RESHAPING JAPANESE STUDENTS' GLOBAL MINDSET FOR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

Manami Sato

Kyoto University of Advanced Science

Abstract: *Over a decade has passed since the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) introduced the concept of promoting Global Human Resources to enhance Japan's global competitiveness. However, despite ongoing efforts, there remains a significant gap between the government's goals and the realities of classroom English education. Key elements of Global Human Resources (MEXT, 2012) include: 1) language and communication skills; 2) initiative and proactivity; and 3) an understanding of different cultures and Japanese identity. In practice, however, students often struggle with English proficiency, primarily due to a traditional education system that emphasizes rote memorization over communication and critical thinking skills This paper examines the disconnect between policy and classroom practices, drawing on existing literature and data to analyze how current educational approaches hinder Japan's global competitiveness. It highlights the critical role of teacher training in overcoming these challenges, proposing that professional development is necessary to equip teachers with the skills to foster a communicative, student-centered approach to learning. In addition, the paper will present practical pedagogical recommendations, such as revising curriculum frameworks (Bloom et al., 1956, 2002) and incorporating more interactive, communicative teaching methods (Long, 1996). By aligning educational practices with global needs, Japan can better prepare students to thrive as global citizens, ultimately strengthening the country's position on the world stage.*

Keywords: *education policy, global mindset, language acquisition, critical thinking*

INTRODUCTION

Japan's education system shares the overarching goal of preparing learners for the demands of a globalized world, as outlined in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Education 2030 framework. However, while Japan has aligned with the global competencies emphasized by OECD, its implementation reflects the nation's unique educational traditions, cultural values, and challenges. The OECD framework highlights three key competencies that future generations must acquire to thrive in an increasingly complex world: 1) creating new values, 2) reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and 3) taking responsibility (OECD, 2018). These competencies aim to foster creativity, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making—skills crucial for navigating a diverse and rapidly changing global landscape. For instance, creating new values encourages innovation, while reconciling tensions highlights the importance of balancing conflicting perspectives in social, cultural, and professional contexts. Taking responsibility emphasizes accountability and global citizenship, encouraging individuals to consider their roles in both local and international communities.

MEXT's vision for Global Human Resources (MEXT, 2012) aligns with these goals but adapts them to Japan's specific needs. MEXT identifies three core competencies: linguistic and communication skills, self-direction and positivity, and cultural awareness combined with a strong Japanese identity. While these principles are commendable, the integration of these competencies into Japan's education system faces several challenges. Firstly, the traditional focus on rote memorization, the grammar-translation method, and exam-driven education often hinders the development of critical thinking and creative problem-solving, essential for fostering global competencies. Second, there are concerns about the readiness of teachers to fully embrace and implement the OECD competencies, as many educators remain entrenched in conventional teaching methods. Furthermore, while MEXT promotes English proficiency as a bridge for global communication, Japan's education system has struggled with consistently improving students' practical language skills.

One of the main challenges Japan faces in implementing these frameworks is the rigidity of the existing curriculum and the widespread

resistance to change within the system. Despite policy shifts, schools and teachers may struggle to adapt due to limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of clear guidance on integrating global competencies. For example, while MEXT advocates for enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving, these skills are not always emphasized in standard textbooks or standardized exams, which continue to dominate classroom practices. Additionally, the shift toward a more holistic education approach has been slow, with educators expressing concerns about balancing traditional academic demands with the promotion of more comprehensive global skills.

This paper will critically examine the implementation of OECD and MEXT's global competencies in Japanese classrooms, discussing the barriers and limitations that hinder progress. It will explore how Japan's education system aligns with global trends and whether current reforms are sufficient or if further changes are needed. Drawing on existing studies and reports, the paper will evaluate the effectiveness of Japan's efforts to integrate these frameworks and suggest specific reforms to bridge the gap between policy and practice. By addressing these issues, Japan can move closer to preparing students as global citizens capable of thriving in an interconnected world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the evolution of societal structures, the future of employment, and the necessity of English proficiency in a globalized world, highlighting the transition to Society 5.0, the impact of AI and automation on jobs, and the importance of interdisciplinary skills, creativity, decision-making, and communication in preparing for future challenges. While these areas of focus align with Japan's educational and workforce development goals, challenges and limitations remain in their implementation, especially within Japan's traditional educational framework.

Society 5.0

Society 5.0, as conceptualized by Keidanren (2016), represents a significant societal evolution, progressing from the stages of Hunting (1.0), Agrarian (2.0), Industrial (3.0), and Information (4.0) societies. While the Information Society (4.0) focused on the digital revolution and the rise of the internet, Society 5.0 is distinguished by its integration of cyberspace and physical space, creating a human-centered "super-smart society." This integration utilizes advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and the Internet of Things (IoT) to address complex societal challenges like aging populations, environmental concerns, and economic disparities.

However, Japan's approach to Society 5.0 faces substantial barriers, particularly in educational institutions. The traditional, exam-driven curriculum and rigid teaching methods are not well-suited to developing the interdisciplinary skills required for this new era. Teachers often lack the training or resources to adopt more dynamic, cross-disciplinary teaching methods. Moreover, Japan's education system has struggled to fully incorporate critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity into curricula. These skills are vital for addressing the demands of Society 5.0, where knowledge must be applied across diverse fields such as engineering, ethics, and social sciences to create socially responsible solutions.

In order to thrive in Society 5.0, Japan requires human resources capable of bridging the gap between technology and humanity. Interdisciplinary skills, global communication abilities (including English proficiency), and lifelong learning are crucial for individuals navigating this interconnected world. Despite efforts to align educational reforms with these goals, many schools continue to face resistance due to the entrenched nature of traditional teaching models.

Furthermore, the importance of maintaining Japanese cultural identity while engaging with a globalized world cannot be overlooked. Japan's

unique cultural values play a crucial role in shaping international collaboration, yet the emphasis on global competencies often eclipses the value of domestic cultural understanding. More research is needed to explore how educational reforms can better balance both global and national perspectives.

The Future of Employment: Impact on Skills Demanded

The future of employment is undergoing a dramatic transformation due to advancements in AI and automation. According to Frey and Osborne (2017), nearly 47% of current jobs could be replaced by automation within the next 10 to 20 years, particularly in roles characterized by repetitive tasks. Jobs like telephone operators, data entry clerks, and factory workers are at high risk, while roles requiring creativity, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills, such as psychologists, nurses, and teachers, are expected to remain in demand.

Japan faces the challenge of preparing its workforce for this shift, as many traditional educational practices still emphasize rote learning and standardized testing, which do not adequately prepare students for the future demands of the job market. In response, Japan must overhaul its educational approach to prioritize creativity, decision-making, and communication skills — traits that will be essential in future job markets.

Moreover, AI and automation also highlight the importance of adapting to new technologies. Japan's efforts in promoting these skills must be assessed through empirical data, such as surveys on current workforce training initiatives and statistics on AI-related job displacement. These studies could guide further reforms aimed at preparing students for the challenges posed by automation and AI technologies.

The Necessity of English

In today's interconnected world, the necessity of English as a global language is undeniable. English dominates the digital landscape, with 60.5% of online content available in English, compared to only 2.1% in Japanese (Statista, 2020). This overwhelming presence of English

highlights its role as the primary medium for accessing and sharing knowledge online. From academic research to global news and social media, English provides a gateway to information and communication that transcends national boundaries. For Japanese students, mastering English is essential to fully participate in the wealth of opportunities and resources available in the digital age.

The global reach of English extends beyond the Internet. While the number of Japanese-speaking people is approximately 120 million, there are approximately 1.3 billion English speakers worldwide, including 380 million native speakers, making English the most widely spoken second language (MEXT, 2021). Given that the global population is estimated to be around 8 billion (United Nations, 2024), this means that one in every six people can communicate in English. In contrast, Japanese is spoken by roughly 1.5% of the world's population, which underscores the limited global reach of the language compared to English. As a result, English has become the de facto language of international business, science, and diplomacy. For Japanese individuals aspiring to work or study abroad, English proficiency is a vital skill for collaborating with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Despite its global dominance, Japan continues to face challenges in improving English proficiency among its population. Data from MEXT (2021) indicate that Japanese students often struggle to achieve the level of fluency necessary for international communication, particularly in speaking and listening skills. This gap between policy objectives and actual outcomes reflects deep-rooted issues in Japan's educational system, such as the overemphasis on grammar and vocabulary at the expense of practical communication skills.

In light of these challenges, the importance of English proficiency in Japan's education system cannot be overstated. English is not just a language; it is a key tool for accessing global knowledge, participating in international collaborations, and securing future career opportunities in an increasingly interconnected world. To remain competitive on

the global stage, Japan must prioritize English education and adapt its approach to teaching the language to better equip students with the skills needed to succeed in Society 5.0.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a literature-based approach to examine the gap between policy objectives and classroom practices in Japanese English education. The selection of literature was guided by relevance to key themes, including global competencies, language acquisition theories, and pedagogical strategies. Sources include academic journal articles, government reports, and policy documents from MEXT and OECD to ensure a comprehensive analysis of both theoretical perspectives and practical implications.

Theoretical frameworks such as Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956, 2002), Comprehensible Input Theory (Krashen, 1981), and the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) were applied to evaluate teaching methodologies and their alignment with global educational goals. Additionally, Nation's Four Strands (Nation, 2007) was used to assess the balance of language learning components in Japanese classrooms. By synthesizing insights from these frameworks, this study identifies key barriers to effective language education and progresses pedagogical recommendations to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

To further ground the analysis in empirical data, this study examines Japan's performance in international English proficiency assessments, such as the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), TOEIC, TOEFL, and IELTS. These assessments provide quantitative evidence of the current state of English language proficiency in Japan, particularly highlighting the disparity between reading and grammar proficiency versus communicative competence. This discrepancy aligns with the theoretical concerns outlined in Comprehensible Input and Output theories, where students may receive sufficient exposure to structured input but lack opportunities to engage in meaningful communication.

Moreover, by integrating insights from classroom-based studies and educational policy reports, this research evaluates the extent to which communicative methodologies, such as task-based learning and interactive language activities, are being implemented in practice. The findings from Interaction Hypothesis and Bloom's Taxonomy reinforce the necessity of classroom interaction and cognitive engagement for language acquisition, yet Japan's reliance on grammar-based instruction often limits these opportunities.

Thus, by synthesizing theoretical models with real-world data, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the systemic barriers preventing effective English education reform in Japan. The methodology highlights the need for targeted policy changes and pedagogical innovations to ensure that language learning aligns more closely with global standards of communicative competence.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Comprehensible Input Theory (Krashen, 1981)

The Comprehensible Input theory (Krashen, 1981) posits that language learners acquire new language structures when exposed to language that is slightly beyond their current proficiency level (i+1). This input is ideally understandable with some effort, allowing learners to gradually develop their linguistic abilities. Task-based learning and communicative activities, which involve real-world language use, align closely with this theory by providing meaningful and appropriately challenging input.

Comprehensible Output Theory (Swain, 1985)

In Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, activities like discussions, and role-plays serve as effective ways to encourage comprehensible output (Swain, 1985). These activities allow students to produce language in context, helping them bridge the gap between passive understanding and active language use. Research suggests

that communicative activities, where students produce language in meaningful contexts, significantly improve vocabulary retention and language proficiency.

Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956, 2002)

Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956; Krathwohl, 2002) connects cognitive development with language learning, promoting higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) like analysis, evaluation, and creation. Task-based activities, such as debates, help students transition from lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) - like remembering vocabulary and understanding grammar - to higher-order skills. This transition is critical for fostering deep, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.

By engaging in debates, students practice organizing their thoughts, analyzing arguments, and evaluating evidence, all of which align with Bloom's higher levels of cognitive complexity. This integration not only strengthens their language proficiency but also improves their overall cognitive development, preparing them for real-world challenges.

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996)

Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996) emphasizes the importance of interaction in language acquisition. According to this hypothesis, language learners improve their skills through negotiation of meaning - especially during interactions where they attempt to clarify and confirm understanding. This process of interaction is particularly important in language acquisition, as it enables learners to engage in authentic communication, pushing their language proficiency to new levels.

In classroom settings, debates provide ample opportunities for interaction. Students listen to opposing viewpoints, ask questions, and respond to others' arguments. This dynamic interaction fosters active engagement with the language, improving both listening and speaking skills, while also strengthening interpersonal communication abilities. The hypothesis underscores the importance of these interactions in

language learning, especially in settings where students can negotiate meaning in real-time conversations.

Nation's Four Strands (Nation, 2007)

Paul Nation's Four Strands (2007) framework for language learning emphasizes the need for balance between four crucial areas: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. These four strands must work together to provide a comprehensive approach to language acquisition.

Debates, speeches, and group discussions naturally incorporate all four of these strands. First, in meaning-focused input, students are exposed to new vocabulary and structures as they read or listen to arguments, which helps them develop their language comprehension skills. Next, in meaning-focused output, students produce language by formulating their own arguments or delivering speeches, which enhances their fluency and aids in language retention. Additionally, through language-focused learning, students refine their grammar, vocabulary, and language use by receiving corrections and engaging in self-reflection during these communicative activities. Finally, fluency development occurs as students engage in debates, speeches, and discussions, building their fluency in a low-pressure, dynamic environment.

This holistic approach integrates theory into classroom practice and is effective in preparing students to actively and meaningfully use the language in real-life contexts.

English Proficiency in Japan: Empirical Data

Japan's ongoing struggle with English proficiency is evident in international assessments. In the 2023 EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), Japan ranked 87th out of 112 countries, reflecting a persistent challenge in communicative competence (Education First, 2023). According to the results of TOEIC, TOEFL, and IELTS, Japanese students generally perform well in reading and grammar-based tests

but face significant challenges with the four skills required, which are essential for real-world communication (MEXT, 2021). The TOEIC Speaking and Writing tests, in particular, highlight a gap between students' ability to understand and produce English, which suggests that traditional classroom practices need to be updated to better reflect practical language use (MEXT, 2021).

DISCUSSIONS: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

The research findings highlighted the challenges facing Japan's English education system, including its focus on grammar and translation, the lack of authentic communication opportunities, and cultural factors impacting language acquisition. Building on these insights, this section discusses the implications of these findings and examines the limitations in implementing proposed solutions.

Bridging the Gap: Challenges and Opportunities in English Education in Japan

Emphasis on Grammar and Translation

Traditional English education in Japan often prioritizes grammar rules and translation exercises over communicative competence. This approach can lead to students possessing strong grammatical knowledge but lacking the confidence and ability to use English in real-world situations. The emphasis on written accuracy over spoken fluency results in students who can construct grammatically correct sentences but struggle with spontaneous conversations. As a result, English is often perceived as an academic subject rather than a practical communication tool.

Lack of Authentic Communication Opportunities

Classrooms often lack opportunities for students to engage in authentic communication, such as discussions, debates, and presentations. This limits their ability to develop fluency and practical communication skills. When students are not exposed to meaningful language interactions,

they fail to develop the ability to think and respond in English naturally. Moreover, traditional classroom settings rarely simulate real-world scenarios, making it difficult for learners to apply their knowledge outside academic environments.

Teacher Training and Development

Many English teachers in Japan may not have had extensive experience using English in real-world contexts. This can affect their ability to create engaging and communicative classroom environments. Teachers who have primarily learned English through grammar-focused instruction may struggle to implement interactive and student-centered learning approaches. Professional development opportunities must address these gaps by providing teachers with the tools and confidence necessary to facilitate communicative lessons effectively.

Cultural Factors

Cultural factors, such as a reluctance to make mistakes and a preference for passive learning, can also hinder students' progress in English. In Japan, the fear of embarrassment often prevents students from speaking in class, limiting their willingness to experiment with language. Additionally, a hierarchical classroom structure where teachers are the primary source of knowledge discourages students from actively engaging in discussions. These cultural tendencies must be addressed to create an environment where students feel safe and encouraged to participate.

Shifting to a Multifaceted Approach

Focusing on Communicative Competence

Curricula should prioritize communicative competence, focusing on developing students' ability to use English effectively in real-world situations. This includes incorporating more interactive activities (Long, 1996), such as discussions, debates, role-plays, and presentations. In particular, incorporating real-world tasks that mimic everyday interactions can help students build confidence in their ability to use

English outside the classroom. Additionally, integrating speaking and listening components into lessons ensures a more balanced language learning approach.

Promoting Task-Based Learning

Task-based learning, where students engage in meaningful tasks that require them to use English to achieve a specific goal, can be highly effective in developing communicative competence. For example, debates or problem-solving tasks encourage students to use English in real-life contexts, allowing for better retention and fluency. Additionally, role-playing activities that simulate everyday interactions, such as ordering food at a restaurant or conducting business negotiations, can make language learning more practical and engaging.

Enhancing Teacher Training and Development

Providing teachers with opportunities for professional development, including immersion programs and training in communicative language teaching methodologies, is crucial to improving classroom practices and bridging the gap between theory and real-world communication. Workshops, peer collaboration, and online resources can equip teachers with the necessary skills to implement communicative approaches. Furthermore, partnerships with native English speakers or international educators can provide valuable insights and exposure to diverse teaching methods.

Creating a Supportive Learning Environment

Fostering a classroom environment that encourages risk-taking, collaboration, and active participation can help students overcome cultural barriers and develop greater confidence in using English. Encouraging students to see mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures can shift their mindset toward active language use. Group activities and peer feedback can further support a more engaging and interactive learning experience.

Integrating Technology

Utilizing technology, such as online learning platforms, language learning apps, and video conferencing tools, can provide students with access to authentic English language resources and opportunities for interaction with native speakers. Digital tools such as AI-powered language tutors and virtual exchange programs can help bridge the gap between traditional learning and real-world communication. Additionally, incorporating multimedia content, such as podcasts and video lessons, can cater to different learning styles and make language acquisition more dynamic and engaging.

Counterarguments and Challenges in Implementing Reforms

While the proposed reforms — task-based learning, technology integration, and communicative teaching — are grounded in strong theoretical frameworks, several practical challenges must be addressed.

Resistance from Teachers

Many teachers in Japan are accustomed to grammar-focused methods and may be reluctant to adopt more communicative approaches. Teachers may require significant training in these new methods, especially in task-based language teaching (TBLT) or other interactive approaches. Additionally, veteran educators who have spent years teaching through traditional methods may feel apprehensive about changing their established routines. To address this, a gradual implementation strategy with ongoing support and mentorship can ease the transition to communicative teaching approaches.

Curriculum Constraints

Japan's curriculum continues to prioritize standardized tests, which mainly assess grammar and reading comprehension. This structure limits the time and resources available for interactive language activities, making it difficult to implement reforms that prioritize communicative competence. To facilitate meaningful change, policymakers must

consider revising standardized tests to include assessments of speaking and listening skills. Additionally, a more flexible curriculum that allows teachers to incorporate communicative activities alongside test preparation can balance both objectives.

Cultural Barriers

Japanese students often face cultural challenges when engaging in communicative activities, especially those that involve speaking in front of others. The cultural emphasis on avoiding mistakes can discourage active participation, which is essential for language acquisition. Overcoming these barriers requires a shift in both teaching methods and student attitudes. Teachers can create a more supportive atmosphere by rewarding effort over perfection and fostering an inclusive classroom dynamic where students feel encouraged to express themselves freely.

Aligning Theories with Classroom Practice

The integration of Comprehensible Input, Task-Based Learning, Bloom's Taxonomy, The Interaction Hypothesis, and Nation's Four Strands into Japan's English education system presents a comprehensive model for improving English proficiency. However, successful implementation will require overcoming challenges such as teacher resistance, curriculum constraints, and cultural factors.

Providing teachers with professional development in communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based methods is essential to overcoming resistance. Additionally, the curriculum must evolve to prioritize language use in real-world contexts, rather than focusing exclusively on grammar and test preparation. Lastly, fostering a supportive and risk-taking classroom environment will help students embrace active participation, ultimately improving their English proficiency and communication skills.

CONCLUSION

In summary, while challenges such as traditional teaching methods and cultural factors persist, it is clear that a paradigm shift is necessary to enhance Japan's English education system. The future demands a communicative, student-centered approach that equips students with English proficiency and nurtures the critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability required for success in a rapidly changing world.

To prepare students for the complexities of a globalized society, it is essential for educators, policymakers, and the broader community to collaborate in adopting innovative teaching methodologies and fostering a learning environment that encourages active engagement and real-world communication. This collaboration should focus on integrating task-based learning, embracing technological tools, and supporting continuous professional development for teachers. Additionally, a reevaluation of assessment methods is necessary to ensure that language proficiency is measured through standardized tests and practical application and communicative competence.

Beyond linguistic ability, the ability to navigate cultural differences and engage in meaningful global discourse is increasingly vital. A forward-thinking English education system must aim to cultivate students who are not only fluent speakers but also confident communicators who can thrive in international settings. This requires an educational culture that encourages risk-taking, collaboration, and resilience in language learning.

While implementing these reforms will require overcoming structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, the long-term benefits far outweigh the challenges. Japan stands at a critical juncture where embracing change can lead to an educational system that produces students who are not only linguistically proficient but also culturally aware, globally engaged, and capable of navigating the challenges and opportunities of Society 5.0. By fostering a dynamic and inclusive educational system, Japan can empower its students to thrive in an interconnected

world, ensuring they become active contributors to global innovation, diplomacy, and social development.

Looking forward, these reforms will lay the foundation for a future where Japan's education system is recognized for producing adaptable, confident, and well-prepared global citizens, ready to lead in a technologically advanced and culturally diverse world. To realize this vision, sustained commitment from all stakeholders — teachers, institutions, policymakers, and society at large — is essential. By embracing this transformation, Japan can ensure that its students are equipped not just with language skills, but with the confidence, adaptability, and intercultural competence needed to succeed on the world stage.

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