Huang et al., 2017). As universities desire native-English speakers to teach their compulsory English courses, the results of this survey deserve further inspection. The part-time and contractual nature of these jobs also presents practical problems related to the dissemination of information and policy knowledge. Furthermore, this situation can be exacerbated by some universities being unable or unwilling to provide policy information to native speaking teachers in English, thus creating a disadvantage to faculty who may not be competent in reading or communicating in Japanese. In one American case study, a part-time schoolteacher reported that she felt more knowledgeable on school policy issues than her peers simply because she was scheduled to work on the day where teacher meetings and training were held (Braun et al., 2011). Although the context is different, it is reasonable to compare this teacher's case with native English-speaking teachers in Japanese universities, such as those in the PBEP program.

As a part-time teacher in the Skill Workshop who is dispatched from an external education institution, one is completely unaware of the wider policy goals of the university and how one fits into the PBEP program. It is only through developing work relationships with other teachers that clarity can be gained. One of the authors observed that once the way in which their work fits into the PBEP program was described to them during teacher-training sessions, the level of interest and motivation amongst part-time teachers improved markedly. Furthermore, when the aforementioned external education institution held contracts in several of the university's campuses, teachers who were teaching at two campuses appeared more enthusiastic and knowledgeable than those working at only one campus. While it may seem unfair to force part-time teachers to devote more time to understanding the methods and policies of a class they only teach once a week, it cannot be denied that the part-time nature of this job impacts the transmission of information, knowledge, and communication among teachers.



## **PBEP Goals Relationship with National Policy**

The university covered in this study has long had a word-of-mouth reputation for being one of the best private universities in Western Japan and being selected out of almost 800 universities by MEXT to be one of Japan's 24 Global Traction Type universities provides it with even greater prestige. In the long term, this is arguably more valuable than any immediate funding received by MEXT. As Japan's population continues to decline, there will likely be increased competition among Japanese universities for new students. Therefore, universities like this have greater incentive to advance government policy initiatives in order to build their reputation, attract and select students capable of demonstrating high levels of achievement, and remain capable of churning out sought after graduates. With English playing such an important role in the government's goal of internationalizing higher education in Japan, the university has an incentive to select students who are capable of participating in compulsory English classes.

The choice of using TOEIC to evaluate students' abilities also shapes the content and perceptions of compulsory English classes. The TOEIC test is widely popular in Japan often used to measure an individual's English ability, and even their status. It is unclear if there is any large-scale study verifying the extent of this practice, but personal communications with employees from three large corporations in Japan revealed that TOEIC scores can determine whether or not an individual is hired or promoted. As Toh (2017) describes, the TOEIC test was created by Japanese businessmen and bureaucrats, is widely recognized by Japanese employers as an accurate measure of English ability, but only tests vocabulary and grammar through truncated and decontextualized listening and reading exercises that make it dubious indicator of one's true ability to read or write in English. Toh (2017, p. 519) explains how his English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum at a university was undermined by Japanese teachers and administrators determined to eschew the focus of EAP in favor of TOEIC drilling and practice, because "Poor TOEIC results would make the faculty look bad in the eyes of wider Japanese society". In the context of English education in Japan, it seems clear that language teachers and students alike understand that TOEIC is not an accurate or appropriate measure of one's English ability; however, they pursue TOEIC practice and assessment knowing that it is a gateway to opportunity. Therefore, by placing importance on TOEIC, universities signal favor for a market-driven neoliberal approach to education. To what degree policy makers are aware of this is unclear. At one of the previously mentioned external education institutions there was even a running joke that the university's professors wanted to improve their students' communication skills; therefore, requesting that dispatched teachers give their students plenty of TOEIC drills. At the center of this joke is a recognition of the reality that teachers are often asked to implement practices and meet goals that are diametrically opposed to one another.

The university in this study is attempting to develop students capable of using English to participate using English in a globalized economy, which requires a practical working knowledge of the language. However, they primarily favor the TOEIC test, which is limited in scope, questionable in its validity, and favored more as a domestic marker of prestige than of language ability. This can influence compulsory English courses, leaving teachers and students alike feeling a disconnect between course content and goals. For example, the PBEP program is meant to improve students' basic four skills to help them engage with information in pursuit of

their own research. However, student and teacher success will be determined and discussed based on TOEIC scores.

## Conclusion

Two interrelated and long-standing issues faced by English teachers in Japanese university English language classes have been the poor motivation and performance of students. These issues are faced by teachers tasked with teaching first-year compulsory English courses at the Japanese university studied in this paper, and exacerbated by influential factors at the global, national, cultural, and organizational levels. Key influential factors discussed in this paper include: tension between the idea that English is a tool to be acquired for international and intercultural communication, and the deeply engrained belief that this requires speaking like a native-English speaker; tension between the aims of Japanese government's English language education and internationalization policies, and the aims of individual universities that are free to set their own standards of language achievement required for admission or graduation; tension between the attainment of practical and academic English skills, with the attainment of higher TOEIC scores; and tension between the time and resources of all parties involved. A student who just wants to study psychology in their native Japanese language would likely not be influenced by any of these factors if not for the fact that they must attend this compulsory English course. However, that is the reality faced by students and teachers in our program. Honig (2006) suggests that rather than asking whether a policy will contribute to educational improvement, we should ask what are the conditions under which a policy might have a positive result for particular students. Therefore, in future research we will explore under what conditions the policy of compulsory English courses would have positive results for our students.

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