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A critical analysis of Japan’s language education system

4.1 Introduction

Why does Japan’s education system appear unable to produce learners who can actually converse in a language which they have been compelled to study for at least six years? What situational factors have contributed to classroom environments where silent language learners appear to be the norm rather than the exception? In this chapter I attempt to answer these questions by offering a critical analysis of Japan’s dysfunctional language education system. After providing a general overview of education in Japan, I will discuss how recent language learning reforms by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT) have been met with widespread scepticism by an EFL community who believe the ministry’s plans are unfeasible and fail to take into account the reality of language teaching in Japan’s schools today. It is clear that a key element in why students appear unable to develop L2 communicative competence is the continued dominance of university entrance examinations within the system. These tests remain hugely influential at the pre-tertiary level, despite demographic changes meaning competition for university places is not quite as fierce as it once was (see Kamiya, 2009; Kinmonth, 2005), and they continue to shape which aspects of a foreign language are taught and how these aspects are studied. This leads me to the issue of yakudoku (a grammar-translation approach) which remains a deeply entrenched instructional method popular amongst Japanese teachers of English (JTEs). After exploring how this approach in effect silences students who are unfortunate enough to be exposed to it, I will outline some of the issues surrounding the presence of native speaker assistant language teachers in Japanese schools and consider why these instructors have
proved relatively unsuccessful in developing learners’ linguistic skills. The chapter concludes with an appraisal of how the disturbing issues of bullying (ijime) and nationalism contribute to a learning context which is far from conducive to encouraging L2 fluency amongst Japan’s legions of language learners.

4.2 An overview of the system

Based on the United States’ 6-3-3 model, Japan’s education system was established in the years following the end of World War Two. The system comprises of six years of compulsory elementary schooling from the age of 6, followed by three more obligatory years at junior high school, and culminates in an optional further three years at senior high. Although in theory students may end their schooling at the age of 15, in reality the vast majority – 97.9 per cent in 2009 (MEXT, 2010, p. 55) – continue on to upper secondary education, and this process usually involves having to sit an entrance examination in order to gain admission to the senior high school of one’s choice. While most elementary and junior high schools tend to be run by local municipal authorities, the number of private institutions increases dramatically at senior high level. In 2009 just over a quarter of these schools were privately run, fee paying institutions (MEXT, 2010, p. 57). The large proportion of private schools in this sector, coupled with a relaxation of catchment area rules at upper secondary level (for more on catchment area reforms, see Cave, 2003, pp. 94–6), means that there is intense competition for places at the best senior highs.

At the other end of the pre-tertiary spectrum, we should not ignore the widespread provision of education that is available to Japanese children prior to the commencement of their nine years of compulsory schooling. Nursery schools (known as yōchien) provide the first steps on the transition from home to formal schooling for children from the age of 3 years upwards. Over 60 per cent of the 13,500 nursery schools in Japan are private organisations (MEXT, 2010, p. 44) and it is not unheard of for the most prestigious ones to subject toddlers to entrance exams in order to gain admission – this being an excessively early taste of the academic rat race which is to come later on. According to Hendry (1989), some kindergartens feel that examining 3-year-old children is potentially too problematic and therefore opt to test the children’s mothers instead! Much of the literature examining nursery schools points to the essential role they play in socialising children into becoming ‘good Japanese’ by introducing the concepts of group-mindedness, cooperation and self-discipline within the curriculum (e.g. Hendry,