岐阜協立大学論集 56 巻 2 号（2023 年）
The Journal of Gifu Kyoritsu University, Vol.56, No.2 (2023)

HAS SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN BEEN A 'FAILURE'?

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Key words: English, education, Japan, MEXT, schools

ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, Japan has often been portrayed as a country of poor English speakers. Media articles have drawn attention to Japan's lowly position in international proficiency rankings and the perennial inability of its school students to meet annual attainment targets set by the country's education ministry, MEXT. While, on this basis, it is perhaps understandable that many should regard Japanese school language education as a relative failure, this article questions whether that would be a fair and accurate assessment of the situation.

INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of the Japanese as a nation incapable of mastering the English language is a common and enduring one. More than two decades ago, Takashi Inoguchi (1999) labelled his home country an '*eigo shippai kokka'* (literally: a "state that has failed English"), while Takao Suzuki (1999) asked the question "*Nihonjin wa naze Eigo ga dekinai ka"* (literally: "Why can't the Japanese speak English?"). Such views have been echoed down the years in a myriad of books, articles and Internet discussion threads with titles like: "Fresh blow as Japan struggles to improve English fluency" (Lau, Basken & Baker 2021); "Why are Japanese so bad at English?" (Japan Today); and "Why do Japanese have trouble learning English?" (Tsuboya-Newell 2017). Glenn Newman (2020) has gone as far as to claim that "anyone who has spent much time in Japan knows that Japanese with good English are few and far between". In this context, Takanori Terasawa (2012) has spoken of a "discourse of Japanese incompetence in English", while Sunao Fukunaga (2017:16) claims that "the idea that the Japanese cannot speak English pervades society and has become a national stigma that has created a discourse of failure".

IS THERE ANY EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF 'FAILURE' IN SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN?

In a survey conducted by Rakuten in 2016, almost 70% of 1000 Japanese male and female respondents aged between 20 and 69 assessed their own command of English as either "poor" or "very poor", against just 8.7% who considered it to be either "good" or "very good" (Rakuten Research 2016). To be sure, there is a wealth of 'anecdotal evidence' to support claims that, generally speaking, Japanese students graduate from high school incapable of communicating in or even understanding English. As one illustration of this, Kumiko Torikai (2018) highlights "serious concerns" among teaching staff at universities regarding the low English skills of their first-year students:

> English faculty across universities are complaining that many students enter school without a good grounding in the basics, and lack the grammatical knowledge and vocabulary to understand the English texts they read. As a result, they cannot answer questions, and are incapable of writing or speaking. Some

universities are obliged to offer remedial classes to help with students' poor grasp of high-school English (Torikai 2018).

But amid the harsh criticism, is there any empirical evidence to support the claims that Japanese schools have generally 'failed' when it comes to fostering students with proficiency in English? Some would certainly answer this question in the affirmative, perhaps pointing to the fact that Japanese high-school and junior high-school students, taken as a whole, invariably fail to attain the English proficiency standards set by Japan's own education ministry, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The MEXT attainment target, which has been in place since 2013, requires 50% of junior high school students and high school students to demonstrate an English proficiency level equivalent to Grade 3 level and Grade Pre-2 level, respectively, in the *Eiken* 'STEP' test. As Hans Karlsson (2016) points out, the *Eiken* test has "traditionally been seen as the standard for English proficiency certification in Japan". *Eiken* Grade 3 and Grade Pre-2 are considered by MEXT to be equivalent to levels A1 and A2, respectively, under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Official statistics show that both high-school and junior high-school students have failed to attain the 50% target every year up to the present day (MEXT 2021). In the 2013 survey report, when the current assessment criteria were introduced, only 32.2% of junior high-school students and 31% of high-school students were considered to have fulfilled MEXT's attainment targets. In 2021, the equivalent figures were 47% and 46.1%, respectively. On the face of it, then, student proficiency levels do seem to be improving.

There are, however, grounds for skepticism about the data presented in MEXT's survey reports. Although the CEFR (via the *Eiken* test) is referenced by MEXT as the benchmark for its assessment targets, students are deemed to have "reached the target levels" even if they have passed a private test other than *Eiken*, or, perhaps more surprisingly, if they are considered by their teacher to "have attained an equivalent level of competence" (Torikai 2018). MEXT's most recent survey report confirms that this assessment method is still being applied in the compilation of its data. The 2021 report shows that 19.8% of junior high-school students and 14.9% of high-school students reached the attainment target by means of teacher assessment (MEXT 2021). On this basis, it is questionable whether the data in the MEXT survey reports can be considered 'empirical evidence'.

From a wider, international perspective, it is perhaps worth noting that unfavourable comparisons are frequently made between Japanese students and their counterparts in other Asian countries, perhaps most notably those in China and South Korea. According to KK Miller (2014), students in China, Korea and Japan are in "an arms race to see who can produce students with the best English, and Japan seems to be trailing behind in third place". Justin McCurry (2011) has reported concern over the state of language education among members of Japan's business community, who fear that their country's "competitive edge could be blunted unless it takes English communication as seriously as China and South Korea". But is there any empirical evidence that Japanese students are any less proficient in English than their counterparts in China and South Korea, or, indeed, in other Asian countries? Some might seek to answer this question in the affirmative by pointing to the comparatively low scores attained by Japanese examinees in, arguably, the

most widely known international English proficiency test, namely the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Over the past three decades or so, numerous publications (e.g. Hisama & Nakabayashi 1997; Sawa 1999, 2020; Yokogawa 2017) have drawn attention to the fact that Japanese examinees customarily rank among the lowest in Asia in terms of their TOEFL scores. A glance at the most recent TOEFL Test and Score Data (below) does indeed show that Japanese test-takers attained significantly lower test scores than their counterparts in China and South Korea, and also that they performed worse in the sections dedicated to reading and listening (i.e. receptive skills) than those dedicated to speaking and writing (i.e. productive skills).

Test-Taker Performance in TOEFL iBT Test (2021)

	JAPAN	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA
Mean Score	73	87	85
Speaking	17	20	21

Japanese Test-Taker Performance in TOEFL iBT Test by Section (2021)

Reading	19
Listening	19
Writing	18
Speaking	17

Source: TOEFL Test and Score Data Summary 2021

While some have sought to draw sweeping conclusions from such statistics, others, like Bruce Stirling (2016), reject the notion of using TOEFL scores as a measure of a nation's overall level of English proficiency. Stirling identifies an inherent "cultural bias" in the design of the TOEFL test in favour of examinees whose education systems are based on the so-called 'Greek model', primarily 'Western' education systems. According to Sterling, test-takers educated within such systems are trained to apply basic Aristotelian rhetoric and logic to written and verbal tasks, which gives them a significant advantage over test-takers educated within systems that attach a lower priority to the development of such skills (Sterling 2016). Even if this is the case, it is unclear to what extent it explains the attainment gap between Japanese examinees and their counterparts in other Asian countries. A more convincing explanation, offered by Sean Reedy (2000), is that the high number of Japanese TOEFL examinees encompasses individuals with varying levels of English proficiency while, in many other Asian countries, the test is taken only by the most able students.

It is worth noting also that the practice of ranking countries according to their TOEFL scores has been vehemently rejected by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the very organization that created the test, and under whose auspices it is administered. Indeed, ETS regards any attempt to use TOEFL scores in this way as a misuse of data, as clarified in the following statement:

> The TOEFL test provides accurate scores at the individual level; it is not appropriate for comparing countries. The different numbers of students taking the test in each country, how early English is introduced into the curriculum, how many hours are devoted to learning English, and the fact that those taking the test

are not representative of all English speakers in each country or any defined population make ranking by test score meaningless (Educational Testing Service 2022:19).

While TOEFL is arguably the most high-profile of the international English proficiency tests, it is by no means the only one. In another widely used test, the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) English Language Test, Japanese test-takers often match—or even outperform—their counterparts in several other Asian countries. To consider statistics from 2019, the scores of Japanese test-takers in the IELTS Academic Test were equal to those of their Chinese counterparts in terms of overall performance, and higher than them in the Speaking section. In the 2019 IELTS General Training Test, the overall score of Japanese test-takers was equal to that of their South Korean counterparts, and higher than them in the Speaking section.

IELTS Academic Test-Taker Performance (2019)

	JAPAN	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA*
Overall	5.8	5.8	6.0
Speaking	5.5	5.4	5.8

IELTS General Training Test-Taker Performance (2019)

	JAPAN	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA*
Overall	5.8	6.2	5.8
Speaking	5.8	5.9	5.6

Source: IELTS Test Taker Performance 2019.
* (South Korea is listed as “Korea, Republic of”).

The 2021 IELTS statistics, which tell a slightly different story from those of 2019, illustrate the unreliability of international tests as a gauge of English proficiency standards in any given country. In the 2021 IELTS Academic Test, the scores of Japanese test-takers were lower those of their Chinese and South Korean counterparts, both in terms of overall performance and speaking. In the 2021 IELTS General Training Test, Japanese test-takers also attained lower scores than their Chinese counterparts in terms of both overall performance and speaking, but higher scores than their South Korean counterparts in the Speaking section. In the General Training Test, the overall scores of Japanese and South Korean test-takers were identical.

IELTS Academic Test-Taker Performance (2021)

	JAPAN	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA*
Overall	5.90	5.97	6.21
Speaking	5.53	5.55	5.87

IELTS General Training Test-Taker Performance (2021)

	JAPAN	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA*
Overall	5.93	6.36	5.93
Speaking	5.82	6.13	5.75

Source: IELTS Test Taker Performance 2021.
* (South Korea is listed as “Korea, Republic of”).

Aside from seeking to use international proficiency tests as 'evidence' of the low level of English proficiency among Japanese, some have drawn attention to Japan's lowly position in so-called "English proficiency rankings". In this connection, the "EF English Proficiency Index"—which is published annually by Switzerland-based Education First (EF)—has been referenced in a range of publications (e.g. Lau et al. 2021; McNeill 2022; Margolis 2020: Newman 2020).

'Regional Rank' in EF Proficiency Index (2021)

	JAPAN	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA
Score	468	513	529
Rank	78	49	37

As shown in the above table, Japan was ranked in 78th place (out of 112 countries and regions), placing the country squarely in the 'low proficiency' category. By contrast, South Korea (in 37th position) and China (in 49th position) were both placed in the 'moderate' category (Education First 2021).

Despite the attention that the EF Proficiency Index has attracted in recent years, it should be noted that its country rankings are based purely upon data generated by EF's own "Standard English Test", which any individual in any country may complete online, free of charge. However, this fact has not prevented EF's website from advertising the Proficiency Index as "the world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills", a claim derided by Jakub Marian. "What they forget to mention", Marian explains, "is that this is only so because they are the only major company that has the nerve to falsely market the results as ranking of countries based on English proficiency" (Marian 2016). Again, based purely on statistics from its own Index, 'Education First' feels justified in warning that "English proficiency levels have not improved in Japan for years, even as the economy stagnates and global trade moves elsewhere in Asia" (EF 2020:26).

Ultimately, international English tests and "proficiency rankings" can do little more than reflect the examination performance of a relatively small group of individuals from a given country on a given day. They most definitely do not constitute an accurate gauge of English proficiency across the population of any given country. Hence, although it is frequently asserted that Japan lags behind countries like South Korea, China, and indeed most countries in Asia in terms of the English proficiency of its people, there is no empirical data that would support this claim.

WHAT ARE MEXT'S GOALS FOR SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION?

Despite the absence of solid, empirical data on the level of English proficiency in Japan, harsh criticism has been levelled at the country's education ministry, MEXT, for its perceived failings. But how is success in school language education perceived by those responsible for the formulation of policy? Put differently, what are MEXT's goals for the system of school language education that it presides over?

On the face of it, MEXT seems wholly committed to the overarching goal of fostering students with competence (and particularly 'communicative competence') in English. To

this end, the ministry has introduced a series of far-reaching, incremental reforms in school language education over the past few decades. According to Kumiko Torikai (2018), the re¥form process can be traced back to the Second Report of the Ad-Hoc Council on Education, which, in 1986, called for fundamental changes in the way in which English was being taught. As Torikai explains, many of the subsequent changes in school language education have been the result of these reforms, which were devised in the context of a general campaign of societal internationalization (commonly referred to as *kokusaika*). In 1989, MEXT's immediate predecessor—the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (*Monbushō*)—instituted a landmark policy initiative that signalled a categorical rejection of the long-standing, non-communicative language teaching approach known as *yakudoku* (literally, translation and reading) in favour of a much more communicatively-oriented approach to English teaching. Two years earlier, *Monbushō* had collaborated with two other government ministries in the launch of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, a scheme to import young, native English-speaking graduates to work as 'Assistant Language Teachers' (ALTs) in collaboration with local English teachers at junior high schools and high schools.

In 2002, MEXT announced an ambitious 'Strategic Plan', which set out a blueprint for the fostering of 'Japanese with English Abilities' ("*Eigo ga tsukaeru Nihonjin*", literally "Japanese who are able to use English"). Under this plan, the acquisition of English communication skills was described as "an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation" (MEXT 2002). In accordance with this new strategy, English-language abilities were to be demanded of *all* Japanese nationals, with the introduction of specific attainment targets for schools. The following year, MEXT introduced its Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities" ("*Eigo ga tsukaeru Nihonjin*" *no Ikusei no tame no Kōdō Keikaku*), which laid out specific measures to achieve its targets (MEXT 2003). These measures included an increase in the recruitment of ALTs and the introduction of a listening test in the highly important National Center for University Entrance Examinations (*Daigaku Nyūshi Sentā Shiken*).

In 2013, MEXT announced an initiative known as the "English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization" *(Gurōbaru-ka ni taiō shita Eigo Kyōiku Kaikaku Jisshi Keikaku*, which shifted the focus even further away from *yakudoku* and in the direction of communicative English teaching. The Plan stipulated that classes would "in principle" be conducted in English at the lower secondary school (i.e. junior-high school) level, and "in English"—not merely "in principle"—in upper secondary schools (i.e. high schools), and would incorporate "high-level linguistic activities (presentations, debates, negotiations)" (MEXT 2014). MEXT has continued to implement reforms aimed at fostering communicative competence, including a new high school curriculum, which was announced in 2018. One notable addition to the new curriculum is a subject entitled 'logic and expression' (*ronri hyōgen*), which is aimed at developing students' communication skills, including participating in debates and discussions (MEXT 2018:87).

Meanwhile, English education has been expanded at the elementary school level, first as part of 'Education for International Understanding' (*Kokusai Rikai Kyōiku*) in the Period

for Integrated Study, and, since 2020, as a compulsory subject for all fifth- and sixth-grade elementary school pupils. At the tertiary level, MEXT has introduced a range of initiatives with implications for English-medium education (EMI) at Japanese universities. These include the Top Global University Project (MEXT 2013), whose declared aim is to enhance the international competitiveness of higher education in Japan, and the Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development (MEXT 2012), which apparently aims "to overcome the Japanese younger generation's 'inward tendency' and to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field, as the basis for improving Japan's global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations".

Although the above suggests a genuine zeal for reform, numerous academics have accused MEXT policymakers of harbouring an ambivalence toward foreign language education (which, in *de facto* terms, means English education). This ambivalence, it is claimed, manifests itself in MEXT's reluctance to implement rigorously its own declared reform initiatives, particularly those that relate to communicative English teaching. Numerous studies, such as those by Bartlett (2020) and Cooper & Price (2020), have discovered that the traditional language teaching methodology, *yakudoku*, continues to play an important role in school English lessons. In this regard, some, like David John Wood (2019), perceive the lack of communicatively-oriented teacher training as a major obstacle to change. As Wood has explained, training for English teachers still relies heavily on L2 to L1 grammar-translation methodology and is, therefore, in need of "radical recalibration to increase bilingual native Japanese teachers fluent in TESOL methods and theory, and capable of communicating in spoken English" (Wood 2019:26). A further impediment to the introduction of communicative English teaching is the fact that, across the Japanese education system, student progress continues to be evaluated through examinations that attach little or no importance to 'communicative competence'. Indeed, as Wood (2019:16) points out, there are "no national high school L1 spoken exams in Japan". Although the introduction of the new 'Common Test for University Admissions' (*Daigaku Nyūgaku Kyōtsū Tesuto*) in 2021 ushered in a relative shift of focus away from grammar-related questions, it is still fundamentally a test of the examinee's reading and listening comprehension, and it still relies on multiple-choice questions. In that respect, this much-heralded new national examination is no more communicatively oriented than its predecessor, the National Center Test for University Admissions (*Daigaku Nyūshi Sentā Shiken*).

For many, this perennial reliance on examinations that focus solely on passive 'linguistic knowledge' has disincentivised Japanese English teachers from introducing communicative activities into their lessons. It has also engendered negative student attitudes towards the study of English. As Brian McVeigh (2004) puts it, many Japanese students "develop an antipathy toward English, bred through preparing for demanding examinations that focus on the intricacies of grammar". This antipathy has been reflected in various attitude surveys. In one such survey conducted among approximately 1,000 high school students in 2021, male students identified English as their least favourite subject, while, for their female counterparts, English was the second least favourite subject, even though many of those surveyed acknowledged that English ability would help them in their future (Nippon.com 2021).

There have certainly been opportunities for MEXT to effect genuine change in pursuit of its ostensible aim to enhance standards of communicative competence in English. The JET Programme, under which thousands of native English-speakers have been placed in Japanese schools, has presented local schoolteachers with a valuable opportunity to introduce 'living English' into their classrooms, thereby helping the students to appreciate the social value of English and potentially enhancing their motivation for study. However, despite remaining in existence for 35 years, JET's overall impact on language education has been very limited. Undoubtedly, this is mainly because the number of ALTs has remained low (and is, in fact, considerably lower in 2022 than it was in 2002). However, even in many schools where ALTs have operated, the education system's unrelenting emphasis on non-communicatively oriented examinations has effectively prevented Japanese English teachers from devoting class time to 'team-teaching' activities. Consequently, many ALTs have complained of marginalization, with some reporting being used like 'human tape recorders', called upon only to read English passages or pronounce words on cue. It is perhaps no surprise that there are long-standing doubts about MEXT's enthusiasm for the programme. Indeed, David McConnell (2000:30-31), the author of the definitive work on the launch of the JET Programme, describes the attitude of ministry officials at the time as "at best lukewarm".

Against the background of the above, Glasgow and Paller (2016: 154) would seem justified in claiming that MEXT "has placed strong emphasis on the adoption of communicative-oriented approaches in rhetoric, but not necessarily in practice". Some believe that this disconnect between rhetoric and practice stems, to some extent, from an overzealous preoccupation among Japanese policymakers with defending their country's 'unique' national identity. At the same time, however, MEXT policymakers are obviously cognizant of the need to promote Japan's 'national interest' in a world where English remains the predominant medium of international communication. Hence, the launch of initiatives like the Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development (MEXT 2012) suggests an acknowledgement that Japan's economy and international standing would be enhanced if the country's education system were able to foster a greater number of fluent English speakers.

More than twenty years ago, Tessa Carroll (2001:7) drew attention to the tension in Japanese policymaking between the development of Japan's contacts with the outside world on the one hand and "maintaining its uniqueness" on the other. This tension remains a factor even today. In terms of maintaining Japan's uniqueness, it has long been claimed that many of the most powerful individuals in Japan (not only those with responsibility for formulating education policy) are strongly averse to any notion of fostering a population with an outward-looking, cosmopolitan world view. If that is indeed the case, designing a system of language education that is perennially incapable of nurturing a population of proficient English speakers (who, as a corollary of their language ability, might be expected to adopt a more international outlook on life) could be construed as an effective strategy for orienting the Japanese people inwardly. The logic of this strategy is explained here by Ko Unoki (2020):

> Competency in another language, whether it be in English or some other tongue, opens up the possibility of developing different perspectives and modes of thinking as well as coming across

information that may be unavailable in translation. Such possibilities may lead to a proliferation of different views and values held by a people, perhaps too much from the point of view of those in power who want to control our hearts and minds of the people by keeping them ignorant and docile. (Unoki 2020)

There are many others who would perceive MEXT's attitude to English education in a similar way. Robert Aspinall (2010) contrasts the MEXT approach with that of its counterparts in China and South Korea, claiming that the educational bureaucracies in those two countries are "far more positive about encouraging their citizens to master communicative English at a high level" since "they do not share the Japanese fear that if their citizens become too good at a foreign language or spend too long outside their domestic culture they will lose their national identity" (Aspinall 2010: 9-10). While there is probably no justification for accusing MEXT of deliberately pursuing a policy of language education mediocrity, it can certainly be argued that education policymakers attach a higher priority to defending Japan's 'national identity' than to fostering a population of proficient, internationally-minded English speakers. In this connection, Mai Yamagami & James Tollefson (2011) argue that, despite the official discourse on the advantages of English in the context of a 'global Japan', the idea of a globalized Japan is not something that would be welcomed by the country's policymakers:

As in many countries, such as Singapore and South Korea, government documents in Japan generally represent learning English (and technical skills) as the key to reaping the benefits of globalization, but in Japan globalization is also often represented in government documents as a threat to the country's unity, its values and its security. (Yamagami & Tollefson 2011:16).

From this perspective, MEXT's approach to language education may be perceived as one manifestation of a much broader strategy to orient Japan's students inwardly rather than outwardly. In this context, it is worth noting that many of the country's most powerful lawmakers, including several postwar prime ministers, are or have been members of *Nippon Kaigi*, a nationalist organisation that champions "patriotic education". The educational ideology of this organisation centres on the "creation of education that fosters Japanese sensibility" (*Nihon no kansei o hagukumu kyōiku no sōzō*) (Source: Official Website of Nippon Kaigi). This extreme brand of conservativism is evident in many other areas of government policy (see Hoffman 2018). For instance, despite long-standing labour shortages in key sectors, Japan has continued to pursue a highly restrictive immigration policy; a policy described by Markus Bell (2022) as "self-destructive". Indeed, such has been their preoccupation with maintaining the demographic status quo that the highly conservative LDP-led governments (that have ruled Japan for all but 4½ years of the postwar period) have consistently equivocated over introducing measures to halt the seemingly inexorable decline of the Japanese population.

Given the heavy investment in English language education, it would surely be unreasonable to claim that MEXT policymakers seek the failure of their own policies. Indeed, it could be argued that, far from lamenting the failure of their approach to language education, these policymakers regard it as fit for purpose, in that, despite the criticisms, it has been able to foster an adequate number of proficient English-speakers to cater for the needs of Japanese society, as they perceive them, without comprising the 'identity' of that society. While some incremental changes in the direction of communicative English teaching have been introduced, the perceived imperative to protect the 'national identity'

may be just one possible reason why MEXT has not pursued its own declared reform agendas with greater vigour. From MEXT's perspective, a radical new approach to language education that necessitated major changes to the way in which teaching staff are trained—as many (e.g. Wood 2019) have advocated—may engender an unacceptably high level of destabilisation within the teaching workforce. MEXT would need to ensure that Japanese teachers of English themselves possessed a higher degree of communicative competence in English, which would, in turn, necessitate a very considerable degree of expense in re-training. It is also likely that it would engender opposition from many within the ranks of teaching profession itself.

DOES JAPAN REALLY 'NEED' ENGLISH?

To claim that Japanese school education has been a 'failure' would seem to imply that Japan has somehow suffered negative consequences by not having nurtured a population replete with proficient English speakers. But does Japan really 'need' English, and, if so, why?

It is common in discussions of school language education in Japan to focus on the compelling economic rationales for nurturing an English-proficient population. While, in the postwar period, Japan's manufacturing sector has played a key role in elevating Japan to the status of the world's third-largest economy, concerns have been expressed regarding the country's fortunes in the so-called 'global knowledge economy'. For more than three decades, there has been discussion within Japan of the imperative to foster 'global *jinzai*, i.e. human resources with the ability to operate effectively in an international environment, which presupposes an ability to communicate in one or more foreign languages. At the same time, many (e.g. Mouer 2015; Morita 2017) believe that it is incumbent upon Japanese companies to establish workplace conditions conducive to the accommodation of high-quality talent from overseas. Liang Morita (2017) has identified the inability of Japanese companies to provide an English-speaking work environment as one major stumbling-block to the recruitment of such talent. In this connection, she contrasts conditions in Japan with those in other Asian countries (including China), whose companies have enjoyed greater success in recruiting "professionals trained by top universities and business schools in Europe and North America" (Morita 2017:5).

As it stands, however, most Japanese people would almost certainly dismiss any suggestion that a paucity of proficient English-speakers represents a pressing problem for their society, given that only a tiny minority of them ever need to use English in their daily lives. While considerable attention has focused on Japanese commercial enterprises (like the clothing company, *Uniqlo* and the online retailer, *Rakuten*) with recruitment policies that favour candidates with ability in English, such enterprises still represent only a small fraction of Japanese employers. Hence, the claim made more than 10 years ago by Yamagami and Tollefson (2011: 32) that the rewards of English language ability have been "largely limited to a relatively small elite" is undoubtedly still applicable to the present day. Hence, it is likely that many Japanese students regard the study of English as largely irrelevant to their personal progress in life. In this context, the question asked by Robert Aspinall and Brian Cullen (2001), namely: "Is English really necessary for everyone?" has recently been revisited, albeit from a different perspective, by David

McNeill (2022), who claims that Japan "wastes a lot of money teaching English". In similar vein, Kumiko Torikai (2018) has questioned the wisdom of forcing students to study "a subject that may hold little interest for them" while being "repeatedly told that failure to master English will doom them to failure in later life". "It is no wonder", Torikai concludes, "that so many students end up hating the subject".

For those Japanese individuals who aspire to attain fluency in English (or, indeed, in any other foreign language), there is now a wealth of study options available that do not involve sitting in a language classroom or cramming for examinations composed solely of multiple-choice questions. Today's Internet is replete with gratis language learning resources, including video tutorials, podcasts, and interactive learning applications. There are also websites offering one-to-one video lessons with native speakers. Moreover, as McNeill (2022) points out, advances in technology have made it easy for non-English speakers to avail themselves of gratis translation websites, which "instantly render Japanese into understandable English".

While it may be at variance with those who would seek to protect, at all costs, their own highly conservative perception of Japan's national identity, there are those, like Liang Morita (2017), who insist that Japan must foster a higher level of English proficiency across society for reasons that transcend the pursuit of economic goals. For Morita, a proliferation of proficiency in English has the potential to generate a positive, transformational effect in the Japanese workplace and, by extension, across Japanese society at large. As Morita explains, such a transformation is particularly important in the context of Japan's parlous demographic situation:

> With a rapidly aging and declining population, the Japanese need to be able to work with foreign co-workers. Being proficient in English would also help the Japanese form alliances and partnerships with foreign establishments in business, research, higher education, and science and technology. stronger English language skills would help improve attitudes towards foreigners, since recent research has shown that Japanese individuals with stronger English conversation ability have more positive attitudes towards immigration. It would also mitigate discrimination against foreigners if the Japanese could communicate, interact and empathise with them. (Morita 2017:1)

Finally, when addressing the question of whether Japan needs English, it is worth considering whether—and, if so, for how much longer—English is likely to continue enjoying its unrivalled status as the *de facto* medium of international communication; the "indispensable foreign language", as it were. It is a demographic reality that the proportion of people in the world who speak English as a first language is declining rapidly. David Graddol (1997) has calculated that by 2050 the number of native English speakers will have fallen to about 5% of the world's population, compared with about 9% in 1950. There are already 1.1 billion native Chinese speakers, compared with just 372 million native speakers of English. Meanwhile, global interest in the study of Chinese has increased dramatically in recent decades. Given Japan's geographical proximity to China and its deep economic ties to that country, there must certainly be an argument for introducing Chinese as a study option at some level in Japanese schools.

CONCLUSION

To put the aforementioned discourses of "failure" (Fukunaga 2017) and "Japanese incompetence in English" (Terasawa 2012) into a wider perspective, it is worth noting

that the education systems in other major developed countries have faced similar criticisms for their inability to nurture speakers of foreign languages. Glenn Altschuler and David Wippman (2022), for instance, lament the fact that almost 80% of Americans remain monolingual English-speakers; while a research report released by the UK House of Commons described language learning in England as “consistently poor when compared with foreign language learning in other countries” (Long et. al. 2020:5).

Given that Japanese students customarily rank among the highest in the world in subjects like mathematics and science (The Mainichi 2019), it is perhaps understandable, against the background of the above discussion, that many should consider English education to have generated comparatively unsatisfactory outcomes. Although the word ‘failure’ is frequently used in the context of school English language education in Japan, failure is a relative and often highly subjective construct. While many maintain that a substantial increase in the number of proficient English-speakers would bring benefits to the Japanese economy (and, indeed, to society as a whole), there is no indication that, without a significant change in policy-making culture, MEXT would ever be willing to implement the kind of root-and-branch reforms to English education that would be required to bring this about. Moreover, despite the frequent introduction of new reform initiatives and statements of a desire for further improvements in student achievement (MEXT 2021), there is nothing to suggest that MEXT regards English school education to be the unmitigated disaster that some of its critics claim it to be.

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