

# English Education in Japan and Its Transformation in the Era of COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

English has a unique perception in Japan. While it is considered as one of the important tools to gain knowledge and success, Japanese society also has its own sentiment and seen it as a language of the elites. This perception heavily influenced the curriculum, teaching methods, and students' motivation in mastering the language. English proficiency in Japan itself, however, is still considered very low. Many argued that the curriculum and the outdated teaching style are the ones to blame. Japanese government have been trying several initiatives to improve its English education quality. In the past few years, non-formal English educations institution and native English teachers has also been increasing in demand, mainly thanks to Tokyo Olympic 2020. The spread of COVID-19, however, brought a lot of new challenges and left the future of English education in jeopardy. This paper is intended to give an overview of how English is perceived by Japanese society, how it is learnt in each educational level, and later how COVID-19 affected the system.

**Keywords:** ESL, Japanese English Education, teaching approaches, learners' motivation.

## INTRODUCTION

English, despite of its complicated history and mixed perception in Japan, has been long consider as an important tool and taken as its main foreign language. As Japan invests a lot on its tourism sector and accepted millions of tourists entering the country every year, more opportunities are also opened to foreign workers and companies, and international students. Jobs related to hospitality and tourism are increasing in demand, and so does demand for bilingual workers who speak both fluent English and Japanese. English, without a doubt, has become vital and this new wave has pushed Japan to improve its English education system. The Tokyo Olympic 2020 can be considered as the turning point and a wake-up call for the policymakers to make English education more significant. In formal education sector, Introductory English classes have been started from the 3rd grade of elementary school and starting from the 5th grade, English class is a mandatory. English is also included in the standardized test for all schools and university entrance exams. As for the informal sector, there are more *Eikaiwa* (English Conversation) cafes and private English schools established throughout the country. The demand of English teachers is not only increasing in a big city like Tokyo, but also in the suburbs area.

COVID-19, however, put Japan's effort to improve their English education on the edge. Many teachers were losing their job as many English schools and a lot of *eikaiwas* must put an end to its business as it kept losing the number of students. Moreover, as Japan halt their tourism business to the indefinite period, the job market in hospitality and tourism business sharply declining in demand, and so is the urgency and motivation in learning English. Along with the end of Tokyo Olympic and a lot of restrictions and the changing policies during COVID-19, people start to feel that English is no longer significant. Therefore, a lot of adjustment and changes must be made in order to keep the English education back on track.

This paper is therefore trying to share a glimpse of English education system in Japan, mostly from the writer's personal experiences of teaching English in Japan. The first part will be focus on the overview of English education from its curriculum, pedagogical approaches, students' motivation, and ability in mastering the language, and some ideas about the working environment including how to deal with Japanese student. The second part will focus on how things are shifting after COVID-19 and the future of English education in Japan.

## AN OVERVIEW OF ENGLISH EDUCATION IN JAPAN

### Curriculum and Pedagogical Approaches

Despite of public demand for English speaking human resources, English proficiency in Japan, unfortunately, is far behind any other countries and considered very low. In a global scale, Japan is placed on rank 78 out of 112, and the 13th out of 24 countries in Asia (EF, 2021). The policymakers have put a lot of new initiatives to improve the quality of English education such as inviting English teachers from English speaking countries to teach at Japanese schools across the countries through a program called Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET), providing guidelines and training to Japanese teachers, and subsidy to send students overseas for a short exchange program. However, these efforts are still considered insufficient. There are varieties of opinions on why the system is failed.

Many argued that English as Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum in Japan is still very outdated. In the primary and secondary schools, English lesson is based on *Juken Eigo* (English for test taking). It mainly focuses on the grammar and vocabularies. The curriculum and the textbook are also created by the local government. The learning duration in the classroom is mostly spent by having the students translating the sentence from Japanese to English and vice versa or having the students do a series of grammatical- based quizzes that would possibly appear on the test. Self-study is also spent by the students to do some quizzes or memorize English vocabularies from the dictionary. It is a very common sight to see Japanese students “reading” a dictionary on the train. The speaking practice is often limited to reading along the text on the textbook with the teacher. The classes are mostly taught by Japanese teachers, and they will be assisted by a native English speaker ALT (Assistant Language Teacher). ALTs’ responsibility ranged from assisting the main teacher to do pronunciation practice, double checking the spelling and grammar, and creating some English activities in the class. Many parents, however, consider the school curriculum insufficient for their children to compete in getting admitted into prestigious school and thus additional classes are needed. Parents mostly send their children to *eikaiwas* or non-formal English schools. Some schools in Japan, mostly private, also provide additional English programs such as camps,

debate club, discussion-based program, or occasional overseas study trip. These programs are often not mandatory, and students must pay additional cash to join these programs, especially if the program is not included in the school curriculum. It is important to note that English related education in Japan is considered very costly and thus the fluency or English ability of each student is also influenced by their family background and status.

There is also a significant turn of English curriculum in higher education. While students focus on grammar and vocabulary in primary and secondary school, English education in the college or university in contrast focuses on communication skill and English used in professional sphere. Most of colleges and universities follow the guideline from Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The textbook used in the classroom is also coming from the publisher that follow CEFR guidelines. The classes are mostly taught by native English-speaking teachers and delivered fully in English despite the teacher’s fluency in Japanese. There are some English classes that focus on particular purpose of English in certain field, such as business English, tourism English, medical English, and many more. This contrast way of learning, however, is found very challenging for the students and heavily influenced their ability in mastering the language including their behavior, motivation, and engagement in the classroom which is depending on the background of each individual (Jones, 2019).

One common thing that can be found in Japanese education system is the class division based on the students’ academic achievement. In terms of English education, students are divided based on their English proficiency test result. Most schools refer to students’ EIKEN<sup>1</sup> test result to decide the divisions. The purpose is to provide learning objectives to the students that most suitable with their academic ability. The effectiveness of this system, however, is still debatable among teachers. Some teachers show their disagreement to this system as it could potentially create unfair treatment and teachers’ preference toward the students and it may affect students’ confidence and motivation in learning, but some also agrees that this division could help the teachers or instructors in making the most suitable lesson plan and classroom management for the students.

<sup>1</sup> EIKEN is an abbreviation of *Jitsuyo Eigo Gino Kentei* (Test in Practical English Proficiency). It is a test that is widely used in Japan for English-proficiency test. The result can be used for students to apply to certain high schools and universities. It also

applies for study abroad admissions. There are more than 400 universities and educational institutions throughout the world that recognized EIKEN certificates.

### Students' Motivation and Ability in Learning English

In general, students have different objectives that motivate them to learn English depending on their interest and past experiences. These and objectives will later also heavily influence students' ability in mastering the language. In Japan, however, English is still seen as an expensive commodity (Jones, 2019) and its complicated history leading up to the second world war has created public sentiment and still lingered until today. While it is considered as a main foreign language and an important tool to achieve success, many still believe that English is not for everyone. It is not surprising to see people rejecting or declining a request that involves English. These perceptions heavily influenced students' attitude and motivation in learning the language. Family background and financial status also play significant role in shaping students' objective to learn the language.

As a result, many Japanese students learn English due to the societal pressures. English has become a mandatory subject for all the standardized exams such as EIKEN. In Japan, there is a system called *hensachi* or school ranking system (Jones, 2019). This system applied to both individuals and the institutions. The result of the exam will later decide if the students are qualified enough to get into higher rank school or university. If students can get into higher ranking universities, there are more opportunities open for the students to be hired into big companies thus many believe as having more promising future career. This flow that later put English as an aim that students need to conquer to have a good life in the future.

Moreover, having clear objectives and great motivation in learning the language also do not guarantee that the students will excel in all English skills. Students who have been exposed to English or have gotten international exposure since they were little, namely the returnees<sup>2</sup>, those who have experiences studying abroad, or those who studied in international school, tend to have higher motivation, and have genuine interest to learn about other cultures. Most of them aim to work overseas or to have a career that involves working with people across the globe. This objective triggers them to learn the language without worrying much about grammatical mistakes nor solely focusing on academic purpose. As a result, these students tend to have better performance when it comes to communication skill, but less accurate in grammar and spelling. In contrast, students who study English due to societal pressures tend to be more passive and having

difficulties in speaking activity, but they have tendency to produce grammatically accurate sentences.

### Working Environment and Dealing with Japanese Students

The demand of English-speaking teachers continues to rise in Japan. Apparently, the number of foreign teachers will help to improve the image of the school and its selling point. All educational institutions must adapt themselves to work alongside with non-Japanese workers. In this high context culture society, this transformation could be a great challenge for most Japanese workers. Language barrier and cultural differences often leads to misunderstanding and miscommunication among foreign teachers and the Japanese staffs. Japanese working environment is widely known for its strict rules in terms of discipline, manner, and hierarchal system. Many foreign teachers, especially those who are coming from low context culture countries, find these rules unnecessary and sometimes refuse to obey them. Japanese staffs often argues that their attitudes are considered rude and disrespectful to Japanese culture. There is also different perspective when it comes to teaching philosophy and style, and students often consider classes taught by foreign teachers are more fun and lenient, while classes taught by Japanese teacher are sterner. This assumption often create sentiment between Japanese and foreign teachers.

In terms of dealing with Japanese students, teachers also need to do some approach to reach a certain degree of trust where students can feel more comfortable and participate actively in the classroom. Students in their first year of college or universities may find English classes more challenging as they are not used to the classes that requires a lot of engagements. Japanese students are also well-known for its obsession toward perfect English grammar and very reluctant to participate when they are not sure enough of the accuracy of their grammar (Ishikawa, 2017). This is the result of having a lot of grammar practice for the sake of test taking preparation during primary and secondary school. It is very important for teacher to not forcing the students in several first classes. Dealing with lower-level classes will be even more challenging and requires longer time to get them used to with the new learning environment. Being fully prepare in advanced is very vital. Teachers need to put extra effort learn the culture, do some research to find out what things are trending among Japanese young people. Teachers must also be aware to the topics that

<sup>2</sup> A term that is used to point out those who grew up outside Japan.

are considered taboo in Japan. Learning Japanese language could also help the teacher even though the lesson is fully delivered in English. It is very important for the teachers to understand and respect the local culture to understand the student behavior and break their “shyness” barrier.

### English Education Institution After COVID-19

When the first news of COVID-19 breakout in Japan, Japanese government immediately asked all schools, universities, and other educational institutions to halt their activities. School and universities finally resumed after about three to four months since the closure. Non-formal education sector such as *eikaiwas* and language schools, however, had their business on the brink of collapse as they kept losing numbers of students. Since the end of Tokyo Olympic, the urgency that motivates people to learn English started to fade. The state of emergency had also made a lot of citizens struggled financially and make some parents unable to send their children to prep school. To make things worse, government lowered standard of evaluation criteria for high school and university selection process (MEXT, 2020). Entrance exams is no longer the sole criteria to be accepted in prestigious schools or universities as the other achievements of the applicant would be considered as well and thus make English less significant.

In contrast to the challenges faced by non-formal institutions, dispatch or educational agencies which provide schools with English teachers and programs are having an increase in demand. This could be triggered by the lesser opportunities for the students to have exchange programs or study trip overseas. Hence, to give the students similar experiences, schools request some education agencies to create a tailored program, such as English camps or intercultural understanding programs to be held in their schools. Some non-formal educational institutions are also trying to shift their business model from giving one-on-one English lesson to providing temporary teachers to all over schools in Japan.

Another significant change that could be seen is the opportunities for non-native English teacher to teach English in Japanese schools. In the past, opportunities used to open only for certain countries where English is spoken as the first language. However, since Japan closed its border for travelers including temporary residents, many native English teachers who were overseas were unable to return to Japan and thus made a lot of institutions lost significant numbers of foreign teachers. This situation made a lot of school re-evaluate their hiring criteria and open more opportunities for other nationalities to teach English.

### Switching to Online and a New Style of Offline Classes

During the closure of all educational institutions, schools were preparing and creating strategies before all the learning activities could be resumed. Most of schools in Japan were quick in responding to the situation. More WI-FI connections were installed and can be accessed by students and teachers at all areas in the school. Japanese government has also created one student one computer policy (MEXT, 2020) and thus in most of schools and institutions, students are equipped with their own tablet or personal computer. Internet is also not a big issue to join a lesson from home since most of citizens in Japan have stable internet connection in their homes. Various digital platforms accounts that can support teaching and learning activities were also opened for each student and teacher.

However, there were several challenges faced by many teachers that heavily affected the teaching learning activity. The biggest challenge that first needs to be addressed was to make the teachers and students to be familiar with the digital platforms. Many teachers complain that schools did not give sufficient guideline to both the teachers and the students, and it created a lot of confusion and miscommunication during the lesson. Thus, a lot of lesson objectives could not be achieved. Besides, many teachers were also under immense stress due to overwork. Teachers were quite aware that students tend to be more passive during online classes and it mostly caused by their lack of understanding and confusion to the instructions and explanation during the lesson. Therefore, teachers need to make more detailed lesson plan and have a lot of preparation in advanced. A lot of visual aids and slides need to be made meticulously as well. Lastly, the number of students in the class also influence the atmosphere and an effective learning in the class. Small number of students in one class are considered more manageable as teachers can easily monitor each student and have every student to participate in the lesson. However, having more than 20 students in one class is considered more challenging in giving students equal opportunity to participate or to monitor their comprehension to the lesson.

As the government start to ease COVID-19 state of emergency, education institutions were starting to switch back to offline classes. Elementary schools and high schools are switching back completely to offline classes, while higher education decided to keep the learning activities online. Some institutions, however, decided to do both online and offline classes, so that they can keep the minimum number of students in the school. Even though, the offline classes are back,

government still requested the institutions to have a strict measurement to prevent the spread of COVID-19. School needs to monitor the students' actions more often such as during break or lunch time to prevent them talking out loud, gathering in a big group, or taking off their mask.

In class activities needs to be adjusted as well. Activities that involve interactions are strictly prohibited by the school, especially those that involve loud noises, moving around, touching, or grouping. For classes that focus on communication skill and require a lot of interaction, this could be another challenge need to face by the teachers. Students are also required to sit on the same desk and chairs throughout the semester. Pair works are still allowed even though students can only be partnered with the person sitting next to them and changing partners are prohibited, the lesser interaction in the classroom the better. Teachers found these policies limits their movement to create more engaging atmosphere and force them to focus on grammar practice and vocabulary instead. In this case, doing both online and offline classes seems to offer better solution to the teachers. Any interactive activities can be done in the online classes using the "breakout room" function, and offline classes can be used to improve the skills that less interactive including writing or reading.

## CONCLUSION

Japan is currently starting to ease the border and allow more visitor to enter the country. Things seems to slowly go back to normal, including the teaching and learning environment. Challenges are tackled one step at a time and both teachers and students are getting more used to have both online and offline classes. However, all changes that happened during state of emergency brings mixed feelings from both teachers and the students. Most students deplore the opportunities that must be cancelled because of COVID-19 such as study trip, study abroad, school events, or the entrance and graduation ceremony. They also miss the fun part of going to school like spending time with their school mates and having direct interaction with

their teachers. However, they also value the time they can spend more time at home, especially those who needs to travel to school for more than two hours. They could use the time for something more productive, extending their part-time jobs working hour, and avoiding the overcrowded rush hour trains. Same opinions are also coming from the teachers. Despite of the challenges they need to face in the beginning state in transitioning to online classes, many teachers agrees that once they get more familiar with the digital platforms, they can use a lot of features available to create more effective and productive lessons.

Moreover, Japan still has a lot of homework to be done to improve its English education system. More research and initiatives are needed to bridge the gap of English education in high school and universities. By having the students solely focus on grammatical problem and vocabulary without give them enough practice how to apply them in a conversation, it can be expected that students will do poorly. Some primary and secondary schools have started to shift their English curriculum to be more communicative, however, this is happening mostly in private institutions. Students need to see English not only as a checklist of academic obligation, but also an important tool to survive in this more globalized and digitalized era.

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