

# The Current Situation and Issues of the Teaching of English in Japan

YAMAOKA Kenji

Thank you, Asao sensei. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Kenji Yamaoka, the representative of the country where the TOEFL score is the lowest in Asia. A lot of things I will mention today will be redundant for the Japanese audience, but please pay kind attention to my presentation.

First, let me have a look at the history of English teaching in Japan. According to Professor Yasuteru Otani, now teaching at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, Japanese English has alternated between pro-English and anti-English since the Meiji Restoration (see Slide 1). After Japan opened its door to foreign countries, it was crucial that Japan should catch up with Western countries. So they tried to

introduce a lot of things by reading books written in foreign languages. That was the first pro-English period. But after Japan gained power, they got confidence in themselves and this arrogance made them too arrogant to regard English as a language of enemies. Through the two wars at the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, they became anti-

English. Some intellectuals even claimed that they should abolish English teaching from school. But after the Russo-Japan war came the Taisho Democracy, and peaceful and democratic atmosphere prevailed in Japan and they became English fanatics again. But as militarism permeated Japan, they became antagonistic toward English again. Since Japan lost the Pacific War, they lost confidence in themselves and they became fanatics again about English. It is said that an English conversation textbooks sold like hotcakes. After the war, Japan tried to build up the country again and they attained economic growth. During that period Japanese people regained confidence and some people said that English was not necessary in Japan. But after the Bubble burst at the end of the last century, the Japanese lost confidence again and the fourth pro-English period began. And now in the midst of the economic or financial crisis, we are now trying hard to

## Slide 1

### Brief History of English Teaching in Japan

#### From the Meiji Period to the Present

|  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| - The alternation between pro -English and anti -English |                             |
| 1868 - 1885  | the 1st pro-English Period  |
| 1885 - 1907  | the 1st anti-English Period |
| 1907 - 1922  | the 2nd pro-English Period  |
| 1927 - 1945  | the 2nd anti-English Period |
| 1945 - 1955  | the 3rd pro-English Period  |
| 1955 - 1991  | the 3rd anti-English Period |
| 1991 - present   | the 4th pro-English Period  |

(Otani, 2008)

improve Japanese students' English ability.

Slide 2 shows the history of the junior high school course of study after World War II. After the war, there were four or six class hours per week in junior high school. But around the middle of last century, they were reduced into three. This interestingly coordinates with the pro- and the anti-English periods that I mentioned before. And now, just the new course of study has been issued, the class hours will be increased to four from three. It is said to be a great advancement in recent years.

Slide 3 is the history of revisions of the high school course of study after the study after the World War II. The circles on the left side mean that English was and is a required subject for senior high school students. In the 1969 version, English was a required subject for high school students but after that, during the so-called anti-English period, English was not a required subject but an elective subject. It was until 1998 version that the English became required again. The number of words required to be learned was 4,900, 4,700, 40 or 50 years ago, but it was decreased into 2,900 or

2,200. Then again, the new course of study requires 3,200 words for high school students including the words that they are supposed to learn at junior high school level. So, all in all, we can say that now is the time the Board of Education and Japan itself are requiring junior high and high school students to gain a high-level English proficiency. The English boom is now around us.

Roughly speaking, as shown in Slide 4, during the first cycle after the World War, the target of English study was Americanization or Anglicization, when the textbooks said everything in America was wonderful and most of the scenes were American family or American schools as you see in the famous textbook "Jack and Betty." And after that, in the second cycle, the main target of

### Slide 2

#### Courses of Study after World War II

##### Junior High School

| year | edition                  | maximum class number   |
|------|--------------------------|--|
| 1947 | First Issue              | 4/w  |
| 1951 | 1 <sup>st</sup> revision | 6/w  |
| 1958 | 2 <sup>nd</sup> revision | 3/w(1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> ), 5 / w(3 <sup>rd</sup> ) |
| 1969 | 3 <sup>rd</sup> revision | 4/w  |
| 1977 | 4 <sup>th</sup> revision | 3/w  |
| 1989 | 5 <sup>th</sup> revision | 3(+1)/w  |
| 1998 | 6 <sup>th</sup> revision | 3(+1 or 2)/w   |
| 2008 | 7 <sup>th</sup> revision | 4/w  |

### Slide 3

#### Courses of Study after World War II

##### Senior High School

| year  | edition                  | maximum word number |
|-------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 1947  | First Issue              |                     |
| 1951  | 1 <sup>st</sup> revision |                     |
| 1956  | 2 <sup>nd</sup> revision |                     |
| ○1960 | 3 <sup>rd</sup> revision | 4900                |
| 1970  | 4 <sup>th</sup> revision | 4700                |
| 1978  | 5 <sup>th</sup> revision | 2950                |
| 1989  | 6 <sup>th</sup> revision | 2900                |
| ○1998 | 7 <sup>th</sup> revision | 2200                |
| ○2009 | 8 <sup>th</sup> revision | 3200                |

the English teaching was international understanding, understanding not only English speaking countries but other countries as well. So in those days, many of the textbooks were about Japan, about other countries than America or Great Britain. One of the favored texts was Martin Luther King Junior's speech "I have a dream." It was around this time that a lot of attention was focused on minorities and minor countries.

From around 1989 to present, it is said that English has become a lingua franca or the tool to communicate with all the people in the world. This attitude can be seen in a lot of textbooks.

These were some notable events in the late 1990s (see Slide 5). One of them was a heated debate between Hiraizumi and Watanabe, Hiraizumi insisted that English should be for practical use and only a handful of people should learn it. But Watanabe claimed that English is for sophistication and everybody should learn it to get culturally enlightened. 1987 was a great year for English teaching. A lot of ALTs began to be introduced into Japan. Slide 6 is the graph showing the number of ALTs who have come to Japan. In the first year only 812 ALTs came and it reached above 5,000 around the turn of the century. Not many ALTs are professional teachers, but the contribution they have made to the English teaching in Japan has been very great.

In 1989, national standardized test for college entrance examinees started. I understand that the introduction of national standardized test was because the entrance exam problems were too difficult so they need to make a standardized easier test. The problem, however, is that all the questions, all the problems were

#### Slide 4

##### Aims of the Course of Study

|                |                                |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| 1947 ~ 1969    | Americanization, Anglicization |
| 1969 ~ 1989    | International understanding    |
| 1989 ~ present | Global communication           |

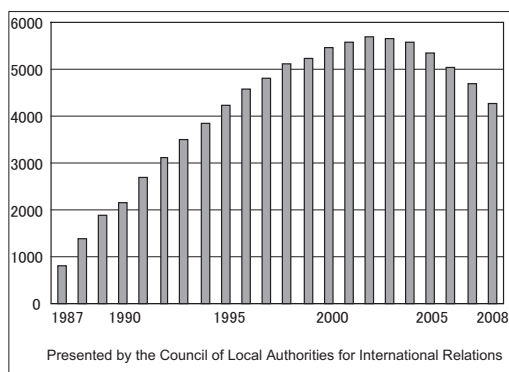
#### Slide 5

##### Notable Events in the late 1990s

- 1975 Hiraizumi - Watanabe controversy  
'English for Practical Use or Sophistication'
- 1987 Introduction of Assistant English teachers
- 1989 National Standardized Test for college entrance examinees
- 1996 Oral Communication classes started in senior high school

#### Slide 6

##### The Number of ALTs



multiple choice style. So some college teachers complain that English ability has become lower since this was introduced.

In 1996, Oral Communication classes started in senior high schools, which focused on communication in English. In this subject, most of the activities are task-based, and there are conversation and listening practices. And the authentic materials are found in the textbooks. This subject was meaningful in that communicative competence has been paid much attention.

Slide 7 illustrates what the present course of study requires or regulates. In junior high school, there are three class hours a week. It requires the students to learn 900 words. The present course of study also mentions the importance of the functions of language and situations in which English is used. I saw Korean course of study before and there was a more minute description of functions. It was the first time that the course of study referred to

situations and functions. And it states that communication ability should be practical and should be conducted in the exchange of ideas and information. And fostering positive attitudes was more emphasized in the English teaching. In the STEP test, Eiken, attitude evaluation was included around this time.

Slide 8 is the table showing the publication numbers of junior high school textbooks. There are now six textbooks. And the top selling one is the *New Horizon* textbook.

Slide 9 is from the present course of study for senior high school. The course of study requires that students learn 2,200 words. It also describes situations and functions in which English activities should be carried on. And now the Oral Communication I and II subjects are also being taught. Overall objectives are similar to those of junior high school. Although it has become a little more difficult, but practical communication abilities are stressed and also the attitude

### Slide 7

#### English Classes at the Secondary Schools 1

##### Lower Secondary Level - Junior High School

- 3 classes a week
- 900 words Overall
- Situations and functions
- Objectives

To develop students' 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

### Slide 8

#### Textbooks

##### Junior High School

| Name          | Number of Publication (2006) |
|---------------|------------------------------|
| • New Horizon | <b>1575372</b>               |
| • Sunshine    | <b>761139</b>                |
| • Crown       | <b>802856</b>                |
| • Total       | <b>323054</b>                |
| • One World   | <b>177664</b>                |
| • Columbus    | <b>69040</b>                 |

offered by Kairyudo Publishing Company

toward communication is important, it says.

Slide 10 shows the number of textbooks that are published in Japan now. There are more than 30 textbooks available in Japan. The reason why the Oral Communication textbooks are so few is that not many schools give the Oral Communication subjects because they think it is quite difficult since it contains debates, discussions, and speeches.

Slide 11 contains the subjects now being taught at high school. Most schools give English I and Oral Communication I in the first year. In Oral Communication I, there are a lot of team-teaching classes. The two circles on the left mean that either of the subjects, English I or Oral Communication I, should be required to be taken. In the second year, they mostly learn English II and Writing. In the third year, they take Reading classes and Writing classes. This is a typical pattern of the high school students taking English.

Last year, the new elementary school and junior high school courses of study were issued as shown in Slide 12. At the end of last year, the draft of the high school course of study was announced. The main change of the new course of study for junior and senior high school is that it stresses the need to

**Slide 9**

**English Classes at the Secondary Schools 2**

**Upper Secondary Level - Senior High School**

- 2200 words
- Situations and functions
- Oral Communication I & II
- Overall Objectives
  - To develop students' practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages.

**Slide 10**

**Textbooks**

**Senior High School**

| Subject               | Number of textbooks |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| English I             | 36                  |
| Oral Communication I  | 20                  |
| English II            | 45                  |
| Oral Communication II | 7                   |
| Reading               | 31                  |
| Writing               | 26                  |

**Slide 11**

**English Classes at the Secondary Schools 2**

```

    graph TD
        subgraph Year1 [1st year]
            E1[English I (3)]
            OC1[Oral Communication I (2)]
        end
        subgraph Year2 [2nd year]
            OC2[Oral Communication II (4)]
        end
        subgraph Year3 [3rd year]
            R[Reading (4)]
            W[Writing (4)]
        end
    
```

\* Course of Study(1999) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

integrate four skills in one class or one subject. This reflects that the Ministry of Education thinks that in English classes all four skills were separated into different classes. In reading class, they only read, in writing class, they only write. There was very little connection between these classes. So in classes under the new course of study, teachers are requested to improve four skills providing communicative activities.

The second thing is that grammar is placed as a tool to support communication. Since the practical communication ability was emphasized, grammar teaching was regarded as of secondary importance. As a result, many junior high and senior school students' grammatical abilities have become lower. Grammar was, in a sense, thought of as something that hinders communication. But they've found out grammar is quite important in communication and so grammar appeared in the daylight.

In elementary school, the new subject "English activities" will be started in two years, and hopefully in some schools, next year. So there should be a great linkage between elementary English activities and junior high school English teaching. The new course of study emphasizes that these two kinds of schools should cooperate.

For high school (see Slide 13), as with junior high school, the new course of study says that the integration of four skills is quite important and they designate English Communication I as a compulsory subject. At present, students have to take either English I or Oral Communication I, but after the new course of study is enacted in four years, all the students will have to take English Communication I.

What is English Communication I? What kind of subject will it be? Although this is only a guess, English Communication I is based first on reading and from reading they are guided to develop other skills through oral activities,

**Slide 12**

**The New Course of Study enacted in 2011**

**Lower Secondary Level - Junior High School**

- Integration of four skills
- Grammar as a tool to support communication
- Linkage with English activities at elementary school
- 4 classes a week
- 1200 words

**Slide 13**

**The New Course of Study enacted in 2012**

**Upper Secondary Level - Senior High School**

- Integration of four skills
- Designation of the compulsory subject – English - Communication I
- Grammar as a tool to support communication
- Encouragement of presentation and debate activities
- 3000 words

writing, presentations, or listening activities. This means that teachers are required to have greater communicative competence and teaching skills.

As in junior high school, grammar will be of more importance, especially in the second year and the third year. Third year students will be encouraged to make presentations and have debates in class. And the words they are supposed to learn

will be 3,000, which is 800 words more than the students now are expected to learn.

The following list shows the subjects of English that the new course of study for high school will offer. Basic English Communication will be designed for those students who are not so good at English. As I mentioned, Oral Communication I will be a required subject. And English Expression is the mixed subject of Oral Communication and Writing. So I think in the English Expression classes teaching will include grammar-based communication active ties.

Since the draft of the course of study was publicized, there has been a lot of controversy as to the phrase “English classes should basically be conducted through English.” Some people say it is impossible, but I believe constant exposure to English will surely improve the students’ overall English abilities if the teachers speak intelligible English so that their students can learn from it.

In Slides 15 and 16, you see notable events in the past 10 years. From 2002 to 2007, there has been an intensive training for all the English teachers. This has been successfully completed. I have been to several trainings in many prefectures and found that most teachers

**Slide 14**

| English Classes at Secondary Schools 4                                       |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
|  | Basic English Communication[2] |
| ○  | English Communication I[3]     |
|  | English Communication II[4]    |
|  | English Communication III[4]   |
|  | English Expression [2]         |
|  | English Expression [4]         |
|  | English Conversation[2]        |
| * Homepage of Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology |                                |

**Slide 15**

| Notable Events in the past 10 years 1 |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| •2002 – 2007                          | Intensive Training for all the English teachers                  |
| •2003 – 2008                          | Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities”       |
| •2006                                 | Introduction of the listening tests for the “Center Examination” |

**Slide 16**

| Notable Events in the past 10 years 2 |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| •2008                                 | The New Course of Study for elementary school - English activities for the 5th and 6th graders introduced in 2011 |
| •2009                                 | The New Course of Study for senior high school - “Basically English classes should be conducted through English.” |

are quite active in those seminars. They were trying very hard to improve their English proficiency and they were enthusiastic about getting in touch with new methods. In some prefectures, they take TOEFL test at the beginning of the training course, and at the end they take it again to see how much they have improved. From 2003 to 2008, the active plan to cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” was enforced. This action plan shows that the Ministry of Education is quite decisive, quite ambitious about systematic reform of English teaching. The intensive training for all the teachers, which I mentioned before, was one of the plans. Another plan was the introduction of the listening test for the “Center Examination,” starting in 2006. Out of 250 marks, 50 will be given to the listening test. There have been minor mechanical problems, but so far the listening test has been going quite well. The start of English activities in elementary school is also in line with the action plan. All the fifth and sixth graders will be engaged in English activities in two years.

The action plan encourages small-group teaching and class activities making use of English. It also requires English teachers to improve their English proficiency. The required scores or level of English that teachers are to attain is TOEFL 550, TOEIC 730 or STEP pre-first grade.

One of the greatest achievements of this action plan was the Super English Language High School (SELHi) program, which has been almost completed. It started in 2002 and it will end at the end of this school year. As you see in Slide 17, 169 schools have been designated as Super English Language High School. In all these SELHi schools, students’ English competence has been remarkably improved. The graph in Slide 18 proves it. The red line illustrates average GTEC scores

of SELHi students, the blue one is that of post-SELHi students, the high schools who have finished designation, and the black line is the other high school students’ scores. Most of the students at all schools start at the same scores, but SELHi and post-SELHi students improve when they advance to the third grade. GTEC 460 is almost equivalent to TOEFL 420. Post-SELHi third year students’ will reach above 500. Other than the high scores in proficiency tests, the SELHi students motivation to express themselves in English is outstanding. This attitude is further cultivated when they go on to universities.

So far, I have given a brief history and described the current situation of English teaching. Here I am going to share with you some issues that must be solved in order to improve English teaching in Japan.

#### Slide 17

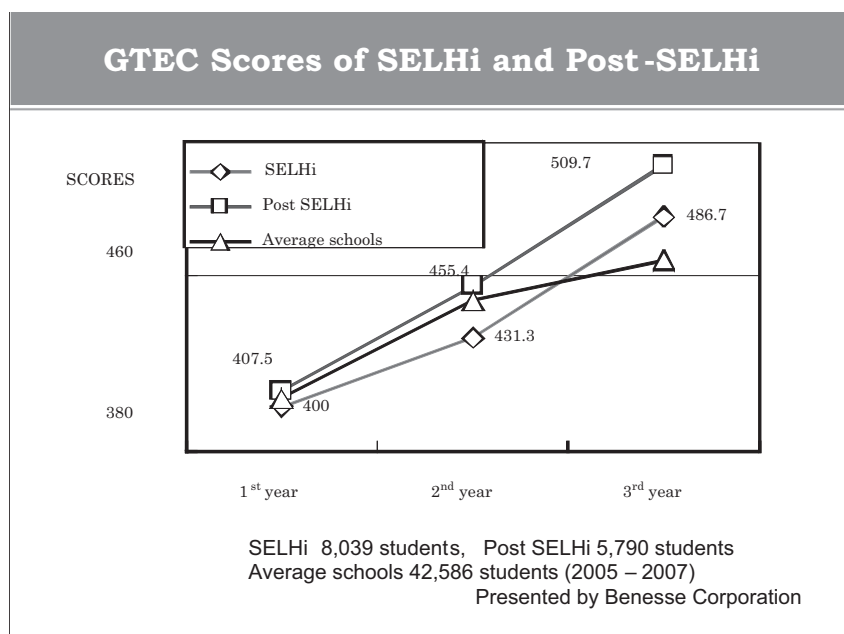
#### Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” 4

Promotion of the Super English Language High School(SELHi) Program

| Years     | No. of designated schools |
|-----------|---------------------------|
| 2002-2004 | 18                        |
| 2003-2005 | 35                        |
| 2004-2006 | 35                        |
| 2005-2007 | 31                        |
| 2006-2008 | 34                        |
| 2007-2009 | 16                        |
| Total     | 169                       |



Slide 18



First of all, there are many things to consider or prepare before commencing the English activities in elementary schools shown in the upper half of Slide 19. The Ministry of Education says the classroom teachers should teach but they are rank amateurs at English teaching. So how to train teachers, how to have the amateur teachers teach English, is a big issue. In some elementary schools, there will be good teachers, but in other schools, such expert teachers may not be available, so the standardization of quality of teaching can be a great problem. And we must carefully consider how to link with junior high school teaching, and how to create the curriculum, syllabus and teaching materials. These books are trial versions of what the Ministry of Education calls the English Notebook. In these books there is very little English. These books are designed so that the students go in for various activities, looking at pictures. It will take good skills for teachers to have the students enjoy the activities and

Slide 19

- Issues to Tackle to Improve English teaching 1**
- 1 English activities in elementary school**
    - 1) How to train teachers
    - 2) How to standardize the quality of teaching
    - 3) How to link with junior high teaching
    - 4) How to create the curriculum, syllabus and teaching material
  - 2 Goals of junior and senior high English teaching**
    - 1) How to set the goals of achievement other than entrance exams
    - 2) How to set the evaluation criteria for four skills
    - 3) How to motivate the students toward the goals
    - 4) How to select the grammatical knowledge for the students to attain the goals

learn from them. We should learn a lot from Korea and China, which are more advanced in elementary school teaching.

The goals of senior high and junior high English teaching should also be set clearly as shown in the lower half of Slide 19. Now, unlike in China, there are no or very few criteria in English language teaching except the goals to pass the entrance exams or to get higher TOEIC/TOEFL scores. In some high schools or in some organizations, they are beginning to make “can-do lists” but they are not standardized now. So it is crucial to work out the goal of English learning and the ways to motivate the students toward the goals. As in Korea, the students’ interest and confidence in English will get lower as they advance in grades. It is, therefore, quite difficult to motivate students, especially those students who have lost interest.

At the same time, as shown in Slide 20, we should seek methods with which to improve students’ four skills integrally and to balance the communicative abilities and the training to pass the entrance exams. Grammar acquisition is quite important but language elements are being eliminated in amount, so it is necessary to have them acquire English grammar through task-based teaching. But many teachers are not so used to teaching that way.

English teachers’ capability is also another problem. As I mentioned, in the new high school course of study, all English classes are supposed to be conducted in English. But many teachers are against the idea now. I don’t think everything should be taught in English, but more exposure to English is quite necessary for students. To make this possible, teachers should use English which is beneficial for students. I think that young English teachers’ English abilities are getting higher every year. So I’m not so pessimistic about English teachers’ speaking abilities in the future.

Class size is another problem (see Slide 20). Instead of 60, we have 40 students on average but we should minimize the class size more to 20. Also, we should make better use of Assistant English Teachers. They used to complain that they were treated like human tape recorders. But now they are being utilized more effectively in many classes. Nevertheless, team-teaching classes should be more communication-oriented and we should make more use of their presence.

Lastly entrance exams should be changed. Now the entrance exams are changing little by little, but in many, universities ask the examinees to translate English sentences into Japanese.

**Slide 20**

**Issues to Tackle to Improve English teaching 2**

- 3 Methods of junior and senior high English teaching**
  - 1) How to improve accuracy & fluency**
  - 2) How to improve four skills integrally**
  - 3) How to balance teaching to improve communicative abilities and training to pass the entrance exams**
  - 4) How to connect grammar acquisition with task-based teaching**
- 4 Improvement of English teachers’ capability**
  - 1) How to improve the teachers’ four skills**
  - 2) How to share good teaching & training methods**
  - 3) How to recruit good teachers**
  - 4) How to improve pre-service training at university**

Communication-oriented classes are not compatible with the entrance exams. This is the complaint we hear almost every day from high school teachers. We should, as college teachers, improve the quality of the English entrance exam problems to meet the demand or the achievements of high school teaching.

Although there are many problems to solve in Japan, I'm very hopeful that this country's

English teaching will be improved steadily. Although the reform is slow, steady progress will be made in the near future. I'm very hopeful because I have seen many good teachers throughout the country and they are quite eager to change their ways of teaching to change the students. Thank you very much.

**Slide 20**

**Issues to Tackle to Improve English teaching 3**

- 5 Class size**
  - 1) How to minimize the class size into 20.**
  - 2) How to teach a small-size class**
- 6. Assistant English teachers' participation in class**
  - 1) How to make better use of ALTs in communication class**
  - 2) How to have them help with reading & writing classes**
- 7 Entrance exams for senior high school and university**
  - 1) How to measure the examinees' communication ability**
  - 2) How to make questions compatible with what the students have studied and done previously**