

Teaching languages other than English in upper secondary education in Japan

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It is often said that the aim of foreign language teaching is not only to communicate with others, but also to broaden the world knowledge and viewpoint of the learners. In learning several languages, students can obtain information from several different sources. In Japanese high schools, however, students have little opportunity to learn foreign languages other than English. A comprehensive project for language teaching itself, therefore, is urgently needed.

言語教育の目的は、他者とのコミュニケーションのためだけではなく、学習者の世界観を広げるためでもある。英語以外にも別の外国語を学ぶことで、複数の情報源を持つことができる。日本の高等学校では、しかしながら、英語以外の外国語を学ぶ機会が非常に限られている。こうした課題に向き合っていくには、言語教育そのものについての包括的なプロジェクトが早急に必要である。

In this paper the situation of teaching foreign languages other than English in upper secondary education will be investigated. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the consideration of the prospects and possibilities for foreign language teaching in upper secondary education in Japan. It is hoped that this paper will also contribute to the discussion of foreign language education itself, not only in upper secondary education, but also in higher education. Thinking about foreign languages other than English leads one to think about the related issues and problems confronted in the English foreign language classroom as well.

Attitudes toward languages other than English

Foreign languages other than English in the Japanese educational system are usually named “second foreign languages”, as English is considered to be the “first foreign language”. English is taught in almost all of the high schools and universities in Japan. On the other hand, foreign languages other than English are taught in

only a few schools. Even if there are some courses offered in universities, the number of languages which are taught is restricted. That is one of the reasons why English is called the “first foreign language” and the other foreign languages are called “second foreign languages”.

As Wilhelm von Humboldt said in the nineteenth century, every language contains its own world knowledge. To learn foreign languages, therefore, leads learners to become aware of the world. Thus, learning foreign languages, not only English but also other languages, has a special value for high school students. However, there are few opportunities for high school students to learn foreign languages other than English within the present curriculum or in after-school activities.

It is necessary for high school students to broaden their world knowledge and viewpoints (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2005). The Ministry of Education refers to languages other than English, and from 2002, “The project for regions where high school students can learn several foreign languages (*Koutou gakkou ni okeru gaikokugo kyouiku tayouka suisin chiiki jigyou*)” has been put into effect in Kanagawa, Osaka, Hyougo, and Wakayama. From 2004, high schools in Kanagawa, Osaka, Wakayama, Nagasaki, and Kagoshima were chosen to promote the placing of languages other than English into the high school curriculum. Even so, sustainable cooperation among schools and related organizations is needed to promote this project, so further research likewise is necessary.

Table 1 shows the number of high schools where students can learn foreign languages other than English and the number of students studying these languages. At this time, 16 languages other than English are taught in high schools

across Japan. Chinese is the number one language other than English taught in high schools across Japan. Another Asian language taught in a considerable number of schools is Korean. Although the number of students who learn Korean is smaller than that of French, the number of schools providing this language course is more than that of French. This means that there are more opportunities to learn Korean nowadays in Japanese high schools.

Discrepancy between attitudes towards languages and the actual social situation

Nowadays in Japan, it is often said that students should learn English as early as possible in order to live in today’s global society (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2003). In some special schools (e.g., Gunma Kokusai Academy, from elementary school to high school <http://www.gka.jp/>) and universities (e.g., School of International Liberal Studies, Waseda University, <http://www.waseda.jp/sils/en/index.html>), English is used as the medium of instruction. That is to say, to master English means for Japanese students that they have a greater possibility of attaining success in the future. There is, however, opposition to this phenomenon. It is very important to master one’s own mother tongue in order to master English or another foreign language. In this debate, people seem to be focused on the Japanese and English languages. And, as this debate has not fully been resolved, problems regarding the timing and the way in which foreign languages are presented to young students across Japan still remain.

On the other hand, a lot of foreigners come to Japan in order to study or work. The number of registered foreigners is about

Table 1. Number of high schools where students can learn foreign languages other than English, and the number of students who learn these languages. (May 1, 2005)

	Language	Public		Private		Total	
		Schools	Students	Schools	Students	Schools	Students
1	Chinese	412	12,737	141	9,424	553	22,161
2	French	146	3,970	102	5,457	248	9,427
3	Korean	209	6,349	77	2,542	286	8,891
4	German	58	1,266	47	2,932	105	4,198
5	Spanish	77	1,735	28	953	105	2,688
6	Russian	20	350	5	112	25	462
7	Italian	3	47	7	245	10	292
8	Portuguese	10	115	1	25	11	140
9	Esperanto	2	37			2	37
10	Thai	2	15			2	15
11	Indonesian	1	13			1	13
12	Arabic			1	12	1	12
13	Pilipino	2	2	1	6	3	8
14	Latin			1	7	1	7
15	Malay	1	4			1	4
16	Vietnamese	1	1			1	1
Total		944	26,641	411	21,715	1,355	48,356
The number of schools (actual number)		504		244		748	

Source: “The situation of international exchange in high schools in 2004” (*Heisei 16 nendo koutou gakkou tou ni okeru kokusai kouryu tou no jyoukyo ni tuite*) Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (October 25, 2005)

1.97 million (The Ministry of Justice, <http://www.moj.go.jp/>). Among these foreign nationals, there are Korean (30.8%), Chinese (24.7%), Brazilian (14.5%), Philipinno (10.1%), and Peruvian (2.8%). In many cases their mother tongue is neither Japanese nor English. Examining this trend, one can note that there is a serious discrepancy between Japanese attitudes

towards foreign language study and the actual social situation in Japan. Understandably, it is very dangerous to think only in the framework or dichotomy of Japanese or English.

Even so, the position of English as the “international language” can no longer be neglected. To consider English as the only foreign language in education, however, leads

students, educators, and society in general, to overemphasize English teaching and forget about other languages.

One example: German language teaching in high schools

According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, in May 2005, 4,198 high school students were learning German in 105 schools. German language ranked number four when considering the number of students and schools incorporating this language in the school curriculum. Chinese, French and Korean ranked higher than German.

German education within the Japanese educational system does not fulfill its function because there is little common understanding about many important aspects of German language teaching in Japan, even in higher education, where the teaching of German is concentrated. There is almost no exchange between high school German teachers and university professors, and there is little if any relationship established between the high school German curriculum and the university level curriculum. There is perhaps one common interest among German language educators at the high school and university levels, and that is the university entrance examination.

In this rather severe situation of German teaching in Japan, especially in the upper secondary level of education, making the entrance examination easy to answer is a requirement. Some of the reasons for this trend include: (a) There are not so many lessons for the second foreign language in schools. Students can learn only a basic level of German language. If the entrance examination is very difficult, even

students who study German very hard under the restricted curriculum cannot answer the questions. (b) The number of students who take the entrance examinations (for example, the National Center for University Entrance Examinations or the “Center Exam” of the National Center for University Entrance Examinations, <http://www.dnc.ac.jp/>) using the German language as their choice of foreign language has decreased in recent years. Table 2 shows the number of students who took German as their “Foreign Language” subject on the “Center Exam”. Even if students learn German, they do not tend to use their German knowledge in order to be accepted into universities. This means that German teaching in high schools does not function any more or at a level accepted by universities. As for foreign language learning, the data in Table 1 suggests students’ interests tend to lean towards English. If high school students could use their German knowledge in a way accepted by the academic community, the number of students who sit for the German foreign language section in an entrance examination would increase, and no doubt, the desire to learn German would also increase among high school students around Japan.

In 1999, the “Committee for Entrance Examination of German Language (*Daigaku doitsugo nyuushi mondai kentou iinnkai*)”, a kind of collaboration between 3 high school German teachers and 3 university teachers was organized. Through this collaboration, those involved recognized that their ideas and information were similar in nature. One task that this committee undertakes is the collection and analysis of entrance examinations, and it makes suggestions to improve examinations in the future. At this moment, the “Center Exam” is being investigated. Some results of this

Table 2. Number of students who choose German as a foreign language on the “Center Exam”

Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Number of students	177	159	162	162	163	191	197	168	142	145	140	116	127	96	105	102

Source: the National Center for University Entrance Examinations

investigation can be seen on the Webpage in the National Center for University Entrance Examinations. (http://www.dnc.ac.jp/old_data/exam_repo/17/gaikokugo.html)

Other activities that help students improve their motivation have also been started in recent years. One of these activities is the German speech contest held annually for high school students around Japan. It is held at Dokkyo University (<http://www.dokkyo.ac.jp/speech/german/>). Through participation in this event, students can have a special experience using the German language as well as interact with peers learning the same language. In preparation for participation in such an experience, students study German very hard, and though not all the students may win or be voted the best, they all can achieve a sense of satisfaction of completion.

Special reference to “plurilingualism” as proposed by the Council of Europe

What can we learn from Europe?

In Japan there is a considerable amount of research about foreign language teaching, for example, how to teach English (or other foreign languages as well, such as Chinese, Korean, German, French, and Japanese for foreigners). However, there are not many studies conducted about the

philosophy of foreign language teaching with consideration to area studies.

Considering the situation in Japan, the lack of an accepted standard language policy makes it further difficult for cooperation among the various groups of language teachers and across various methodologies of language teaching, examining the European language policy might give us an impetus to think globally and act locally. The language policy in Europe tries to respect partner countries while maintaining one’s own interest. Most Europeans learn not only English but also other foreign languages in order to live in their multilingual society. Under this precondition, language experts in Europe made a common framework (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. CEF. 2001). CEF proposes a common basis to improve language teaching in Europe. The CEF has no binding power to instruct users how to teach. Rather the CEF presents a kind of theme, and it is hoped that users could thus reflect on their practice and teaching methodology from the suggestions made by the CEF.

The concept of “plurilingualism”

“Plurilingualism” is a very complex concept. At the

beginning of CEF, this concept is defined and full explanations are given. CEF distinguishes “plurilingualism” from “multilingualism”.

“Multilingualism” is “the knowledge of a number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society” (CEF:4). “Multilingualism” intends to reduce “the dominant position of English in international communication” (CEF:4).

“Plurilingualism” emphasizes “the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact” (CEF:4).

Under this concept, the purpose of language teaching changes drastically. “It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place” (CEF:5).

It is quite possible that the philosophy of “plurilingualism” could be applied to the Japanese situation, even though there is a geographical distance between Europe and Japan. The number of foreigners in Japan increases year by year. Their mother tongues are mostly Chinese, Korean, Spanish and Portuguese (The Ministry of Justice). There is an opportunity for Japanese students to meet these people in every day life.

Considering this fact, students, who think “foreign language” study is English, should know that there are a wide variety of languages in the world and English is only one of them. With this in mind, then second foreign language teaching in the upper secondary education becomes very important.

Prospects

When Japanese high school students, whose mother tongue is Japanese, become interested in several languages, we will be able to foster expectations for changes in the situation. These students will be able to compare English and the English-related culture and values with another language and culture. When someone, whose mother tongue is not English, communicates with English native speakers in English and communication breakdown occurs, they both should have a responsibility for communication repair or problems in understanding. Many times those who are not English native speakers take responsibility for such miscommunication (Kimura 2002). When young students learn only English, their sense of responsibility and their broader sense of the world is not developed enough. To improve this situation, learning several languages (including one’s mother tongue) has significant meaning and importance.

Even if foreign language education other than English in high school does not function perfectly, it is very important for students to find linguistic diversity in the world. Thus, the concept of “plurilingualism” plays a vital role in foreign language teaching and the educational arena in Japan’s society today.

Conclusion

In upper secondary education, several languages should be included in the curriculum. Through learning, for example German, students come to know not only the German language but also they can acquire knowledge about German speaking areas, Europe, and the relationships among the neighboring countries. This way of thinking can be applied to other languages and other subjects being studied as well. Learning foreign languages other than English is thus an effective way for high school students to develop a richness of their educational experiences for use in their futures.

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