

Disregard of Opportunity Gap Inequalities in Policy Debates over Mandatory English Education at Public Elementary Schools in Japan

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Introduction

On January 17, 2008, the Japanese Central Education Council submitted a newly revised set of official curriculum guidelines to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan (Central Education Council, 2008). These guidelines for elementary schools will become effective in the 2011 academic year and include a controversial new policy: the introduction of mandatory “foreign language activities” at all public elementary schools. Japanese fifth and sixth graders will receive about one period (approximately forty-five minutes) per week of mandatory English education called “foreign language activities.”

Prior to implementation, these guidelines were vigorously debated by supporters and opponents of the policy. However, they have now been made official and every public and private school in Japan is required to follow them. This article will identify supporters and opponents of the policy and summarize their arguments in order to demonstrate that neither side has ever discussed the policy in terms of the opportunity gap that exists between different segments of the Japanese population.

Considering that the existence of an opportunity gap is a major issue in educational policy debates in the United States, my aim here will be to argue that a similar opportunity gap exists in Japan, but that it tends to be ignored in policy debates. Next, I will show that the gap is manifested in differential access among sectors of the population to shadow education and to private schools. Finally, I will evaluate the new policy in terms of narrowing this opportunity gap between students with access to shadow education and private school lessons and those without them.

English education at elementary schools in Japan

The revised guidelines for elementary schools state that fifth and sixth graders will receive thirty-five periods of

“foreign language activities” per year. Despite the fact that no particular language is mentioned in the main statement, it is clear that the authors of the guidelines intend English to be the foreign language that should be taught in practice (MEXT, 2008b). The overall object of the activities is

To form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (MEXT, 2008b, p.1)

For these activities, no evaluations and examinations are required, nor are there any clear standards articulated, such as the specified number of vocabulary and grammatical rules that fifth and sixth graders are supposed to memorize, since the activities are not considered as an academic “subject,” but an area of study. The aim is not to impose strict standards of success, but to have students enjoy what they are doing—to develop positive associations with learning another language.

Supporters and their main arguments

The main supporters of the policy come from the business community, the general public, the English education industry, academic societies in English education, and MEXT (Otsu, 2004a). They present three arguments in favor of the policy.

First, a strong demand exists for reforming English education because of the increasing importance of English for communicating in a rapidly globalizing world (Butler, 2005). This is the first and seemingly most influential point—intensifying globalization and its demands on people. These perspectives are clearly reflected in an announcement called “Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” by Atsuko Toyama, who was the minister of MEXT in 2003.

Globalization extends to various activities of individuals as well as to the business world. Each individual has increasing opportunities to come in contact with the global market and services, and participate in international activities. It has become possible for anyone to become active on a world level.

Furthermore, due to progress in the information technology revolution, a wide range of activities, from daily life to economic activities, are being influenced by the movement to a knowledge-based society driven by the forces of knowledge and information. Thus, there is a strong demand for the abilities to obtain and understand knowledge and information as well as the abilities to transmit information and to engage in communication.

In such a situation, English has played a central role as the common international language in linking people who have different mother tongues. For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language (Toyama, 2003).

The second argument makes the point that the younger one is the more receptive one is to acquiring a second language. The fifth and sixth grades, therefore, represent a critical period for language acquisition that educational policies need to take into consideration (Tomita, 2004).

The third argument, advanced by the Central Education Council and MEXT, suggests that equal educational opportunity is a major reason for mandatory English education in the fifth and sixth grades, though the other supporters do not seem to make this point in any significant way. MEXT (2008b, p.6) provides the following reasons for enhanced educational opportunity:

Currently, many elementary schools conduct English activities during period for integrated study, but the contents of these activities vary widely. From a point of view of securing equal educational opportunity and connecting elementary school education with middle school education, the nation needs to show common teaching guidelines.

However, no detailed argument is provided in support of their idea that common teaching guidelines will improve equal access to English, nor is there any consideration given to the possibility that social status or other differences in

social category might inhibit access to English. Also, MEXT provides no explanation about how thirty-five periods of mandatory English education activities “secure” equal educational opportunity. Their argument, it would seem, suggests that “securing equal education opportunity” means that the content of instruction across schools varies widely so that establishing common guidelines will be sufficient to narrow a perceived opportunity gap between schools that conduct English activities. In other words, MEXT does not mention the problems of differential educational opportunity that are based on social categories.

Opponents and their arguments

Most opposition to the policy seems to come from professionals in the teaching of English and from professors in the social sciences, especially linguistics. Professor Yukio Otsu, a linguist, actively opposes the policy. He has published one book and edited a further three books in which he criticizes mandatory English education at public elementary schools (Otsu, 2004b, 2005, 2006b; Otsu & Torikai, 2002). In 2006, he organized a petition drive to protest mandatory English education at public elementary schools. The petition to appeal to MEXT to reverse track and stop making the policy official was submitted to the education minister, Kenji Kosaka on February 14, in 2006 (Otsu, 2006a).

Otsu and his colleagues argue that teaching English to elementary pupils is not only meaningless, but that it can be harmful, if not properly done. In presenting their case, they make six important points:

First, there is a shortage of teachers who are capable of teaching English at the elementary school level. It would be an impossible task to prepare teachers who are able to teach English for every public elementary school (Saito, 2005).

Secondly, English education as it is proposed to be taught at elementary schools will not be as worthwhile as supporters would have us believe (Saito, 2005).

Thirdly, there is the problem of the potential negative effects on pupils’ English abilities. If elementary school teachers—those currently teaching in the classroom—teach English, they may harm pupils’ attitudes to the language because of their insufficient knowledge of English (Saito, 2005).

Fourthly, the policy overemphasizes English at the cost of other languages and cultures, and so it does not foster multilingualism. It should be noted that most foreigners who

live in Japan are non-English speakers (Yamakawa, 2005). The tendency to overwhelmingly promote English as the *de facto* foreign language can be observed at all levels from elementary schools to higher institutions (Koishi, 2006).

Fifthly, falling academic standards in Japanese and reading are connected to English education at elementary schools (Saito, 2005).

Finally, Imai (2005) assesses the benefits of English education in relation to the potentially detrimental effects of cutting other subjects, and doubts that the trade-off is desirable.

Disregard of the Opportunity Gap Problem in the Policy Debates

It is notable that in making their arguments to support or to oppose the policy, neither side mentions the role of social categories like social class in such questions as equal access to second language instruction. MEXT mentions “equal education opportunity” in terms of the contents of activities between schools, not individuals. Kariya (2001) argues that discussions regarding inequalities in educational achievement have been avoided in Japan because any merit system in schools would be considered as discriminative, even though inequality in achievement based on social stratum has consistently existed in the postwar period. A distinctively Japanese view on merit systems as discriminative emerged in 1950s. During this period, educators faced students who were not able to go to high schools because of their low socioeconomic level. Educators recognized the relationship between one’s economic situation and likelihood of going on to secondary education and sympathized with those who could not attend high schools due to their limited financial situation.

As Japan entered an age of high economic growth in 1960s and poverty became less of a problem, the relationship between social class and academic achievement (poverty and low achievement) gradually disappeared in educational debates, but the view, “merit system as discriminative education” has remained. Because of this, the idea has become established that equal education means arranging educational activities so that students do not feel a sense of being discriminated against by being classified according to academic merit (Kariya, 2001). In effect, viewing class differences as factors in academic achievement is problematic because it makes low social class-students feel they are

being discriminated against. Also, differentiation based on one’s merit was avoided since it would harm orders of school communities (Kariya, 2009). In consequence, inequality as a structural or class problem has been ignored in educational policy and practice (Kariya, 2001).

The Opportunity Gap and Shadow Education

Inequality in achievement due to social class is overlooked in Japan, but it does exist (Kariya, 2001; Tsuneyoshi, 2008). With regard to English education, an indication of an achievement gap based on social class differences is evident at the elementary school level due to the existence of an opportunity gap intensified by the private education market called “shadow education,” which enables students from wealthy families to take English lessons in addition to formal schooling.

Although there is a variety of shadow educational activities (Baker, Akiba, Le Tendre, & Wiseman, 2001; Stevenson & Baker, 1992), they “share a similar logic such as correspondence courses, one-on-one private tutoring, examination preparatory course, and full-scale preparatory examination schools” (Baker et al., p. 2). These organized learning activities offered by private companies are similar to those of formal schools. They are intended to enhance students’ academic performances within formal schooling (Baker et al., 2001). Shadow education has been a major phenomenon in East Asian countries such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan (Bray, 2003), and it is “growing proof of how economically generated inequalities outside of education systematically undermine quality of access, participation and outcome within (Lynch and Moran, 2006, p. 223).

Shadow Education in Learning English among Elementary School Pupils

In 2006, Benesse (2007), the biggest private company in K–12 correspondence education in Japan, conducted a basic survey about English education. Four thousand, seven hundred and eighteen parents with children attending a sample of public elementary school (1st to 6th graders) completed the survey. Eighty-nine percent of them were mothers.

Nineteen percent of them reported that their children learn English outside of public elementary schools. Twenty-four percent of sixth graders take English lessons outside of public schools, while sixteen percent of first graders also study English outside of their schools.

Access to shadow education in English differs significantly depending on the mother's educational background. In the survey, 48.3 percent of the mothers had a high school diploma or lesser academic background, while 45.1 percent had an associate or higher degree. In the case of mothers with lower academic background (middle school or high school graduates), only 13.7 percent of their children studied English outside of public schools. On the other hand, 26.1 percent of children whose mothers have an associate or higher degree take English lessons in the private education market. This data suggests that mothers with a higher educational background are more likely to enroll their children in English lessons in the shadow education industry. As Lynch and Moran (2006) argue, middle class parents use their economic capital to send their children to shadow education institutions in order to secure their child's future class status. Thus, there is a need in Japan to recognize that social class does play an important role in gaining access to English programs, even at the elementary education level.

Private Elementary Schools

Expensive private elementary schools also offer English lessons as parts of their curriculum. Some private elementary schools started English education more than one hundred years ago and the number of private schools that began to provide English lessons dramatically increased in the 1950s (Matsukawa, 2004). In 2005, 135 out of 148 private elementary schools which responded to MEXT's survey conduct English education (MEXT, 2006). In addition, teachers who teach English at private elementary schools do not teach other subjects but specialize only in teaching English (Matsukawa, 2004). Thus, compared to public elementary school teachers who need to teach all subjects, teachers at private elementary schools have more skills and knowledge in teaching English.

Because parents who send their children to private elementary schools are more educated and possess higher socioeconomic status, private schools are another source of unequal opportunity to learning English. Put in perspective, in 2008, Japan has 73 nationally established elementary schools, 22,197 public elementary schools, and 206 private schools (MEXT, 2008a). But even considering the small number of private schools in relation to public elementary schools, it is still clear that a considerable opportunity gap

exists between those who can afford extra services for their children and those who cannot.

Evaluation of the existing policy in terms of narrowing opportunity gap

Both supporters and opponents of the policy argue their respective cases about the benefits and harms of mandating English education in the elementary school without considering the important issue of equality of opportunity, which is one of the most discussed topics in countries like the United States. It is indeed important to argue how to improve pupils' English ability, but at the same time, it is necessary to ask who benefits from mandated English education at public elementary schools, while identifying who suffers from the English education practices. One could argue that no one benefits, neither the poor students who do not get extra tutoring, nor the students who attend shadow education institutions, because the lessons are so poorly taught that they can undo all the positive good of taking classes out of school.

The policy does seem to be good in one respect in that it does give some opportunities to pupils who, due to their social class, would otherwise have no familiarity with English, whatsoever. Thirty-five periods of English activities may not be much, but they may be sufficient to provide some opportunities for disadvantaged groups and thus narrow the gap with those who have access to shadow education and those who have access to English in private schools. Thirty-five periods of language activities is a distinct improvement on current practice. In 2006, 95.8 percent of public elementary schools conducted English activities and the average number of periods devoted to these activities—14.8 periods per year—fell short of what the policy offers from the academic year of 2011.

The opponents may argue that thirty five periods of language activities are meaningless, and these hours should be used for other subjects. However, considering the substantial number of pupils taking English lesson in the shadow education industry, one class-hour per week does not seem much and may help some pupils who have no opportunities outside of public schools. It would certainly help when the students move on to seventh grade.

Middle school students take regular examinations in every subject, including English, between four times and six times per academic year. Successful performance on these

exams is important for entering competitive high schools. Two or three months after their entrance to middle school, seventh graders take the first regular series of examinations. Seventh graders are normally asked to write the alphabet with both capital and small letters and show knowledge of a simple vocabulary such as 'dog,' 'cat,' 'ball,' 'cup,' and so forth. A score on this first examination of English may set students' attitude toward English because this is the first official evaluation of their English ability. Thus, it can be argued that thirty-five periods of English activities may be helpful for pupils who have fewer opportunities to learn English. They would at least have some familiarity with the language and a better chance of performing reasonably well from the beginning in their seventh grade English class.

Although pupils without any opportunity outside of public schools may benefit from the policy, it is unrealistic to believe that this policy can narrow the achievement gap significantly, for two reasons. First, students with more opportunities in the private education market start with a larger vocabulary, knowledge of English grammar, and so forth, which enables them to achieve higher scores on regular examinations throughout the three-year period of middle school education. Secondly, since the policy is aimed at giving students a foundation of communicative competence in English and a positive attitude toward English, the activities may not help pupils at all for the second or third regular examinations held later in the year at the seventh grade level. These later examinations focus on writing and reading skills. In other words, what pupils learn during the activities in fifth and sixth grade at public schools is not what is tested at the seventh grade level. Therefore, all the efforts and thirty-five periods of fifth and sixth grades may be meaningless in terms of narrowing an achievement gap based on social class differences. Thus, a greater concentration on English lessons during elementary and middle school years may be necessary to narrow the gap.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the problems arising from an official disregard in Japanese policy debates regarding the opportunity gap that exists between different groups in obtaining access to English instruction. Neither the supporters nor the opponents of mandatory English education at public elementary schools show any awareness of problems of unequal access or admit that an opportunity gap exists

that is based on social class differences. Therefore, it is important to consider that many public elementary school pupils from high socioeconomic status families tend to take private English classes outside of public schools, and that some attend private schools that offer more intensive English lessons. Families with sufficient resources have more opportunities than others to help their children learn English before they take the middle school mandatory English course in which good performance is required to enter competitive high schools. I argue that this case exemplifies the disregard of inequalities based on one's socioeconomic status, and suggest that the opportunity gap between these groups be considered in future educational policy debates in Japan.

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