

## Changing English Education in Japan from the Grass Roots

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Please allow me to address the assignment topic: “Consider and discuss the significance of English education in Japan,” by suggesting ways to change it. English education in Japan is often reported in the newspapers to be “fundamentally useless.” As for me, I totally agree with that opinion, and will discuss the reasons why I think so in this short essay. I list the problems such as placing too much emphasis on grammar, on using katakana reading, on teaching the grammar translation method, and insisting that students study to pass university examinations rather than communicating. I provide examples of English education in neighboring countries to Japan. Finally in this essay, I suggest a way to change those negative points from the grass roots level.

### 1. Problems

First of all, current English education in Japan places too much emphasis on learning grammar. That’s why Japanese students of English are not good at speaking and listening to the English language. Many Japanese students cannot use English even after six years of taking it as a compulsory subject. In contrast, the foreign people who speak English as a foreign language whom I know can readily speak English. These people are my classmates from China, Taiwan, Korea, and Latvia. They have come to Japan to study Japanese, but they also have an excellent command of English in addition to their mother tongues, Chinese, Korean and Russian. They can also speak and listen to Japanese in a short period. Quite likely they study Japanese in the same manner that they studied English in their home country.

Secondly, pronunciation problems arise from the use of Katakana reading. Translation reading doesn’t allow the student to improve. As long as Japanese educators don’t deal with these problems the situation will not change.

Thirdly, I think that most Japanese high school students who study English are only thinking about learning it in a way to pass the entrance examination of the university that they wish to go. Their immediate goal isn’t to speak English. English is a communication tool to communicate with people throughout the world: not only grammar, reading and writing are essential, we need speaking and listening.

### 2. Learning from Outside

English education carried out in South Korea, Taiwan, and China place much emphasis on English education at an early age. They are taught by native speaker. Before they are going to hunt job everyone has high level of English skills.

Conversely if they didn't have they can't get a job. South Koreans have higher TOEIC scores. Japanese student who are going to study abroad is decreasing but in South Korea some parents take to English-Speaking countries and raise their child there and the other parent stay in South Korea. There are many differences the contents of English education. For example In Japanese elementary school students learn about 285 words but in South Korean students learn about 500 words before graduation. And they have English class an average of 2 hours a week, is focusing! on improve conversational skills.

Japanese people should have more sense of crisis. Company executives in Japan want to expand their business overseas due to the economic depression. Global companies introduce English as official language gradually. Business people who work for global companies are faced with an immediate problem. I am a student, but in future if my boss were a foreigner, or if I was ordered to be transferred abroad, or be required to achieve a TOEIC score of 900 I would have no choice but to do it to help my company to expand its business abroad.

Some people who have never been abroad who have high level of English skills say that you don't have to go abroad to study English: we can study English books, magazines movies newspapers, or even mobile phones. Although studying abroad is costly we can learn global ideas that can't be bought by money. Japan is aging and our society has fewer children, we need good ideas to solve this problem. The day may come when Japan changes to an immigration country like the United States. Owing to developing technologies and globalism about 1.5%, about 2 million foreigners live in Japan.

I understand that English is a foreign language in Canada not only for the 5 million people who live in Quebec, but for the many immigrant families who come to live in Canada. I wonder how the children who come to Canada from Hong Kong, from Taiwan, from Japan, from India and from dozens of other countries are learning English. I would like to learn more about how language is learned at the elementary school level in Canada, and bring back what I know to Japan.

### 3. Grassroots Change

It seems that English education at the Junior High School and Senior High School levels has become quite fossilized and difficult to change. An opportunity to change these levels seems to lie at the elementary school level. Before students get to Junior High School perhaps they can be taught English, and more importantly perhaps the teachers at elementary schools can avoid the problems of too much emphasis on grammar, on using katakana reading, on teaching the grammar translation method, and insisting that students study to pass university examinations rather than communicating.

From April 2011 English education in elementary school was implemented. In recent years educators and parents have been debating about whether English should be introduced in elementary schools. Trial programs of English education were tested at many locations. During the summer of 2011 I participated in a training program for elementary school teachers at my university. They have totally different English skills than what they are required to teach to their young students. The elementary school teachers are therefore quite anxious about teaching English. The program "International Understanding" at my university was carried out to reduce their anxiety. One of our seminar members and I demonstrated various ways of teaching English. We asked the teachers to demonstrate how they currently teach English. Their efforts were impressive and serious. They were also thinking about how to teach English while keeping an emphasis on the importance of the mother tongue. I suppose the student who wants to be an elementary school teacher will have to seriously consider about how to change English education in Japan.

Thank you for allowing me to address the writing assignment to "Consider and discuss the significance of English education in Japan." I suggested ways of changing it from the bottom-up, from the grassroots level. I picked up ideas from how teachers in other countries teach English and I spelled out the reasons why I have liked learning English in Japan. An opportunity has been opened for elementary school teachers and students to learn English. I would like to take advantage of that opportunity by learning more about how language is learned at the elementary school level in Canada, and bring back what I know to Japan.