The MEXT English Education Reform Objectives and Student Motivation

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The MEXT English Education Reform
Objectives and Student Motivation

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Language teachers in Japan generally take great interest in the announcements to reform English education by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). Notably, the MEXT 2002 Strategic Plan dated July 12, 2002 titled "Developing A Strategic Plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities' - a plan to Improve English and Japanese Abilities (Ministry 2002) " and the 2003 Action Plan titled "Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities (Ministry 2003)" have caused quite a stir. As in any country, dictates from educational authorities raise levels of anxiety across the profession. This is usually because such ambitious plans often serve only as lofty banners and fall short in the practical matters of day to day methods and procedures in the classroom.

However, this time, professional teachers should put aside cynicism and review the contents of the plans. The most important aspect of the MEXT plans is the upper echelon recognition of a serious educational problem. Despite the hiring of thousands of ALTs (assistant language teachers) throughout Japan, most high school graduates still enter university with minimal communicative competency in English. Additional English language classes within universities may or may not improve student oral communicative competency as the matter comes down to the individual level of motivation of the learner and the classroom environment the learner enters. As with many matters in life, motivation and good fortune (in getting a talented teacher) often combine for success. Unfortunately, the converse of this is also true in that a lack of motivation combined with poor language instruction can be disastrous with students losing complete interest in their English language studies.

Certainly the problem of minimum oral communicative competency can be

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rectified; however, top heavy pronouncements from the MEXT such as all English teachers are expected to have TOEFL scores of 550 or greater will do little more than cause consternation. Yes, ideally all English teachers should have high measures of English ability and certainly this fits the notion of teacher as “expert.” However, will the MEXT insistence on 550 TOEFL scores for English language teachers in Japan raise the levels of oral proficiencies of learners? It is most unlikely, unless the teachers address some fundamental issues in teaching methodology, student evaluation, and student motivation. This applies to native English speaking instructors as well as their English teaching Japanese counterparts. This paper reviews the MEXT reform objectives that should be the primary determinants in upgrading deficiencies in English language instruction at universities. The issues of student motivation and student evaluation need to be at the forefront of teacher concerns as they are interrelated classroom concerns and should not be treated as distinct entities.

In order to address existing problems in teaching methods, student evaluations, and motivation, it is useful to examine some of the specific headings and descriptions extracted by Tanabe (2004) from the 2003 Action Plan (Ministry 2003). Several important points are outlined under heading I. Goals to cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” subsection II. Action to Improve English Education (Ministry 2003):

1) Improvement of English Classes
2) Improvement of the teaching ability of English Teachers and upgrading of the teaching system
3) Improvement of motivation to learn English
4) Improvement in the evaluation system for selecting school and university applicants
5) Support for English conversation activities in elementary schools
6) Improvement of Japanese language abilities
7) Promotion of practical research

Of these seven salient points, the first four are especially pertinent to language instructors at the university level for obvious reasons: they are interrelated and improvements can be implemented at any time. It is easily understood that
improvement in English classes will result from improved teaching ability, upgrading teaching systems, improved learner motivation, and improved evaluation systems. More important, however, is the recognition that improved student motivation can result from the other interrelated elements and these are the domain of the teacher. Increasing student motivation for English studies should be the primary short-term goal for teachers and it can be accomplished by addressing deficiencies in the above interrelated elements (see illustration I below).

MEXT heading (II.) Action to improve English Education, subsection (1.) Improvement of English Classes contains the following significant point:

“Promotion of criterion-based evaluation (so-called “absolute evaluation”). The establishment of criterion-based evaluation will be further promoted through means such as “reference Materials for Creating Evaluation Standards and improving Evaluating Methods” for the junior high school level, instruction manuals, and the progress of deliberations concerning evaluation in foreign language education at the senior high school level (Ministry 2003).

Subsection (2) Improvement of the teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading of the teaching system includes: “Promotion of intensive training in a five year plan will be undertaken. All English teachers can undertake training in the five years from 2003 through 2007 (Ministry 2003).

Subsection (3) improvement of motivation to learn English states that: “-10,000 high school students will study abroad each year
-opportunities to use English outside the classroom will be enhanced
-international exchange will be further developed through such means as communication with the world using English (Ministry 2003).”

MEXT heading II, subsections 1, 2, and 3 address the very important considerations of: the promotion of criterion-referenced evaluation, the intensive training of teachers, the upgrading of teaching systems, the increase in opportunities to use English outside of class, the increase in international exchanges, and the increase in study abroad opportunities. Realistically, only a small percentage of high school students will be able to study abroad, use English outside the classroom, or
participate in international communication. Yet, the more such opportunities exist, the greater the likelihood that the motivation of those participating will increase, but what happens to those students who are denied such opportunities? Additionally, not all study abroad encounters are favorable and difficulty during a study abroad can effectively decrease motivation.

The issue of motivation is very important and one must wonder why the MEXT plan is treating this objective as an element outside the domain of the teacher and external to the English language classroom.

The reason for focusing on the MEXT objectives (listed above) is one of practicality. It is possible for individual instructors to take immediate steps to address deficiencies in English education quickly at the university level (even though the MEXT objectives do not seem to be addressed to post secondary education at all). The MEXT objectives are vague and no specific plans for implementation have been provided (as that would certainly irk professional educators). Instead, educators have an opportunity to examine their own teaching practices in light of the MEXT objectives and resolve the problem of how to “cultivate Japanese with English abilities (Ministry 2003).”

Throughout junior and senior high school, students battle with English grammar and vocabulary to succeed at entrance examinations. English is an obstacle much like a track hurdle that needs to be jumped and can then be left behind. With successful entry into a university, for most students, the reason for studying English is gone. The last hurdle has been cleared. Clearly, for most students in junior and senior high school, their motivation for studying English is instrumental in that English helps them to gain admission to higher education. Hundreds of hours have been spent studying English, yet few students have developed the competency or experienced the satisfaction of being able to converse in English. With admission to university, if these students do not establish a new rationale to apply themselves to their English studies, the lack of motivation to pursue English will result in low overall proficiency (Berwick and Ross, 1989).

Unfortunately, the intrinsic reward of developing competence in oral communication is insufficient motivation to guide the majority of students in their English
studies, until they have developed enough fluency to find the learning situation rewarding. Given the limitations of large classes and few hours of instruction, not many options have been explored to optimize learner motivation and to improve their oral communicative competency.

Gardner (1985) recognized years ago that in order to learn a foreign language, the learner has to:

1) identify with the speakers
2) find the learning situation rewarding
3) have motivation

A lot of attention has been paid to Gardner's ideas and his Attitude/Motivation test Battery has been translated into Japanese and has been used to gather data on junior college and university students in Japan. Not surprisingly, in one such study, Yamashiro and McLaughlin (1999) found significant correlations between college student motivation and English language proficiency.

Given the scope of the MEXT reforms, it seems reasonable to try to convert their objectives into practical steps that language teachers can begin to take. By recognizing the significance of motivation as a factor in language proficiency, it makes sense to see this issue in its proper context, with the teacher in the classroom.

Illustration I: Interrelating MEXT Elements as a means to Increase Student Motivation
The MEXT 2003 Action Plan under heading (II.) Action to improve English Education, subsection (1.) Improvement of English Classes calls for the promotion of criterion-based evaluation at the junior and senior high school levels. This point, arguably, applies to university classes as well. In fact, if criterion referenced assessment becomes the new standard at universities, the repercussions will extend down through all levels of education and change will take place quickly.

Antonio and O'Donnell (2004) found that “the use of criterion referenced assessment in evaluation helped students markedly improve their emotive communicative proficiency (p. 20).” Furthermore, they state that with criterion referenced assessment, the students can be given immediate feedback after speaking activities. They found that generally, students are eager to hear their scores and they seek advice on how to improve. Through a study program of using English naturally in authentic contexts, and with assessment of pre-negotiated criteria, the students were able to find new motivation to study.

The issue of student motivation should be at the forefront of education reform. Improved motivation can result when teachers establish performance objectives for their students and evaluate using criterion-referenced assessment. This applies to all levels of education but is especially true for English oral communication classes at the university level which should lead the way in setting educational standards.

References