English Examination Hell: A Look at Japan's Struggling Language Learners

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HONOR PLEDGE

I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this assignment.

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Abstract

This literature review attempts to explore a wide range of topics regarding the frustrations and struggles with achieving large-scale English proficiency in Japan. This exploratory review analyzes factors such as Japanese history, the historical and cultural importance of Japanese entrance examinations, and student attitudes towards both the role of English language and examinations in attempting to diagnose reasons for these challenges. A critical eye is placed on the current and historic state of Japan's English language education system in regards to these issues. Additionally, emphasis is placed on different socio-cultural and linguistic factors revolving around TESOL/TEFL acquisition in order to contextualize problems that may or may not be uniquely Japanese.

Introduction: Troubling Numbers and Questions about EFL in Japan

During the last two centuries, many national borders are being transcended, and our world has become much smaller. With the many changes brought about by globalization, there has been a significant rise in the interaction and transmission of culture and language across borders and peoples. How this cultural transmission has taken place has varied by country to country, but obvious friction and struggles have resulted from many of these interactions. Though not a country which uses English as an official language, Japan has long required some knowledge of English due to Japan's status as an economic power and member of the First World. Despite attempts at improvement, Japan remains a country with a high count of English language learners but struggling with actual English language proficiency.

Several troubling statistics help define the poor state of English Education in Japan. In 2010, on the TOEFL Internet-based exam, Japan scored a tepid ranking of 135th in the world, and 31st out of 33 in just the Asian region alone. Japanese students scored similarly poorly on the 2013 TOEFL IBT tests (TOEFL). Furthermore, in both years of the TOEFL IBT test, Japanese students scored lowest of any Asian IBT TOEFL-taking country on the speaking portion of the test, and near the bottom on the listening portion. While not a perfect barometer for communicative skills, the TOEFL holds high importance in entering international universities for prospective Japanese students, as many international universities require students to score above a minimum TOEFL score for entrance.

The 3rd iteration of the EF (English First) English Proficiency Index, another large-scale, internet-based test and global ranking of English Proficiency was slightly more positive towards English Education in Japan. Conducted worldwide on adults from non-English-speaking countries, Japan ranked 26th in the world (out of 60) in terms of English Proficiency (EF).

English First placed their score in the "Moderately Proficient" tier (the middle, 3rd tier of the 5-tier rating system). While certainly a higher ranking than Japan's TOEFL scores, it also marked a slight decline in Japan's ranking since its last iteration. Additionally, English First. who conduct the testing and ranking, suggested that Japan's "non-communicative methods" of English education (specifically in terms of test-preparation English education) were at least partially to blame for Japan's low scores on the EF Proficiency tests.

The question of English proficiency has not been an issue left ignored by the Japanese government; as part of the 2008 Japanese Educational reform, English language education has become mandatory for students beginning in 5th and 6th grades. Recent changes from the MEXT have included future inclusion of English education in 3rd and 4th grades as well. As Japan gears up for the enormity of hosting the Olympics, the governmental policy changes relating to the pedagogy of English as a Foreign Language will have far-reaching effects on English language education, extending far past the Olympics' completion. And Japan's responsibilities for the hosting of the Olympics will certainly require a refocusing and renewed importance on the communicative side of English, which has historically been a problematic area for English learners in Japan.

Though Japan has had exposure to English for more than a century, English education looks far from perfect today. Despite the frequency of English language learners in Japan (almost every public school student, as English education is mandated by the Japanese government starting in 5th grade), success with learning English in a communicative context has often not been up to par when compared with many other English-learning countries. To review this problem in an attempt to understand possible developments and change in Japanese EFL policy, I will focus my research on three primary questions:

1) What historical factors of Japanese education have influenced Japanese learners and their goals and ability to acquire English?
2) What effect has the test-centric Japanese educational system played on the developments and modern system of Japanese EFL?
3) What conclusions can we draw from our understanding of the interactions between teaching English in Japan and high-stakes testing?

History of English Education in Japan: English Language and Education Programs

Historically, English education has long been a component of the Japanese educational system. Looking at the storied history of English education in Japan, Miyuki Sasaki (2008) asserts that English learning in Japan began in 1808, as soon as a British ship (the *HMS Phaeton)* violently entered Nagasaki's harbors. Sasaki summarizes Japan's adoption of English language learning into 4 distinct periods of time in Japanese history. She defines these periods as "Period 1 (1860 to 1945): English education for the elite", "Period 2 (1945 to 1970): English education for everyone", "Period 3 (1970 to 1990): English education for practical purposes in the era of rapid globalization", and "Period 4 (1990 to the present): Introduction of innovative policies". With each period marked changes in teaching style, availability of English education, and changes in it's purpose, though greater changes in policy and perception seemed to have occurred primarily in periods 3 and 4.

Sasaki's critical eye on Japan's major historical events yields an understanding that modern Japanese policy has been shaped through globalization, educational policy included. In the 3rd and 4th periods, much of these developments have been synonymous with strong trends of modern globalization and an opening of Japan that have affected the English education systems. Some of these events are reactionary to these changes: one development nearing the end of Sasaki's "Period 3" was the Japanese creation of the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), which has gone on to largely change and reformed many aspects of all Japanese education, as shown by recent educational policy.

Sasaki also notes that other changes and advances in English education can also be tied to other changes brought on by globalization, such as Japan's economic boom bringing more interest, and more significantly, a means in which to fund Japan's expanding English educational system. A notable byproduct of Japan's economic advancement and simultaneous hope for an internationalized, globalized approach to language education was the MEXT's creation of the JET program in 1987 (a program which continues to this day). The JET program draws young graduates from other countries to teach English in Japanese schools and echoes sentiments of internationalism and cooperation in the classroom, increasing the scope of, and improving English education in some schools (Sasaki, 2008, Nishino & Watanabe, 2008).

Similarly, global educational trends have played roles in the English education system in Japan from within the classroom. A brief look at Japan's pedagogical history of English teaching shows obvious parallels to the Western developments in the TESOL/TEFL praxis and pedagogy. Sasaki's description of Japan's changing teaching styles, from a longstanding embrace of the grammar translation method (originating from Chinese language education), to Japan experiencing theoretical changes, breaking into audiolingual methods (in "Period 2") and finally an introduction of communicative language teaching (in "Period 3") have obvious parallels with Western TESOL/TEFL pedagogy. Japan's pedagogical history in terms of English teaching mirrors (albeit in a delayed way), the popularized Western educational practices and pedagogical developments leading up to our current one.

History of Testing: Rise and Significance of High-Stakes English Testing in Japan

Opportunity in today's Japan is driven by a student's performance on tests, of which a select few hold extraordinary importance. The emphasis on these tests is enormous, as Rohlen (1983) described it, they are "a National Obsession" in Japan. The Japanese institution of

entrance examinations allow or bar future opportunities for young Japanese; they are in place for both their entrance into the top High Schools and top Colleges/Universities of Japanese students, and performance on these tests can essentially dictate the futures for Japanese students. Japan's system is a tournament competition of different rounds: successful performance on High School entrance examinations allows entrance into the best High Schools, which prepare students much better for University entrance examinations. Students then take the University entrance exams, of which only the highest-scoring students are selected into the most prestigious schools. Finally, University completion yields a degree which holds value in name alone.

The prestige of having graduated from top Universities in Japan holds so much weight for job decisions that their name value alone trumps actual content knowledge and training. As Takeuchi (1997) describes:

> "A first class bank would prefer to hire graduates of the faculty of education of Kyoto University than graduates majoring in economics and law from lower ranked universities. The former are considered to have greater potential ability because they passed the more difficult university entrance examination. The irony here is that success in getting into a better company is again based on competition according to school ranking without taking account of the subject studied." (p. 194)

Naturally, the amount of competition for admission into the most-prestigious Universities in Japan has been extreme, and largely consolidated in the process of preparation and taking of the University entrance exam. Takeuchi suggests that the malleability and "bureaucratic" character of the many students who worked so hard to graduate from prestigious Universities, working through the arduous processes of multiple entrance examinations and countless hours of preparation, better fit the profile that many large Japanese companies look for. Furthermore, it maintains the system and idea of the name value of a degree with the most prestigious Japanese Universities.

In Japan, that primary entrance examination is currently known as the "National Center

Test for University Admissions", which is given for the most prestigious public Universities and some private schools as well. The test encompasses multiple disciplines and subjects and test for content knowledge. Preparation for the test is an essential goal for most students at most Japanese high schools. Typical Japanese High School students spend a great deal of their time (particularly in their third year in High School) on test preparation for the National Center Test, essentially *the* test for Japanese students in their pursuit of any future career or goals that requires University admission.

While not necessarily a one-shot test (students can retake the National Center Test the following year), the test is only offered once a year, and factors extremely heavily into University admissions, with minimum testing scores required for a chance to apply. For Japanese students, this test is a major part of their lives. As Ikuo Amano (1991) describes, "Passing the university entrance exams is the chief educational concern of most senior high school students" (p. xx). Essentially, "The university entrance exams…. are part, a kind of first phase, of the scramble to secure a stable career" (p. xx). And as Japanese students have affectionately deemed it, this time in their life as a student preparing for exams is known as 'Juken Jigoku', literally meaning 'Entrance Examination Hell'. Many students (called *Ronin*, or "Masterless Samurai"*)* who are unsuccessful on their first attempt at taking the entrance examination tests decide to wait and prepare for the test again the following year.

This overbearing institution of high-stakes testing has long remained the static factor in Japan's educational system, a contentious constant in Japan's TEFL history. The Japanese system have long included English testing in the entrance examinations to higher education, from its modern iteration to many previous ones of years past. According to Sasaki (2008) from "Period 1" to modern day, Japan has placed extreme importance on a student's proficiency of *Juken Eigo*

(entrance examination English) in student's lives. However, this is not English for communication, this is English for the entrance examination. In 2014, the National Center for University entrance examinations reported that around 530,000 students took the English test, and a similar number also took the English Listening test (they are not the same test; the English Listening test was a recent addition to the Center tests). Moreover, more examinees took the English and/or English Listening test than any other subject.

The development of high-stakes examination in Japan was not organic to internal developments in their own educational system; instead the examination system can be attributed to Japan's feelings of internationalism, adoptions, and adaptations of the Western systems at the turn of the 19th century. Ikuo Amano (1991) attributes the rise of the modern examination system in Japan to being a combination of the historical connection that Japan had to China and its cultural systems (which included a long-standing, historically-rooted Examination system), and the Western developments and encouragement of an Examination system from Europe and the West. As Amano describes, "... the examination systems which had matured in the West were transplanted in their extremely purified and idealized forms to Japan, quickly took root in its sociocultural ground, and prospered." (p. xxi) Additionally, Amano traces the modern culture of "*Juken Eigo*" (entrance examination Hell) all the way back to the 1920s (p. xii).

Still, the importance of the examination, and entrance examination English, have trended in a direction of lesser importance. As Japan's English testing stands today, Sasaki (2008) asserts that the significance of the test *has* been diminishing in recent years, as less emphasis is placed on it for prospective students of higher education. Less overall students applying to higher education programs, and thus there is less competition and less need to establish high bars for test score minimums for prospective students. Governmental criticism of the Educational

systems in place have led to attempts to reform different aspects and parts of the test as well. Still, Japan has experienced a difficult and uneven transition in attempting to diminish the focus on the test.

Rise of the *Juku*: Private Industry Responding to the Need for Test Preparation

Sasaki (2008) notes that even policies which removed and outlawed authentic testing materials from public school classrooms have done little to abet student's testing concerns. Japanese policymakers decided to remove test preparation materials from the public school classroom by removing them from the curriculum and outlawing them. Ironically, this attempt at reforming the system by removing materials and forcing blatant test preparation outside of school simply gave rise to the extensively-popular *'Juku'* system- Japan's system of private cram schools which students attend outside of normal class hours.

Still needing a way to prepare for entrance examinations, the *Juku* private industry gave students a way to fill their need for test preparation outside the now test preparation-lacking school classrooms. Today, *Juku* are attended by many Japanese students, serving as a believed necessary 'step' in their preparation for the future- for a better chance at a good University and eventual career path.

The *'Juku'* system is very popular in Japan, and the process of *Juku* attendance extends to Japanese children, which can start at very young ages. As one recent article in Japan Times described the *juku* private school system, "Some families start preparation [at a *juku*]… from preschool in some instances." It is also extremely variable from *Juku* to *Juku*, ranging from small businesses to "corporate behemoths" (27 Dierkes). Dierkes, who observed and studied the operating practices of *Juku* across Japan, observed differences in teacher backgrounds as well, classifying most *Juku* owners into either being student activists trying to change the world

through education, *Juku* part-timers who fell into the profession, or licensed teachers who became frustrated by the public school system. As Dierkes calls it, *Juku* is a "Shadow Industry" to many Japanese, and owner-operators and teachers are not given the respect or prestige afforded to Japan's licensed teachers.

Naturally, Dierkes (2009) found school operation to be very different from traditional education in Japan, teaching at variable hours, as well as materials and curricula. As Dierkes notes, interaction with students and teachers was highly communicative and interpersonal in comparison to conventional schools:

> "While the content and pedagogy in *juku* shadow teaching in conventional schools very closely [matches], students seem to relate to *juku* operators and instructors very differently from their relationship with teachers in schools. It is very common, for example, to see students exchanging joking banter with instructors in *juku*. .. *Juku* operators value this information exchange very highly. A number of them have emphasized in conversations that such exchanges give instructors an opportunity to get to know the students and their needs better, to learn more about their schools and changing testing patterns, as well as to judge any particular learning needs that a student might have." (p. 33-34)

It is obvious that there is value on both ends of a teacher-student relationship that values positive communication and trust. At the same time, *Juku* are taught and operated by many without any educational background at all, "It is important to point out that neither most owner-operators nor teachers have any sort of pedagogical preparation" (p. 34). Outside of the scope of licensing, one wonders how effective *Juku* are.

Student and Teacher Attitudes: Goals, Intent, and the Importance of Communication

The goal of communication for Japanese English, especially at the High School level, is a complex issue. Aya Matsuda (Seargeant 2011) conducted a questionnaire to analyze the drives and attitudes towards English of Japanese students in a moderately-selective, private high school in Tokyo. Her findings on entrance examinations parallel sentiments from Amano (1991) about

the typical beliefs of many Japanese students: better performance on entrance examinations increased in success in their future career prospects (and indirectly, its importance for college entrance examinations) was a driving point for learning English. Matsuda found that a majority of students disagreed the statement 'English is not necessary in order to enter a good university'. Moreover, these goals extended to aspirational realms such as importance for music, or simply increasing paths and career choices in the futures of students.

Matsuda (Seargeant 2011) acknowledges another primary drive for students: communicative ability and its pragmatic importance. From her interviews and surveys, Matsuda discovered that these Japanese high school students recognized the importance that the English language now serves as a lingua franca and international language. Moreover, their desire to actually learn the language was not exclusively based on this understanding, but the fact that they could traverse. "Students were not necessarily attracted (merely) to the symbolic value of English as an international language but rather (or also) to its practical value: it brings them more opportunity to meet people and access information that would not be available to them otherwise."

Matsuda (Seargeant 2011) found that educators also did not share the rosy, idealistic view that students did. High School faculty members who Matsuda surveyed reported frustration with "English imperialism" and the extreme importance that English had (a point which extended even outside of the classroom). Others speculated on the fact that perhaps, "teachers… did not seem to believe that these students- or certainly not all of them- needed to acquire much English" (p.45). Instead, teachers viewed from the question from a practical sense: while some students might go on to school internationally, or be employed in careers requiring proficiency in English, a majority of students would not, and thus the English language needs of students was in fact

often very little.

Reasons for Proficiency Problems: Rote Learning and Teacher Proficiency

English testing has been such an influential factor for a majority of Japan's EFLs, and with it, a singular focus on the processes and needs students require for taking the test. Non-communicative styles of learning have thusly held a stronger grasp on Japan's English classrooms: there is undoubtedly an importance of the English language, but it has long served as a form of advancement through testing rather than a form of communication with the outside world. As English is part of a larger testing that is key to entrance into higher education, and Japanese have historically believed in an idea (if a fallacy) that higher education equates to a good job, mastering test English is one of the keys to attaining dreams of success. Rohlen (1983), who explored the pedagogy of Japanese Public High Schools, distills this explanation, saying "The fact that most educated Japanese can read English with amazing skill but hardly speak a word follows from the nature of such exams." (p. 101)

At times, this perception of English language learning was broken down as a form of knowledge and strength for the Japanese EFL. Tinkham (1975) conducted a study comparing rote learning tendencies and success in language learning for American learners with that of Japanese learners. This rote learning essentially revolved around rote word memorization. He found that Japanese learners were far more amenable to, and overall better at rote language learning. Tinkham says:

> "There appears to be a significant differences between Japanese and American high school students in their attitudes towards rote learning and in their performances in tasks requiring rote learning. Japanese students appear to view rote learning in a more positive light than do their American counterparts. Japanese students also perform significantly better both recalling and recognizing new words in a new language."(p. 697)

Exclusive use of rote learning is generally not considered conducive to a communicative

acquisition of other languages; it has obvious parallels to the audiolingual TEFL methods of 'language drilling'. As such, Tinkham also conducts his study in a way that students demonstrate with assessment-based performance, this rote learning seems to be suggested as positive only in the domain of test performance. And if, as Tinkham suggests, Japanese students do better with reception and performance in rote learning in these testing conditions, than it is unsurprising that they were more amenable to these techniques in a cultural system which placed an incredible emphasis on non-communicative English.

Tinkham's study findings are not surprising: they paralleled a particularly test-heavy Japan during that time. Sasaki (2008) notes that "Period 3 (1970-) mark[ed] the beginning of a qualitative change in English education in Japan… From period 3 on, English came to be regarded as a means of communicating with other people in the world."(69) Essentially, the use of English for communication only *began* in 1970, after over a century of English education that was explicitly *not* for a communicative context. Undoubtedly, Japan's transition in TEFL towards a communicative model has been an incredibly difficult one as it has been hard for Japan to shake a historical past, one which specifically downplayed any significance of the importance of English as means of communication.

Teacher Proficiency and Confidence: Japan's Struggles with Teachers

Nishino and Watanabe (2008) further address underlying problems with Japan's public school TEFL problems in communicative teaching. They claim that the blame of flaws in English education are shared, and a definite part of the blame falls on Japan's English teachers. Nishino and Watanabe found that the average communicative ability of Japanese English teachers was very low, and their overall proficiency in English is low (according to average TOEFL scores). Moreover, many teachers who had a 'low' proficiency in turn also were affected

by their believed limitations by routinely avoiding attempting to use English in a communicative context, making their students revert to drilling and non-communicative teaching methods, and continuing a cycle of communicative and overall proficiency struggles.

Yuko Butler (2012) found congruent assessment of English teacher confidence, using in an exploratory self-reported survey to analyze several Asian countries' Elementary School EFL teachers and their current and desired English proficiencies, which were self-reported. Compared to other EFL educators from Korea and Taiwan (countries which performed significantly better on the TOEFL), Japanese teachers scored themselves lowest in both their current and desired English proficiency levels, and had the largest gap between current and desired proficiencies. Moreover Butler found that the gap in oral domains of English was larger than in written domain (Butler 265), reinforcing a belief that Japanese EFL teachers hold of having weaknesses.

Their actual proficiency, be it real or imagined, means that they often lack the knowledge or confidence (or both) to conduct communicative activities for their students. Finally, thinking that it was effective for themselves on entrance examinations, they "consequently they may adhere to the grammar translation method."(Nishino 134) In a problematic, neverending cycle promoting *'Juken Eigo'*, teachers attain their educated positions to become English teachers through passing tests, then attempt to impart the way they learned on their students.

Nishino and Watanabe (2008) discuss other problems with English language education as well. First, students may not feel a practical importance from learning English, as they have few chances to use it outside the classroom. In contrast with Matsuda (2011), Nishino and Watanabe suggest that actual communicative experiences are limited; students simply have few real outlets where communicative English is required. Students may also not be used to the student-centric education model, a model which is familiar in Western countries, but may be difficult to

suddenly adapt to students who have spent all of their lives with a teacher-centric model. Yet when left with the traditional model, reflecting teacher's assumptions about how to essentially 'teach the test', students may place a much greater focus on their reading abilities, which are of greater importance for English testing. Finally, Nishino and Watanabe indicate that class sizes can number around 30-40 students as a norm, certainly creating difficulties for attempts at communicative activities and most certainly making classrooms highly, if not exclusively, forcing teacher-centric teaching models.

These perceptions appear to be incorrect for any congruence with student learning styles as well: a study done by Saito (2004) of preferred teaching and learning styles of Japanese learners, disproves the teacher's perceptions of exclusively test-centric, non-communicative teaching styles. In surveying and comparatively analyzing differences in preferences between Japanese EFLs and Japanese ESLs in America, Saito found

> "The results of the quantitative analysis revealed that the Japanese students in both ESL and EFL settings preferred a teacher who was open minded. They viewed a teacher positively who was available outside class for consultation, showed respect for other cultures, and created a relaxed and open atmosphere by telling jokes and by admitting that he or she also made mistakes. Further, it was appreciated when the teacher was willing to adjust the classroom content to meet student needs." (p. 118)

These claims suggest a larger similarity in the desires of students across cultures than might be expected. Moreover, Saito (2004) similarly claims that in the cases of Japanese EFLs, smaller class sizes, which naturally led to less teacher-centered, unidirectional instruction have been responsible for improved English performance and proficiency, even if they are certainly not the norm in Japan's current English education system.

One additional difference that Saito (2004) found between these two groups of students was a more negative perception of English education by EFLs, and thus, students who could be perceived to be lazy or unmotivated by their teachers. But while Saito (2004) found attitudes

about English were indeed representative of less-motivated students, “These students are not solely responsible for their apparent apathy.” (p. 118) One primary cause that Saito cited was simply Japan’s much larger class sizes, which realistically forced teacher-centered, non-interactive instruction. I would add that, returning to Nishino & Watanabe’s (2008) points regarding the state of English education in Japan, perhaps Japan’s TEFL program has simply not been successful in creating a culture of interested, motivated Japanese EFLs.

Thankfully, Japanese EFL’s struggles with motivation and proficiency has not been wholly forgotten by the Japanese government. Nishino & Watanabe (2008) diagram some of the recent, larger-scale changes that the MEXT has attempted in order to try and improve English education. One change which occurred in 2006 was the simple addition of a new test section. After many years of being exclusively a reading/writing test (National Center for University Examinations), the English section on Japan’s national entrance exam now contains an English listening section as well. In theory, this extends and necessitates a student focus on the listening domain of English, one largely ignored in test-prep heavy English classes.

The MEXT has also taken steps to reform English education by improving their individual schools, such as establishing the experimental ‘100 Super English Language High Schools’, schools which have integrated a fuller, more-communicative English curriculum for their students. These schools incorporate new ideas by changing the education of their teachers: more communicative training and workshops has helped to give these English teachers new ideas for communicative activities. Still, Nishino & Watanabe question whether these developments will do enough to change Japanese TEFL at a larger scale. In their eyes, these changes appear cosmetic or at too small a scale to truly reform the system.

Thinking About Student Needs: What English is Best?

Much of the discussion to this point has described supposed deficits in English education, but it is an important consideration to rethink what the Japanese student *needs*. One obvious caveat to the simple labeling of Japan's system as 'flawed' is the question of whether or not this form of English is 'wrong' for the Japanese EFL population. One danger of increased emphasis on communicative English is if it does not serve student needs. First of all, realistic goals have to be established by the MEXT for the Japanese curriculum. There is a heavy idealization on the native speaker (NS) in many communities, often in the periphery of which Japan is a part of. Japan's community of EFLs is primarily non-native speakers of English (NNS).

Thus, it would be impossible to set a bar for English in Japan that was 'Native-level' and simply should not be the goal- NNS' should shoot for. As Jenkins (2006) notes, "The sociolinguistic reality of most expanding circle English users, characterized primarily as it is by lingua franca use[1], therefore makes nonsense of the idea that the English of proficient expanding circle speakers is the interlanguage when it differs from NS English." (143) Considering the many Japanese TEFL teachers, a great number of students will learn under NNS rather than NS, suggesting further similarities to ELF (English as a Lingua Franca). Thus, we should look to reconceptualize this into a goal of a language between two Japanese NNS EFL, a much more more realistic and appropriate goal for Japanese EFL, and as Jenkins suggests, perhaps analyze many of these languages even as a third space between ESL and EFL, either legitimizing the practice of '*Juken Eigo'* (entrance examination English) as a type of English (if it is indeed communicative), or at least lessening future requirements for communication of Japan's English learners.

At the same time, if Japanese EFLs are truly learning exclusively *'Juken Eigo'* (entrance

[1] This is described as "communication with other NNS of English rather than with NSs. Considering Nishino & Watanabe's account of English, with their specific descriptions of teacher problems in the classroom, I believe this is an apt tag for many Japanese EFLs.

examination English) with no intent on communication, this in itself is a unique form of English that makes an appraisal and analysis quite difficult. If the sociocultural view of language is predicated on the social tools people use to communicate, Japanese *'Juken Eigo'* does not seem to fit very well at all. At the same time, some parallels can be drawn to exactly the kind of socio-cultural focus that Firth & Wagner (1997) describe in their hope of the field, "SLA as a theory of classroom practice." (304) As they suggest, classroom practice differences "led to the formation of different learner understandings of, among other matters, what constituted appropriate and inappropriate use of [foreign language] in the classroom." (305) Certainly the *'Juken Eigo'* has some value and is understood in different classrooms and taught differently, even if usually these forms relate around antiquated grammar translations. Moreover, outside language learning experiences, loan words, and globalized exchange of language must play somewhere into the reception and acquisition of English for these Japanese EFLs.

Questions remain about the many forms of English that are taught in Japan. For these classrooms, are students truly *only* learning *'Juken Eigo"*? What are real ways for exposure and real outlets to English (tourism, international study, etc.) and what effect do they actually have on English education in Japan? With consideration to the international nature of the major cities, does the factor of location play in the level, exposure, and eventual ability of English language learners?

Additional Considerations for Japanese EFLs: Larger Culture Issues

To this point, most of the focus has revolved around different aspects of the testing and education model that Japan uses. However, there are additional considerations that must be taken into account, namely the question of influence; the cultural significance of English language learning in Japan. A common belief and frequently cited concern with teaching English in Japan

is the idea of the homogenous, insular Japanese in-group; with it, inner notions of cultural 'purity', which reject the English language as foreign. Varying degrees of this treatment are pervasive in some educational literature on Japan's English programs (Kubota, 1999, Leeming, 2011). Obviously, it also rings as being somewhat ironic, considering the obvious significance that outside countries have played in terms of educational policies such as the aforementioned examination systems. As I will outline, the issue of Japanese culture is much more intricate than immediately written off in such reductionist language.

Japan's treatment of race is historically very complex, and too large for the scope of this paper. However, several studies open-minded Japanese students in many instances. Hammond (2006) gave racism simulation games to Japanese University students and found complex cultural understandings about other groups, as well as the willingness to change their perceptions. Similarly, Kubota (1999), in discussing the interplay between orientalism, Japanese counter-theory, and EFL, explained that recent scholarship has led to the understanding that "such representations need to be viewed as particular knowledge rather than objective truth and that such knowledge is contested by counterknowledge." Instead, the discussions between theory are motivated by larger forces of politics and power.

Yasuko Kanno described some of the difficulties and access to bilingualism and opportunity, She asserts "bilingual education in Japan has yet to assimilate a critical awareness into its analysis: it has not yet conceived of access to bilingualism as part of the educational resources that schools distribute unevenly among children of different educational classes." (182) Analyzing language teaching practices of several Japanese schools of different socioeconomic statuses and cultural backgrounds, Kanno found that access to English learning, and language learning in general in Japan was unequal. One wonders if lesser teaching and de-emphasizing

language teaching in some Japanese schools also may exacerbate societal and economic gaps which are already difficult to traverse in Japanese culture.

Treatment of Japan as a single entity can be a dangerous treatment as well, manifesting itself in fallacies of attempting to create causal relationships between cultural beliefs and learning styles. Leeming (2011), in studying the use of Japanese L1 for High School EFL in the case of pair work, asserted as a belief that "Japan is quite a conformist society and this seems to influence the way in which tasks are approached and ultimately the amount of L1 used.

Initially, Leeming (2011), followed this train of thought and believed that this kind of Japanese conformity was detrimental for the practice and frequency English use. With the high prevalence of Japanese use in Japan's English classrooms, which was sprinkled with infrequent use of English, Leeming believed that Japanese students' English use was unsatisfactory to meet their actual needs in the English language classroom. Weschler (1997), also studying language use in Japan's English classrooms, labeled this as a common "misdiagnosis", that use of Japanese "...only serves as a crutch; the more quickly it is disposed of, the better."

Leeming (2011), through his experiences and research in Japanese classrooms, realized that his understanding of Japanese L1 use in the EFL classroom was incorrect and decidedly changed his tone on the issue. "My fear that Japanese is used extensively and is undermining the effectiveness of tasks does not seem well founded" he acknowledges. Leeming's findings are important because they acknowledge a change in perception

Similar to Leeming's conclusions, Weschler (1997) explored Japanese use in the English classroom, and concluded that, "it should now be apparent that the use of Japanese in and of itself in texts and in the classroom is not the problem… like any tool, it can be used skillfully or misused." As Leeming (2011) and Weschler found, the issue of Japanese language use in the

classroom, then, is not necessarily a cultural issue nor a cultural rejection of English in the classroom. Moreover, it does not negatively impact student's acquisition of English; Leeming's path of thought highlights an easily followed, but dangerous path towards the stigmatization of cultural aspects of the Japanese EFL- instead, its is imperative to allow first language use in the English classroom.

Similar to Matsuda's (2011) discoveries of the diversities in reason for wishing to learn English, it is important as foreign educators not to jump to conclusions and believe that conformity suggests an unwillingness of Japanese students to learn English, for cultural reasons or otherwise. Ultimately, these cultural issues appear to have some importance in English acquisition, but it is difficult to say to what degree.

Conclusion: Approaching the Olympics, More Questions, and What the Future holds

To this point, Japan's understanding of English remains primarily within the context of its high-stakes testing mechanisms. Moreover, the critical eye that the MEXT has on its language programs has often appeared to be due to the test itself. However, a need for change seems apparent to Japan's educational policymakers, and be it due to their poor international test scores, the upcoming Olympics, or a host of other reasons, the MEXT has shown a desire to lead the change against Japan's struggles with English proficiency.

The MEXT has outlined some interesting changes for the future, both in terms of English education and the National Center Test administration. On the testing front, the MEXT have recently decided to further remove emphasis from the traditional single, one-shot test. Different ideas have been proposed, such as additional 'human' components of testing (interviews). Other changes may include multiple iterations of testing, which give students more opportunities to show their ability and eliminate possibilities of student health factoring into the equation

(Japantimes). These changes obviously de-emphasize the stress of the test, changing the sole focus to ideally being a more well-rounded picture of a student. While these ideas have been debated and discussed, their implementation has not yet taken effect, and it is an obvious question of what reception these new, reformed tests will receive.

In terms of English teaching, in early 2014, with an eye on the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) released a new plan titled "English Education Plan corresponding to Globalization", which further expanded the scope of English Education to additional grades, as well as established an educational plan and framework for English education in Japan through 2020. While this plan was obviously spurred by Japan's upcoming hosting of the Olympics, the plan's scope of improving English education by hiring more teachers and improving teacher education in Japan is significant. Moreover, it looks to "empower" teachers, hopefully improving and raising the spirits and conviction of Japan's English teachers who have shown struggles with both proficiency and personal confidence in their own abilities.

As with previous considerations, I would suggest a deeper study is needed in the types of English and the way English is taught between public and *Juku* schools in Japan. Many questions remain about the pedagogy, standards, and general performance of the *Juku*. *Jukus* are very popular for Japanese students, is there a genuine reason for their popularity other than simple tradition? How do *Jukus* teach English, and how much of their English lessons are simply the *'Juken Eigo'* of the public school classroom? Does English teaching vary from the public school in technique (do they use techniques that are better/worse for communicative ability), or are they identical excepting the fact that *'Juku'* have authentic testing materials for the entrance examinations, where public school English classrooms do not? Is the *Juku* environment, where

teachers and students seem to connect better on a communicative level, a strong asset for acquiring subject knowledge (including English), and if so, why aren't public schools doing more to push an agenda of communication?

Moreover, I wonder at the possible negatives of the system, as teachers are not licensed and oversight of the *Juku* industry is obviously different from that of the public school system. How much of a problem is it that students are learning two different Englishes (one in school, one in *Juku*) at the same time? If *Juku* teachers aren't even required to be licensed (and as Dierkes indicated, most were not), how much English proficiency do they really have, considering they aren't required to have any at all? Are many of these unqualified teachers simply reinforcing the status quo of English as '*Juken Eigo*'?

Many of the analyses and conclusions about '*Juken Eigo'* assume a great deal about the Japanese educational system, an admittedly unfair analysis of a large system that while as a whole may not be performing well according to large-scale testing, may not be indicative of an actual ability to communicate, nor signifying any quality of education. Moreover, the obvious variability from school to school (and classroom to classroom) in Japan, in addition to recent policy changes, the Super English High School system, reform and adaptation certainly complicates writing off the Japanese system as completely a system of the *'Juken Eigo'.* How much they have removed themselves from this system (if teaching has indeed become more effective for students) and whether or not this is what the government wishes in terms of a real, communicative English are questions which remain and require future exploration and discussion.

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