

Cram Schools in Japan: The Need for Research

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The private *juku* (cram school) industry is an enormously profitable and influential area of education in Japan, including in the specific field of English language teaching (ELT). However, while much research has been carried out in other areas of ELT in Japan, *juku* have largely escaped the attention of researchers. This paper attempts to argue the need for more research into English language education as it is practiced in *juku*. The article first situates *juku* within the Japanese education system, and then illustrates the extent to which *juku* have been under-researched when compared to other ELT contexts in Japan. The author advocates the need for more research into ELT to be carried out in *juku*, and finally suggests some areas into which this research could be conducted.

学習塾産業は大きなビジネスであり、日本の英語教育に大きな影響を与えている。ところが、高校や大学などでの英語教育に関する研究は多くなされていないが、学習塾での英語教育の研究はされていない。本論では、初めに、学習塾の現状を説明し、次に、どれだけ学習塾の英語教育の研究が不足しているか説明する。最後に、学習塾の英語教育の研究の必要性を訴え、より多くの研究がこの分野で行われるべきであると論じる。

English language teaching in Japan is carried out in many different contexts. Mandatory English education takes place for all children from elementary school to the end of high school, and in addition, students who continue to study at the tertiary level are often expected to complete courses of foreign language education. Alongside the state school and tertiary educational systems, there is also a large private market for English language education, which manifests in many different types of institutions; two of the most common being *eikaiwa* (English conversation schools) and *juku* (cram schools). English is not the only subject taught in *juku*, as they are cram schools designed to help students cram for exams and get into universities, and so they teach many different subjects (maths, Japanese, etc.) However, as I shall demonstrate below, English is a very commonly taught subject.

English education in Japanese elementary schools, high schools, junior colleges, and universities has

been the subject of considerable amounts of research. Studies have been carried out in these contexts regarding educational policy (see Hashimoto, 2009; Yonezawa, Akiba, & Hiouchi, 2009), teaching methodologies (see Gorsuch, 2001; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008), classroom policies on language use (see Hashimoto, 2013; Yphantides, 2013), teaching materials (see Yamanaka, 2006; Mineshima, 2008; Sano, Iida, & Harvey, 2009), teacher and student perspectives (see O'Donnell, 2008; McKenzie, 2008; Rudolph and Igarashi, 2012), teacher identities (see Butler, 2007; Nagatomo, 2012) and many other areas. As a result, much is known about English education in these settings, providing views on each context at different magnifications, from the overall structure of the institution to the details of classroom teaching and interaction. The *eikaiwa* sector has not drawn as much academic interest, but still a substantial body of research exists concerning the motivations of *eikaiwa* students (Seargeant, 2009; Kubota, 2011), the professionalism of schools (Bossae, 2003), the professional lives of teachers (Nagatomo, 2013) and the ideologies surrounding the industry (Seargeant, 2009).

Despite the intense interest in English language education in Japan, however, the private *juku* sector has not been subject to nearly the same level of scrutiny as either the state school, tertiary sector, or the private *eikaiwa* industry. In this article, I will attempt to make the case that more research needs to be carried out into ELT in *juku* schools. I will discuss the prevalence and importance of *juku* schools, analyse the amount of research carried out when compared to other sectors of ELT in Japan, and discuss some of the possible reasons for *juku* being under-researched. Finally, I will suggest some areas in which research could be conducted.

Juku: Context, Prevalence, and Importance

Bray (2007) uses the term *shadow education* to describe the unregulated global industry of private

tutoring, and notes that in the context of Japan *juku* are by far the most common and popular form of this. *Juku* are private cram schools, in which teaching takes place on many different subjects either one-to-one or in small classes. Most *juku* teaching is carried out after school hours for the purposes of supplementing the students' education and providing support for students in preparation for their university entrance exams. *Juku* are not licensed as schools and Iwata (2006) notes that because of this "the teaching staffs [sic] in *juku* schools need no license" (p. 2). This means that *juku* teachers are usually not trained or qualified, although some *juku* teachers may be postgraduate students with teaching qualifications. Indeed, many *juku* teachers are university students themselves, hired part-time for reasons of cost-saving and because they are familiar with the university entrance exams for which the students are preparing. Therefore, there is no official or external oversight of any aspect of *juku*, be it in terms of teaching methodology, teaching materials, or anything else. This is a particularly jarring revelation when considering the prevalence of *juku* in Japan.

The *juku* sector is very large, and very influential. Dierkes (2008; 2010; Cited in Cook, 2013, p. 403.) has claimed that there are roughly 50,000 *juku* in Japan, and Pettersen (1993) and Roesgaard (2006) have both noted that the *juku* business brings in billions of yen in profits each year. These high figures are explained by the large customer base to which *juku* cater. Bray and Lykins (2012) state that 15.9% of elementary school children in Japan attend *juku*, and the levels of attendance gradually increase to the point where, in the third year of junior high school, 62.5% of students are regularly attending *juku* for tutoring after school (cited in Cook, 2013, p.403). Bray (2007) notes that roughly 70% of all Japanese students will attend *juku* at some point of their school life, and that this number has increased dramatically over the past few decades; more than doubling between 1976 and 1993 (p. 23). The increase in student attendance between elementary school and senior high school can largely be attributed to the wish to perform well on university entrance exams. While students may be concerned with studying various subject areas, depending on the course they wish to enter, Gilfert (1999) notes that most university faculties include English as a required subject. This makes English one of the most commonly taught subjects in *juku*.

It is clear that there is a huge amount of students studying English in *juku*, largely for the purpose of improving their university entrance exam scores, and sometimes just to improve their knowledge of

the language (O'Donnell, 2003). It is therefore surprising that, as I shall demonstrate in the following section, *juku* are generally under-researched.

Research into *Juku*

Bray (2007) notes that globally, private education is a huge business, but one "which so far has received little attention by researchers" (p. 18). Similarly, despite the prominence of *juku*, there has been very little research into them, particularly from ELT researchers.

It is not the case that no research into *juku* exists at all. Indeed, a small number of papers and books have been published. However, these studies are from fields as far apart as psychology (O'Neil and Fukumura, 1992) and Japanese studies (Rohlen, 1980), with many focusing on Japanese education or general education (Harnisch, 1994; Russel, 1997; Roesgaard, 2006). These pieces of research have great value in terms of putting the *juku* system in context, and analyzing its social status and utility. However, there are very few articles which focus directly on ELT, which is surprising given: a) the amount of English taught in *juku*, and b) the level of research carried out in other ELT contexts in Japan.

Of those papers which do focus on ELT, a handful of studies have been published exploring things such as methodology, student experiences, and teaching materials. Takigawa (2005) investigated the effects of communicative tasks on grammatical form uptake in *juku* schools, finding evidence that the adoption of communicative methodologies in *juku* could help improve students' language skills. Lieske (2004) looked at attitudes towards English among university students who had previously attended *juku*, concluding that they do not have a detrimental effect on attitudes towards English. O'Donnell (2003) found that students differ in the reasons given for attending *juku*, with some attending purely to pass exams, and some seeking to improve their overall English proficiency. Lowe (2013) analysed *juku* teaching materials in terms of gender representations, concluding that they featured problematic and stereotypical representations of females. It seems from this research that there are several areas of study into *juku* schools that could be informative and useful. However, in the ELT literature *juku* are very rarely mentioned in any context other than their relationship to university entrance exams. Despite the research potential of *juku*, in the next section I will provide some data to highlight the extent to which *juku* have been under-represented in ELT research when compared to other educational contexts in Japan.

The Scale of the Problem

In order to illustrate the extent to which research into English education in *juku* has been neglected, this section presents some data comparing the amount of published research on *juku* to the other sectors discussed earlier; elementary school, high school, university/junior college, and *eikaiwa*.

This data was collected from the Japan Association of Language Teaching (JALT) publications archive. The purpose of collecting this data was to illustrate the point made in this article - that *juku* are comparatively under researched - rather than to provide solid figures on the total amount of ELT research carried out in each of these sectors. As such, I chose to focus on one organisation which I felt would be most likely to represent the balance of research in the field. JALT is the largest language teaching organization in Japan, and therefore data taken from JALT publications is likely to be representative of the major concerns of researchers in the country. Similarly, I chose to focus on the largest research publication in the organization, the *JALT Journal*, as I felt this would give a representative sample of research that has been produced in the Japanese context. JALT was chosen over other large language teaching organisations in Japan such as the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET), because these organisations have a specific institutional research focus (colleges and universities in the case of JACET).

Papers were analysed from all issues of the *JALT Journal* between 1979 and 2014, and were classified into five categories based on the context in which the research was carried out: elementary school, high school, university/junior college, *eikaiwa* (usually referred to as some variation of private schools for adults in the literature), and *juku*. Universities and junior colleges were combined into one category as they are both post-secondary institutions. A paper was considered to belong to these categories if it focused on any of the following areas of the context in question: participants (either teachers or students), materials, methodology, assessment, motivation, policy, or instructional principles. Papers which discussed two or more contexts (as in a comparative study) were counted in both categories. In order to avoid ambiguity, studies were not included in the category if they took place outside of Japan, such as university students studying abroad. The data is presented in Table 1.

From this it is clear that, when compared to other areas of research interest, *juku* have received almost no attention from researchers in the field of ELT. Universities, junior colleges, and high schools have all been significantly researched over the past three

and a half decades, with university-based research being by far the most prominent. *Eikaiwa* have received only a little attention, with three pieces of research being carried out. Elementary schools are also under-represented; however this is probably due to the fact that elementary schools only recently began to feature mandatory English education. While elementary schools and *eikaiwa* received only a small percentage of research attention, they still featured more in the literature than *juku*, which were only prominently featured in one piece of research, and even this research was largely about the attitudes of university students towards English (O'Donnell, 2003). The point of this analysis was not to claim that no research into *juku* exists in the field of ELT at all—as described earlier, a few papers have been published on the topic—however it does show that *juku* are underrepresented when compared to other contexts in Japan in which English education is taking place. In the next section I will propose and discuss some of the reasons why this may be the case.

Table 1. Papers Published in Different Contexts in the *JALT Journal*

Elementary School	High School	University/ Junior college	<i>Eikaiwa</i>	<i>Juku</i>
5	42	83	3	1

Why No Research?

There are several reasons why research may not have been carried out in *juku*. I shall provide some of these reasons below and, where necessary, argue why these objections are not valid.

Researchers Do Not Work in Juku

It is often the case that researchers focus on contexts which are easily accessible to them, and most researchers are employed at universities. This seems like one likely explanation for the fact that the balance of research tilts strongly towards universities. This is certainly a good explanation for why *juku* have largely escaped the attention of researchers; however this fact does not provide any reason why research should not be carried out in *juku* schools.

Juku Are Difficult to Access

Unlike state schools and universities which are often open to having research carried out in them, *juku* are private businesses which are not licensed nor subject to professional oversight. As such, they

may be resistant to having research carried out by people from outside of the company, as they may feel there is little benefit to doing so, or that the presence of researchers may actively disrupt or negatively represent their business. This problem may also be echoed in the concerns of parents, who could object to their children being the subjects of research and raise concerns about privacy and about strangers carrying out research with minors. These are serious concerns, and could cause difficulties for researchers trying to access *juku* for research purposes. However, these difficulties are similar to those encountered in much of the social science research, and making the effort to seek permission to conduct research in *juku* may provide rewarding new knowledge.

Juku Are Designed Only for Exam Preparation

With two major practical concerns already discussed, a final reason for the under-researching of *juku* may be a lack of motivation on the part of researchers to investigate these institutions. Researchers may feel that *juku* have a limited educational role—to serve as supplementary to regular education and aid students in passing their university entrance exams. As such, research into these schools would be limited and there would be less opportunity for researchers to pursue their own research interests than in other settings. This seems to be a good reason as to why these schools have not have been heavily featured in research.

However, this ignores the possible benefits that such research could have. As discussed earlier in this paper, research into *juku* has produced interesting and promising results in the areas of methodology (Takigawa, 2005), student perceptions (Lieske, 2004), and materials design (Lowe, 2013). More research carried out in the context of *juku* schools could help to improve the learning environment of these schools for students, and help them achieve their learning goals even if their learning goals are limited to exam preparation. In addition, research by O'Donnell (2003) suggested that many students attend *juku* in order to improve their English proficiency rather than just to pass exams, and as such there may be more opportunity for improvement in teaching and learning than is readily apparent.

It is possible that research into *juku* would not necessarily lead to changes in practice or to an uptake in recommendations by the schools in question. This would not be unusual, as there is rarely a clear and direct path by which research leads to better practice. However, this does not reduce the fact that research into *juku* has the potential to generate valuable and important insights and knowledge.

While the reasons outlined above help us to understand why there is currently a lack of research into *juku*, and identify some of the possible challenges of carrying out such research, they do not seem to provide a serious rationale for not carrying out such research in the future. In the next section I will discuss some of the possible paths future research may take.

Future Directions for Research

In the sections above, I have made a case for more ELT research being carried out in the *juku*. The question remains, however, of what form this research may take. When considering this question it would be instructive to look at the kind of research carried out in other contexts in Japan. In the introduction to this paper, I noted some areas which research has focused on in other contexts. In the following section I shall suggest which would be useful to research in *juku*, and provide some commentary explaining these choices. I believe that four key areas for *juku* research to investigate are:

- methodology
- teacher education and training
- teaching materials
- student and teacher perspectives

As research from Takigawa (2005) has hinted, studies into the methodology used in *juku* may be instrumental in increasing the effectiveness of teaching and retention of information among students. While the learning aims of these schools may be limited, research into methodology and classroom instruction could help students to achieve these aims more successfully, and thus be a valuable area of research.

As noted earlier, most teachers working in *juku* are not trained or licensed, and so their approaches to teaching may not reflect current trends in classroom practice. A focus on how teachers are prepared by their schools (if at all) would be interesting, and may help to inform in-service teacher education.

A study by Lowe (2013) found evidence of problematic gender bias in materials used in a *juku*. More research into this area would be needed to discover if this kind of issue is widespread, but it would certainly be of interest to researchers if potentially problematic material was being used during English education in *juku*.

As *juku* are focused largely (though not solely) on the teaching of grammar for the purposes of passing university entrance exams, there is a possibility that this may contribute to students having negative

attitudes towards future language study. Negative experiences have been shown to influence negative future attitudes towards language study (Kimura, Nakata, and Okumura, 2001), and therefore research into whether this was the case would be extremely helpful.

These are some possible areas that research into juku could focus on. However, it is possible that more avenues of research could open in the future. These preliminary suggestions should at least provide some directions for initial research and pilot studies to take.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued the need for more research into ELT in juku. I have reviewed the literature showing that juku are extremely prevalent in Japan, with roughly 70% of Japanese children attending them during their schooling. I have also argued that many, if not most, of these children will study English in juku. Despite the prominence of the the industry, I have demonstrated that juku are underrepresented in ELT research in Japan, and discussed some of the possible reasons for this. Finally, I have laid out some areas that research into juku could take.

As an industry which is such a prominent part of English education in Japan, it is surprising that so little research has been carried out into juku, and I hope this paper has gone some way toward demonstrating the need for more research into this context to be produced in the future.

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