



English Education in Japan: Where Is it Going?

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Introduction

It has been a while since English began to acquire the position as *the* language of globalization and intercultural communication. At the same time, the rapid and vast spread of English has caused concerns that, as a form of imperialism, it will eliminate local languages (May, 2012; Phillipson, 1999). These concerns have generated the trend of multilingualism, which advocates the coexistence of English and local languages. In this era of ‘glocal’ (global and local) English education, what would this look like in Japan?

English as a Tool of Nationalism

Recently, the focus of English education in Japan seems to be on the ability to ‘export’ the country’s cultural and economic assets to the outside world. Students are expected to learn how to introduce traditional Japanese culture overseas and eventually apply this skill in business to further expand Japan’s economy. Indeed, as scholars argue, English education in Japan has been used as an instrument to develop and reinforce Japanese nationalism (Kobayashi, 2012; Liddicoat, 2007; Phan, 2013; Rivers, 2011; Sullivan & Schatz, 2009). In other words, English acts as a fortress to strengthen the nation and ‘win’ against the world.

This is not to deny the idea of raising Japanese learners’ awareness and understanding of their own cultural backgrounds. The use of local content can enhance learners’ self-affirmation and encourage them to see connections between the learning content and themselves, motivating them to learn English even more.

However, I am still concerned that the current trend might be more harmful than beneficial if the driving force is political and economic rather than educational. Studies reveal that the promotion of English as a tool for economic prosperity was initiated by the national government in its policy to ‘cultivate Japanese who can use English,’ which is reiterated in public discourse as well (Hashimoto, 2009; Kobayashi, 2012). Thus, this notion, which seems to attempt to turn learners into economic and cultural ambassadors, is likely to be politically driven. It is also accompanied by the public sentiment toward losing ‘face’ in intercultural communication, in situations where one cannot communicate smoothly in English or answer questions about his/her own

country. Probably the political push for English acquisition actually resonates and facilitates learners’ own interest. Even if this is the case, this inward-looking attitude should be meant to promote learners’ smooth L2 identity development as ‘multilingual subjects’ as well as an increased sense of self-affirmation and efficacy, rather than for external purposes (Kramersch, 2009).

Diversity Within

Another concern is that the use and promotion of ‘traditional’ Japanese culture in English education might lead to ignorance of the diversity within Japan. As Kanno (2003) points out in her study of Japanese immersion programs, ethnic minority students tend to suffer structural inequality. Moreover, biethnic and returnee students often become the target of macro- and micro-aggressions due to their differences from other Japanese (Kidder, 1992; Oikawa & Yoshida, 2007).

If English is supposed to be a ‘bridge’ to connect different cultures, or a language of mutual understanding, why don’t we consider both intra- and inter-cultural communication and embrace diversity within the country? English classes can provide learners with rich opportunities for such discussion and help them to forge deeper intra- and inter-cultural understanding as a result.

Toward an Optimal Balance

The issue of balance between being global and being local is sensitive. I have yet to reach a conclusion about how much we should embrace the current situation of English education in Japan as a successful and necessary attempt to raise awareness of students’ own culture, protect their local language and identity, and promote multilingualism as opposed to furthering the domination of the English language.

However, if this attitude is excessive—if it encourages English learners in Japan to only ‘export’ their economic and cultural assets and avoid humiliation in intercultural settings, and if these learners are ignorant of the ethnic and cultural diversity *within* their nation—it would take them further away from accomplishing the fundamental goal of English education in Japan: to cultivate global citizens who can communicate effectively with those who have different personal and cultural backgrounds.

In this increasingly globalized world with complex problems that cannot be solved by a single nation, international cooperation has become more and more important, even more than international competition. English education has great potential to initiate intra- and inter-cultural goodwill.

Even though it may sound contradictory, this adjustment seems to be the closest way toward cultivating of global citizens in Japan who can appreciate diversity and take leadership in this global society, thereby strengthening the nation.

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