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Enhancement of Teacher Training: Key to Improvement of English Education in Japan

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Abstract

English language education and the lack of quality in its practical application in Japan has become a very common topic for discussion over the years. The reason this persists as a topic of discussion is simply that very little improvement has been noted in overall English ability among Japanese students despite a series of policy changes instituted by the Ministry of Education. This paper examines these policy initiatives and describes how they were intended to be implemented as well as problems associated with them. The authors believe that the lack of qualified teachers is likely responsible for the current undesirable situation and the enhancement of training programs for teachers will function as the key to the solution of this problem.

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1. Introduction

English language education and the lack of quality in its practical application in Japan has become a very common topic for discussion over the years. The main reason this persists as a topic of discussion is that very little improvement has been noted in overall English ability among Japanese students despite a series of policy changes instituted by the Ministry of Education. According to the English Proficiency Index Report released in 2013, Japan ranked 26th among 60 countries where English is not used as a native language (Crienglish.com, 2013). Compared

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with 22nd in 2012, this shows that the average level of Japanese learners' English proficiency has decreased despite the continuing increase in Japanese government's investment into English education (Crienglish.com, 2013).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been advanced as a method of teaching communicative competence since the 1980s. For instance, in 2001 the CERF guidelines (Common European Framework of References for Languages) were established. The intent of CERF was to promote the use of CLT in Europe. This has had an effect on language teaching and learning throughout the world (Sasajima, S., Nishino, T., Ehara, Y. and Nagamine, T. 2012). Japan has made attempts to catch up with this recent world trend in English education to achieve a more fruitful outcome. But the report mentioned above shows that these attempts have failed.

In 2018, English will become a compulsory subject in some primary schools from the fifth year. Students will be expected to hold discussions on current events topics in English in high school (Wada, 2015). This is another big change in the policy of the Ministry of Education. Students will be expected to have a better chance to master English by starting the learning process two years earlier than before. However it is questionable whether this policy change can generate satisfactory outcomes.

Many researchers have commented on the problems with the implementation process of the designated curriculums. CLT is not being employed as an idealized teaching method due to various situational constraints (Sakui, 2003). There is "a complicated gap between educational policies and actual teaching practice in Japan" (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009). More constructive studies are needed in order to make the use of CLT a substantial reform in English education in Japan (Nishino, 2008). This paper analyzes this undesirable situation from a new perspective, that of teacher training. It gives a general description about the changes in policies regarding English education in Japan, explains the insufficient teacher training at a national level and highlights the key points of teacher training to enhance the implementation of CLT.

2. History of Policy Change in English Education

2.1. History of Policy Change in English Education

During the Meiji period, English teaching was adopted as part of the school education as Japan was rushing to absorb as much information as possible regarding technological advances in the West. The focus of language learning (Sato, 2002) (English as well as other European languages) was to develop reading and writing skills through the study of grammar and vocabulary. Communicative activities were rarely encouraged (Kitao and Kitao 1995). Butler and Iino (2005:28) describe the situation beginning from the early 1900s:

"English became primarily an academic pursuit, learned mainly for the purpose of reading written texts rather than as a means of communication. Even after the nationalistic movement of this period ended, English was widely adopted as a screening process for elite education. As a result, the so-called *juken eigo* (English for the purpose of entrance examinations) became the main goal of learners rather than English for communication".

Japan re-emerged on the international scene, after the Second World War, in 1964 with the Tokyo Olympics. Although English-speaking assistants were available at venues, the lack of English speaking ability among the general population was made clear. By the 1970s and 1980s many people were unsatisfied with the speed of change regarding English education. Many people felt that not enough was being done to develop communicative skills in English. Many were aware that the Ministry of Education's (now known as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, i.e. MEXT) Course of Study Guidelines did not discuss teaching English for communicative purposes. Many people argued that among the content, goals, and structure of English classes in Japanese schools a change of policy was needed to improve the teaching and learning of English (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009).

Since the 1980s, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language in schools in Japan has been viewed as a weak point in Japanese Middle and Secondary schools. Because of this the Ministry of Education established a variety of

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