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Review Article

English education for healthcare professionals in Japan

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Summary In a global environment, education for healthcare professionals should include cultivating human resources who have the necessary skills to work in an international arena. This article will review the current status of English education for dental healthcare professionals in Japan. After conducting a literature search using the keywords: English education, Japan, and dental, only a few studies were found that investigated and proposed suggestions for dental professional English education. Even so, these were still in the early stages with outcomes yet to be fully evaluated. Even though English is thought indispensable for global professionals, and that increasing chances for communication skills is necessary, little attention has been addressed to English education for dental professionals or the implementation of such education in the Japanese undergraduate dental curricula. With the current reality of field expansion in dentistry, the need for not only improved English communication skills for Japanese dentists, but also the acquisition of essential expertise, psychomotor, teambuilding, critical thinking, and creative thinking skills in English as well as Japanese, is a definite probability. In order to reach this level of knowledge, further efforts and research would be necessary for the advancement and development of dental professional English education in Japan.

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1. Introduction (English for dental professionals)

In a global environment, knowledge, techniques, research outcomes, workforce and dental related businesses have the potential of becoming borderless. Mutual recognition of dental licensure, for example, has already become a reality in the EU. In addition, other regions are also advancing towards the mutual recognition of dental practitioner licensing [1]. While mutual recognition of dental licensure is not yet a reality in Japan, high-quality healthcare education including current knowledge and trends is required; and the quality of dental education must be globally assured/accrued. A white paper on dental education in Japan (*Shikaigaku-kyouiku hakusho*), published once every three years, presents a realistic picture and also reports the trend of dental education needing to be assured globally [2,3]. This is necessary not only to assure the dental health of Japan's citizens, but also to enable Japanese dental school graduates to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to work internationally, providing dental care and assistance to other countries thereby improving health standards. Currently, the graduation competencies for dental professionals do not appear to differ significantly by country, which makes globalization in this profession a definite probability [4–6].

In such an environment, English becomes a crucial prerequisite for healthcare professionals to obtain up-to-date knowledge, participate in discussions with international colleagues, pursue successful careers [7], perform state of the art treatments, and communicate with an increasing number of international students and patients. According to the Japan Student Services Organization, the number of international students studying in Japan has been steadily increasing [8]. Also according to a survey, the estimated number of foreign patients in Japan, 22,000 in 2011(FY) and 27,000 in 2012(FY) were calculated with a growth rate of 23% [9]. Accordingly, for students majoring in the healthcare professions, the interest to improve English competencies is growing in many countries [10,11].

In Japan, “English” is sometimes misunderstood as only those proficiencies covered in TOEFL® or IELTS™ type tests, e.g. speaking, writing, listening, or reading; however, in this review's context, English covers the ability for dental professionals to be competent in more than just communication skills. For example, “Critical Thinking Skills”, a competency that the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) defines as necessary for new general dentists [4], is very important for decision-making and problem solv-

ing in all the healthcare professions. Of the six domains listed by ADEA, including communication, it is listed first, and is unquestionably an important skill for Japanese dental professionals, too. Education for healthcare professionals should ideally include cultivating human resources with the ability to effectively use these competencies in an international arena in “English”. Even though English is indispensable for healthcare professionals, little attention has been addressed to researching the field of English education for dental professionals or the undergraduate dental curricula in Japan [12,13]. Therefore, the objective of this review was to analyze the current situation of English education and which skills are necessary for dental professionals. To do that we first need to take a brief look at the educational structure and history of English education in Japan.

2. English education in Japan (pre-university entrance) and its trend

In Japan, compulsory education spans nine years, from primary (six years) through lower secondary school (three years) with a near 100% attendance rate. Even though upper secondary school (three years) is not compulsory, it also has a high attendance rate of over ninety-seven percent [14]. English language education began in 1854 when Japan opened its borders to Westerners. Since then it has undergone many transformations, with the most significant occurring in the mid-1980s when the Communicative Approach became more popular [15].

Even so, while reading and grammar skills have become quite well ingrained, the oral communication skills of the general populace still remain quite low [16]. Under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) Guidelines: “The Course of Study (National Standards for School Curricula)” the government has been revising the standards for English education every ten years since their issuance in 1958. In 2003 the importance of communication skills was stressed, however most lower and upper secondary schools still put a lot of effort into teaching English grammar in Japanese, and translating reading passages into Japanese rather than English speaking and listening skills, which are necessities for communication. Due to lack of funds and number of instructors, in best-case scenarios students often only have 40–45 min of contact with a native English speaker, once a week; which really isn't adequate for improvement.

Therefore, by the time students enter a dental program in university, their communication skills are still underdeveloped. Even though there is a universal understanding that

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