

# **Problems in Top-Down Goal Setting in Second Language Education: A Case Study of the “Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’”**

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This study critically examines the “Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities,’” which the Japanese Ministry of Education has implemented as part of its reform of English education. Specifically, the paper appraises on the basis of up-to-date research findings on L2 learning the attainment goals the Ministry of Education through its Action Plan has set for junior and senior high school students. In this regard, it is shown that there is no empirical data to justify the Action Plan’s adoption of particular standardized tests into the definition of these goals, and that the goals defined in terms of English proficiency cannot be achieved within the available instructional time. This study thereby identifies flaws in the Action Plan which are caused mainly by the lack of input from those who are acquainted with the reality of L2 learning (i.e., teachers and researchers). The study also suggests possible ways for improving policy making and specifies the types of research that would be instrumental in formulating realistic and effective educational policies.

本論文は文部科学省の「『英語が使える日本人』の育成のための行動計画」が示す中学校・高等学校卒業時の英語到達目標の妥当性を、これまでの第二言語習得研究の成果をもとに検証したものである。その結果、(1)行動計画は目標達成度測定のために特定の検定試験を指定しているが、そのテスト使用を正当化するための十分な客観的データがないこと、(2)規定の到達度は現在の授業時間では達成不可能であること、がわかった。教育実践の具体的指針となる目標設定の方法、さらに実証研究の内容についても示唆した。

As English has come to be used more extensively in various areas of professional and social life, there is a growing perception that people's ability to communicate in English is closely related to both individual and national economic success. In this context, however, it is necessary for the authorities in charge of educational policies to base their decisions on the actual conditions under which students are learning the second language (L2) and not require results that cannot be achieved under those conditions. Focusing on this point, the present study critically examines the "Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" (hereinafter, the Action Plan), which the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has implemented to guide the ongoing reform in English education (Ministry of Education, 2003). Specifically, the study investigates the attainment goals which the Action Plan has established for junior and senior high school students, and identifies problems in those goals on the basis of up-to-date research findings on L2 learning. By exploring more effective ways of defining learning objectives, the study also makes some suggestions for future research and policy making.

### The Action Plan and Its Evaluation

As part of the "Human Resource Strategy" included in the Government's "Basic Policies for Economic and Fiscal Management and Structural Reform 2002" (Cabinet Office, 2002), MEXT officially announced the Action Plan on the last day of the 2002 fiscal year (March 31, 2003), and put it into effect the following day. The Action Plan is a five-year project. Its aim is to establish a system whereby the goals to cultivate Japanese with English abilities, defined in its opening chapter, can be attained at each level of formal schooling by the end of the 2007 fiscal year. The goals for senior and junior high school levels are specified in the following way :

English language abilities required for all Japanese nationals  
"On graduating from junior high school and senior high school,  
graduates can communicate in English"

- On graduation from a junior high school, students can conduct basic communication with regard to areas such as greetings, responses, or topics relating to daily life. (English-language abilities for graduates should be the third level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) on average.)

- On graduation from a senior high school, students can conduct normal communication with regard to topics, for example, relating to daily life. (English-language abilities for graduates should be the second level or the pre-second level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) on average.) (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 1)

Assuming these abilities can be acquired by the time of graduation from senior high school, the Action Plan defines the goal for the university level as ensuring that “graduates can use English in their work” (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 1).

The subsequent part of the Action Plan is devoted to detailed specifications of “[how] to improve English education” (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 2). The enumerated measures are concrete and comprehensive, concerning diverse aspects of L2 education such as teaching methods, teacher training, learner motivation, and high school and university entrance examinations. The Action Plan is, in fact, the first government-directed campaign launched for the specific purpose of improving the national standard of English education and thereby English proficiency.

As its implementation has come to involve a substantial number of personnel in local schools and boards of education, the Action Plan has been generating various views and opinions. Regrettably, however, those views and opinions are mostly based on individuals’ experience, intuition, or beliefs concerning L2 education. Tanabe (2004), for example, regards the Action Plan’s specificity in its descriptions for implementation as an advantage, and predicts that “it [the Plan] undoubtedly provides Japanese with opportunities to grow” (p. 7). Focusing on the same feature of the Action Plan, however, the Japan Society for the Improvement of Foreign Language Education (2003) denounces the central authorities’ excessively rigid control over teaching practice. The Society also argues that any educational plan that prioritizes a particular foreign language has a corrupting effect on students’ values and should therefore be retracted.

The exchange of such speculative opinions is unlikely to lead to valid conclusions that can readily be incorporated into future policy making. The Action Plan requires more rigorous research-based evaluation. Above all, its goals should be carefully examined since it is the ends rather than the means that is more likely to reveal the true nature of the ongoing reform in English education.

### Problems in Examination-Oriented Definition of Goals

Prominent in the definition of the goals of the Action Plan is the decision to equate success in STEP, a test designed and implemented by an incorporated foundation outside MEXT, with the achievement of the target levels of proficiency. In offering a brief explanation of these goals, the Action Plan also refers to other external examinations when it states, "it is important for all Japanese people to aim at achieving a level of English commensurate with average world standards based on objective indicators such as STEP, TOEFL, and TOEIC" (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 1).

Such an examination-oriented aspect of the Action Plan is open to criticism because MEXT has provided no rationale for incorporating ready-made external tests into its goals or for selecting particular tests from among others. Given the broad and cursory way of describing the target levels of proficiency, students and teachers may well assume success in those tests to be the main objective. Moreover, such officially recognized clear-cut criteria will necessarily be used to assess teachers, schools, and educational regions and will bring about competition regarding students' test results. According to Morizumi (2003), some regional boards of education have already inquired into the number of students who have passed the third level of STEP in each junior high school under their jurisdiction.

With such inculcation of exam-based norms by the authorities, teaching and learning will necessarily be adjusted to the nominated tests, and the quality of those tests will therefore exert a great influence on the formation of Japanese learners' L2 competence. If that is MEXT's intention or if MEXT utilizes those external tests as a tool for disseminating its policies, MEXT should demonstrate the correlation between the competence which it assumes should be fostered in students and the competence those tests are to assess.

Japanese learners' lack of communicative ability in English is often attributed to the overemphasis placed on grammatical knowledge and reading ability in high school and university entrance examinations. MEXT seemingly accepts such a view since the Action Plan specifies concrete ways of improving entrance examinations so that they will conduct "an appropriate evaluation of communication abilities" (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 2, Section 4). Ironically, however, there is a strong possibility that the adoption of particular tests into the goals of the Action Plan will cause different problems of the same type. It is very

difficult, if not impossible, to create a test that does not distort the nature of communication abilities and their development, especially when the test has to be implemented on a large scale. In view of this, MEXT should at least disclose its reasons for judging that the adopted external tests offer a more “appropriate evaluation of communication abilities” than the entrance examinations in their current state.

Studies investigating the use of tests from a social or political perspective (e.g., McNamara, 1997; Shohamy, 2001; Spolsky, 1997) demonstrate that language tests can serve as powerful instruments for imposing authorities’ educational policies. On the other hand, psycholinguistic research into the influence of test quality on teaching and learning (e.g., Alderson & Wall, 1993) indicates the insufficiency of the washback effects of tests as an agent for educational reform, and suggests that concurrent improvement in teacher education and materials is necessary. In any case, if the authorities insist on exploiting the power of tests as a means for actualizing their policies, the prerequisite should be a careful adaptation of the test content to match the aim of those policies. In other words, the authorities should rigorously examine the possible washback effects of those tests to have a clear idea of the outcomes. Without assuming such responsibility, MEXT has hastily chosen readily available external tests. In response to such a hit-or-miss decision by the central authorities, English education in Japan is now becoming more and more attuned to those examinations.

Strangely, having adopted particular external tests into its goals, the Action Plan indicates the necessity of research to clarify the relation between the results in those tests and the degrees of proficiency required at each school level (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 2, Section 7). This post hoc specification of necessary research suggests that MEXT’s first priority in forming the Action Plan was to respond to the Government’s “Basic Policies for Economic and Fiscal Management and Structural Reform 2002,” which explicitly required MEXT to establish by the end of the 2002 fiscal year an action plan for improving English education. Thus, the injudicious reliance on readily available external tests reflects the makeshift nature of the educational plan that was drawn up as part of economic policy.

### **Problems Relating to Feasibility of Goals**

Ideally, success in examinations should be seen as a natural result brought about by the attainment of the target proficiency levels. However,

the attainment goals that the Action Plan defines in terms of proficiency also have a fundamental problem. Specifically, it has not been verified that the degrees of proficiency required at junior and senior high school levels can actually be achieved within the class hours allotted for English in each setting. As MEXT appears unconcerned about this matter, in the following section of this study, an attempt is made to evaluate the feasibility of those goals with regard to available instructional time.

### *Absence of Context-Based Criteria for Assessing Feasibility*

From a psycholinguistic viewpoint, determining what should be learned (as in the Action Plan) fundamentally differs from prescribing what to teach (as in the Course of Study, the ordinance that MEXT issues and periodically revises). Teachers can strictly follow the Course of Study and present students with the listed items in the stipulated manner and sequence. However, as demonstrated by Corder (1967, 1978), Selinker (1972), and many other second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, L2 development is governed primarily by the students' internal mechanisms and cannot be controlled by teaching. Specifically, students will not necessarily acquire the items of linguistic knowledge offered by the teacher (i.e., become able to use them in actual communication) at the time they are taught or in the order they are taught. In order to reasonably define attainment goals for particular students, therefore, empirical data are needed as a basis for predicting the level of proficiency that is attainable under the particular conditions and within the available time for learning.

However, current SLA research does not contribute much to L2 education in this area. A number of studies (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Krashen, 1985; Long, 1983; Schmidt, 1990; Swain, 1995) have investigated the effects of "negotiation of meaning," "comprehensible input/output," "noticing," or "attention to form" on L2 development and have explored how opportunities for each of these can be enhanced. The results of such investigations can have implications in the search for ways to increase the rate of acquisition or decrease the time required to attain higher levels of proficiency. Current SLA research, however, does not offer much empirical data that can be referred to in predicting the time required for reaching specific levels of proficiency.

As one of the key issues to be addressed by future research, Lightbown (2001) raises the question of "how much time is required for most students to reach specified levels of proficiency in a variety of classroom settings" (p. 599). The time required to attain a particular level of pro-

iciency varies considerably depending on many factors related to the similarity of the L2 to the language(s) already learned, the intensity of instruction and exposure, and the quality of the instruction. Context-specific research is therefore needed to determine the time required to achieve specific levels of proficiency in a particular setting. With regard to the bilingual immersion programs offered in Canada, extensive investigation of this kind (e.g., Swain, 1981; Turnbull, Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1998) has been undertaken, exerting an important influence on policy makers' decisions. Some of the studies on minority language children (e.g., Collier & Thomas, 1989; Krashen, 2001) also deal with the time factor from this perspective. However, with regard to many other educational contexts, including Japanese secondary education, such an enterprise has not been attempted. Therefore, the goals of the Action Plan are not based on any empirical data. For the same reason, there are no context-based criteria for evaluating the feasibility of those goals objectively. The feasibility, therefore, can only be assessed indirectly by referring to the information obtained from outside the Japanese context.

### *Available Class Hours*

As learners of English in Japan generally have very little exposure to English in their daily life, the feasibility of the goals of the Action Plan should basically be evaluated in terms of classroom instruction. The quality of instruction, together with learner motivation, will be enhanced to a greater or lesser degree if the measures prescribed in the Action Plan are steadily put into practice. However, the Action Plan does not make any reference to the quantity of instruction (i.e., allotted class hours). What is examined in this section, therefore, is whether improvement in teaching and learning alone can make the attainment of the goals possible.

Class hours allotted for each subject in junior high school are determined by MEXT and stipulated in the Course of Study. According to the latest Course of Study for Foreign Languages for Lower Secondary Schools (Ministry of Education, 1999a), the instructional time allotted for the subject "Foreign Language" is three 50-minute classes per week over three years with 35 weeks per year. The "Foreign Language" in this context can be seen as synonymous with English, as the new Course of Study stipulates that English should basically be chosen from among other languages. Thus, the total time for instruction a junior high school student receives per year is some 90 hours, which amounts to 270 hours over three years.

Class hours in senior high school cannot be calculated so simply. The latest Course of Study for Foreign Languages for Upper Secondary School (Ministry of Education, 1999b) places very few constraints on individual schools' decisions concerning the selection of subjects and allocation of credits. As a result, the number of English classes a senior high school student attends varies considerably in accordance with the school's educational objectives and particular conditions. In ordinary or academic high schools, a student typically earns 16 to 22 credits in English subjects upon graduation. One credit being equivalent to one 50-minute class per week for one year (i.e., 35 weeks), the accumulated time for instruction such a student receives in three years is approximately 470 to 650 hours. On the other hand, in some vocational or technical high schools, students earn fewer than 10 credits (some 290 hours) within the same time period, while in the high schools or departments of high schools that attach greater importance to English education, a student typically acquires around 25 credits (some 730 hours). The Action Plan sets an identical goal for all these students who are studying English under such varied conditions. This fact clearly demonstrates MEXT's lack of concern about the time required to attain the goals it defines.

### *Indirect Assessment of Feasibility*

The Action Plan requires total beginners of English to learn to "conduct basic communication with regard to areas such as greetings, responses, or topics relating to daily life" through 270 hours of instruction delivered in junior high school for three years, and then become able to "conduct normal communication with regard to topics, for example, relating to daily life" within the class hours accumulated in junior and senior high school for six years, for example, 740 to 920 hours for graduates of an academic high school (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 1). The purpose of this section is to assess the feasibility of these goals by referring to the relevant information obtained from outside the Japanese context.

Cleveland, Mangone, and Adams (1960) examined various types of "training for overseasmanship" offered in the US at the time and created a table of "Time Requirements for Foreign Language Achievement" (pp. 250-251). According to the table, the minimum time required for American adult learners of Japanese with "average aptitude and positive motivation" to attain "sufficient proficiency in speaking to satisfy routine travel requirements" is either (a) nine months with a one-hour class per

day plus two hours of practice drills performed in a language laboratory with the aid of instructors, or (b) six months with a two-hour class per day plus four hours of drills. In the former case, the total class hours are 810, including the time spent on drills, while in the latter case, they amount to 1,080 hours.

The researchers also estimated that the minimum time required for the same type of learners to obtain “fluency and accuracy in speaking with sufficient vocabulary to meet any ordinary requirements” is either (a) 30 months with a one-hour class per day plus two hours of drills (total class hours: 2,700), or (b) 24 months with a two-hour class per day plus four hours of drills (total class hours: 4,320).

Apart from the linguistic distance between the L1 and L2, the context for which these estimates were made and the setting of the Action Plan appear to have very little in common. Furthermore, the ability “to satisfy routine travel requirements” does not correspond to the ability to “conduct basic communication with regard to areas. . .or topics relating to daily life,” the latter possibly allowing the learner to deal with a wider range of topics and situations. The ability “to meet any ordinary requirements” and to “conduct normal communication with regard to topics. . .relating to daily life” could be argued to be at similar levels, but no further explanation is available for either of these definitions. Nevertheless, a rough and ready comparison indicates that the Action Plan requires students to make tremendously rapid progress in terms of instructional time.

Another piece of relevant information is cited in Swain and Lapkin (1982):

The basic level. . .should enable the student to acquire fundamental knowledge of the language, the ability to participate in simple conversation, the ability to read simple texts, and the ability to resume the study of [English] in later life. The middle level. . .is expected to enable the student to read newspapers and books of personal interest with occasional help from a dictionary, to understand radio and television, to participate adequately in conversation, and to function reasonably well in [an English]-speaking community after a few months' residence. (p. 14)

The definition of the “basic level” could well be an additional description of the target level of proficiency that the Action Plan specifies for junior high school students. The definition of the “middle level” could also account for what is meant by the ability to “conduct normal com-

munication with regard to topics. . .relating to daily life,” which is the goal the Action Plan sets for senior high school students. These definitions, however, have nothing to do with the Action Plan. They are the criteria presented for bilingual immersion programs in a document published by the Ontario Ministry of Education, and the target language was therefore French. According to the criteria, “the basic level is considered to be achievable through at least 1,200 hours of French instruction during the student’s school career,” and “the middle level is considered achievable through at least 2,100 hours of French instruction” (Swain & Lapkin, 1982, p. 14).

There are, of course, major differences between French immersion programs in Canada and EFL teaching in Japan. Depending on the context, therefore, one class may differ considerably in the significance it holds for learners’ L2 development. Nevertheless, it would be illogical to assume that the L2 ability requiring 1,200 hours for students of immersion programs can be acquired by Japanese students within 270 hours. It would also be unreasonable to expect Japanese students who spend no more than 740 to 920 hours in classes to attain a level of proficiency comparable to that of Canadian students who receive instruction for 2,100 hours. Thus, the Action Plan is inordinately optimistic in assuming that EFL teaching in Japan can accomplish such feats by performing two to four times better than Canadian immersion programs in terms of students’ achievement in the long-term.

A number of studies (e.g., Collier & Thomas, 1989; Cummins, 1979; Krashen, 2001) demonstrate that students in immersion programs and minority language children in majority language classrooms need several thousand hours to acquire an adequate command of the L2 and demonstrate age-appropriate performance in that language. Accordingly, in those contexts where students naturally have considerable exposure to the L2 outside the classroom, class hours are usually talked about in four-figure numbers, while in Japan, where such support for learning cannot be expected, no more than 1,000 hours are spared for English instruction through junior and senior high school education. It is therefore not sensible to discuss attainment goals for Japanese students on the same level as for students who are learning under such favorable conditions. The ability to conduct “normal communication” on a variety of topics related to “daily life” is, in fact, aimed at by large numbers of ESL and EFL learners in the world. However, given the limited class hours currently made available for Japanese students at junior and senior high schools, such an ability cannot be expected of them.

If the linguistic distance between the L1 and L2 is taken into account, the goals of the Action Plan appear even more impractical. In studies focusing on language transfer, German is often referred to as one of the languages that is relatively “close” to English (e.g., Odlin, 1989). However, in Germany, students at the middle-school level typically attend four hours of English classes per week and by the time they reach the age of 15 have received instruction amounting to 400 hours (Milton and Meara, 1998). In contrast, as mentioned earlier, their counterparts in Japan attend three 50-minute classes per week and have received 270 hours of instruction throughout their three years of junior high. Thus, despite the Action Plan’s claim that “it is important for all Japanese people to aim at achieving a level of English commensurate with average world standards” (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 1), the prerequisite for attaining that goal has not been fulfilled.

Carroll (1975) examines the influence of various factors on the performance of learners of French as a second language and concludes that “the primary factor in the attainment of proficiency. . . is the amount of instructional time provided” (p. 276). Furthermore, in an article entitled “Are the British really bad at learning foreign languages?” (Milton & Meara, 1998), it was found that in terms of vocabulary growth per hour of tuition, British learners of French outperformed their counterparts studying English in other European countries. On the basis of these findings, the authors suggest that low levels of language performance in Britain may well be due to the comparatively small amount of time devoted to L2 instruction. In addition, there is substantial evidence (e.g., Stenett & Earl, 1984a, 1984b; Stern, 1985) to support the common sense view that accumulated instructional time closely correlates with students’ achievement in L2 proficiency. Without giving due consideration to such findings of empirical research, the Action Plan sets impractical goals for students and teachers that cannot be achieved within the time available.

### *Washback Effects of Impractical Goals*

The impractical goals of the Action Plan will very likely generate cynicism among teachers as a result of their dissatisfaction or disappointment at the central authorities’ disregard for the reality of students and their learning conditions. Unable to come close to realizing the goals they are pressured to achieve, teachers will also experience unnecessary stress and frustration, and may even lose confidence in English education.

Furthermore, the unrealistic goals of the Action Plan cannot be expected to solve the major problem facing English education in Japanese secondary education. Japanese learners of English have a reputation for suffering from problems of communication in the L2, while having a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. This is often attributed to teaching methods, entrance examinations, or the shyness of students. From a psycholinguistic perspective, however, it can also be accounted for by the lack of classroom interaction through which students can obtain the “right” kinds of input and output. Students often supplement schoolwork with self-study or cramming at evening schools, but that also does not offer much opportunity for interaction. This deep-rooted problem cannot be overcome by setting unrealistic goals for students.

Research in SLA indicates the significance of interaction in L2 development from different points of view. Some researchers (e.g., Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996) argue that “comprehensible input” obtained through active interaction is the key variable for L2 acquisition, while others (e.g., Izumi, 2003; Swain, 1995) suggest that input alone is not sufficient for successful acquisition, and contend that “comprehensible output,” often gained through interaction, plays an important role in L2 development. The extent to which form-focused instruction (FFI) can contribute to SLA is still controversial (e.g., Krashen, 1992; Norris & Ortega, 2000). However, even the researchers who attach great importance to FFI (e.g., Ellis, 2001, 2002) presuppose a sufficient amount of interaction when they attempt to determine where and how FFI can come into play. FFI cannot therefore be expected to play a major role in L2 development, or to compensate for the lack of interaction or deficiencies in the quantity and quality of input or output. On the contrary, it is demonstrated by a number of studies (e.g., Schmidt, 1990; Skehan, 1998) that the explicit knowledge obtained through FFI can promote SLA (e.g., facilitate “noticing” or “restructuring”) only when learners use that knowledge in actual communication. In view of this, the key to improving English education in Japanese secondary education is to create a learning environment in which opportunities for interaction can more readily be provided for students.

In specifying measures to improve teaching methods, the Action Plan attaches great importance to the role of interaction, and stipulates the following:

. . . in English classes, instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centered classes are not recommended.

Through the repetition of activities making use of English as a means of communication, the learning of vocabulary and grammar should be enhanced, and communication abilities in “listening,” “speaking,” “reading,” and “writing” should be fostered. (Ministry of Education, 2003, Chapter 2, Section 1)

However, in the definition of its goals, the Action Plan does not give due consideration to making it easier for teachers and students to move forward in that direction. For teachers who are pressured by time constraints regarding the highly ambitious goals to be achieved, it is not easy to take time away from FFI, through which they can easily obtain immediate tangible outcomes, and allocate that time to classroom interaction that has no explicit target knowledge to be learned and hence no instantaneous perceivable effects. The students who recognize the lack of time for achieving such lofty goals may make even more efforts in self-study or at cram schools. Interaction, however, cannot be expected to occur in self-study, and cram schools by their nature tend to pursue immediate visible effects of instruction even more eagerly than formal schools.

The goals of the Action Plan are therefore inconsistent with the direction it requires teaching methods to move toward. The time necessary for transmitting knowledge about linguistic forms could be reduced greatly through the efforts of the teacher and students concerned. However, communicative ability, or the ability to use those forms in actual communication, cannot be promoted as rapidly as the Action Plan expects. Thus, the Action Plan, while seemingly accepting the view that L2 acquisition is primarily promoted by the communicative use of that language, takes little account of the time naturally needed to acquire an L2. Owing to such inconsistency in educational policy, students and teachers are now puzzling over the distribution of time and effort they should divide between grammatical knowledge and communicative ability.

### **Suggestions for Future Policy Making and Research**

Examinations conducted on a large scale cannot faithfully reflect the nature of communication abilities and their development. Examination-based attainment goals, therefore, inevitably have the effect of distorting the L2 competence of the learners who work toward them. In view of this, attainment goals defined in terms of L2 proficiency seem to have a better influence on teaching and learning. If those goals provide precise descriptions of what learners at the target level know and are able to

do and if such descriptions are based on updated knowledge about the course SLA typically follows and the empirical data on the characteristics of L2 development of the learners in that context, teachers can consult those descriptions in conceptualizing what their students need to learn and integrate ideas based on that data into instructional and assessment tasks. In other words, with such realistic and practical goals, teachers can adjust what they teach according to how students progress.

Language standards (also called bandscales, benchmarks, or curriculum frameworks) which have been developed around the world provide precise and comprehensive descriptions of the knowledge and ability which learners at different levels possess. For example, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), which was established for English as well as other European languages, provides a large number of descriptors that can be used to determine learners' L2 proficiency and needs. The Australian ESL Bandscales, which were also developed to guide teaching and learning, present detailed descriptions of ESL learners' progress as they develop proficiency in each of the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking (for more information on the language standards, see McKay, Coppari, Cumming, Graves, Lopriore, & Short, 2001). These language standards are the result of research conducted by a number of applied linguists and educational specialists on learners in context and repeated consultations with language teaching professionals. As most of the standards were completed fairly recently, there is not much empirical basis on which to argue for their values or benefits. Nevertheless, it is clear that the absence of such endeavors in the Japanese context is directly reflected in the ill-defined and impractical goals of the Action Plan, which appear to have little value in guiding teaching or assessing learning.

Attainment goals, if they are set, should be realistic and practical so that they can effectively guide teaching and learning without putting unnecessary strain on those responsible for achieving them. Indispensable in formulating such goals is a valid framework for estimating the time needed for students in that particular learning environment to reach various levels of proficiency, or the level of proficiency that they can attain in a given period of time. Therefore, context-specific research should also be devoted to this aspect of learning in order to obtain empirical data that can be used as a base for establishing such a framework. The SLA literature has not attached much importance to context-specific practical studies. In particular, longitudinal investigation focusing on L2

development of classroom learners in context has been neglected in the Japanese context. However, attainment goals defined at various educational levels (e.g., national, regional, school, and departmental levels) can only be justified when they are based on the objective data obtained through such empirical inquiries.

This study has highlighted the fact that sufficient time is an important requirement for L2 acquisition. It has also emphasized that in making educational policies, the time naturally needed to learn an L2 should not be underestimated. However, this should not be taken to imply that more time should be devoted to English instruction, which relates to a different topic that needs to be discussed in relation to other school subjects, and is therefore not the object of the present study. What this inquiry is meant to suggest is: (a) policy makers should make realistic decisions, giving due consideration to the restrictions imposed by the actual learning conditions, and (b) various types of context-specific research need to be conducted to find ways of minimizing the restrictions imposed by the context or maximizing learning opportunities for students.

For example, when students receive English instruction of no more than 270 hours in junior high school, their learning objectives, not to mention the target level of proficiency, should naturally differ from those of students who spend a longer period of time in classes. In other words, learning objectives for Japanese junior high school students should be defined in terms of how those 270 hours can most effectively be spent. With regard to what form English education at the junior high school level should take, some people argue that explicit grammar teaching should be totally abandoned while basic interpersonal communication skills should be intensively promoted through communicative L2 use. Others, however, contend that instruction in junior high schools should focus on providing students with a good grounding in grammar with which they can first develop reading and writing abilities and that students will acquire oral communication abilities if and when they come to have sufficient exposure to the L2. At present, however, none of these claims is valid since there is as yet no supporting evidence in terms of available class hours.

In addition to defining learning objectives, the issue of when to begin instruction and how to distribute instructional time should also be considered for the purpose of making optimal use of the limited amount of time available. In Japan, there has been a heated debate about the best time to begin English instruction (e.g., Otsu & Torikai, 2002; Tosu, 2002), especially because MEXT has been moving toward introducing English

education into the elementary school curriculum. There is, however, some evidence that the additional time gained by an early start may be less important than sustained exposure and instruction as students get older (Lapkin, Hart, & Harley, 1998; Turnbull et al., 1998). A traditional view of the distribution of instructional time is that language learning should be constant, with classes regularly provided over a long period of time. However, some research has shown that shorter periods of concentrated instruction at the primary level are more effective than “drip-feed” exposure (Lightbown & Spada, 1994, 1997). Again, all of these findings originate from outside Japan, and it is not clear to what extent they are applicable to the Japanese context. To enhance its accountability, MEXT, in cooperation with researchers in related fields, should explore the most effective ways of utilizing the limited instructional time available for Japanese students.

### Conclusion

Stevens (1978) suggests that most of the origins of “relative failure” in L2 learning are outside the classroom and not the responsibility of individual students or teachers. Among those external causes, Stevens cites “unattainable objectives” and “insufficient time” (pp. 198-199). English education in Japan will certainly be enhanced to some extent if the measures prescribed in the Action Plan are steadily put into practice. Nevertheless, the Action Plan and other educational policies that may be introduced in the future will never succeed in eradicating the “relative failure” in English education in Japan as long as those policies are formulated on the basis of “unattainable objectives” and “insufficient time.” Accordingly, students and teachers will have to continue suffering undue blame for the failure, and the Japanese as a whole will continue to have an ingrained inferiority complex about their English abilities. Whether to lower the goals or to secure the necessary time to achieve the goals is an issue that should be addressed seriously, as is also the matter of maximizing available instructional time.

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