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Japanese Foreign Language Acquisition Planning: Analysis of the Documents of the Curriculum Council's Meetings

Terunao Abe

I

An advisory council to the education minister, *Kyōuikukatei Shingikai*, or henceforth, the Curriculum Council, submitted a midterm report on national curriculum standards reform in November, 1997,¹ the final version of which just published this summer, 1998,² and a draft of a new set of teaching guidelines for schools to be announced late this fall. The report urges more emphasis on foreign languages, environmental issues and social welfare. Particularly its terms related with English education have been attracting much public attention because the government seems to have already decided to allow public primary schools to introduce English in the “period for integrated study” or in the special activities period. In fact, experimental English language teaching has already been started at a limited number of public primary schools in the nation’s 47 prefectures.³ The report, however, does not recommend introduction of English or some other languages as a mandatory subject at the primary school level. Instead, it encourages practical, not necessarily English but foreign language conversation lessons for pupils. Nonetheless, it is generally understood that most of the primary schools will decide on teaching English rather than some other foreign languages under the pressure of the parents who have fears that their children may fall behind in

studying for a competitive entrance examination to a famous, private, lower secondary school. As for a foreign language at the lower secondary level, the report suggests that it be a required subject, a long overdue change as English, among others, has for so many decades been taught as a de facto compulsory subject despite the fact that it has been elective for all this period. Hence, this part of the recommendation seems not to have stimulated much public interest. It may only have added to the already aggravated concern on the part of some intellectuals who have for some time been critical about the ever-increasing English dominance in various domains of people's lives in the country.

The present paper attempts to make a critical analysis of the minutes of the many meetings at which the Council members debated to decide on what to include in their midterm and final reports. To begin with, a brief organisational description of the documents will be called for. They consist of three different sets (the numerals given here in parentheses indicate the meetings which are relevant to our analysis):(A) those written at the general meetings of the Curriculum Council (6, 9, 11, 12, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 27,28), (B) those drawn up by the primary school education division of the Council (2, 3, 7), and (C) those prepared by the secondary school education division (1, 2, 3, 4). The dates given to those meetings in each set tell us that those in (A) chronologically precede those in (B), which in turn on the whole come before those in (C). In addition, those who attended the general meetings include both the division chiefs and sub-chiefs as well as only a few other members from each division. So the chronology and representation here can be understood to mean that the general meetings were intended to set the directions and scope of the topics, and sort out their concrete and controversial points for the ensuing division sessions. It must be pointed out, moreover, that the participants of both kinds of meetings, general and division, are supposed to have understood that they should work on the basis of a Central Educational Council's report published in 1996, which determined the

country's basic educational policy lines for the 21st century.⁴

II

The discussions as seen in the minutes center around two major topics: one is the need to improve children's communicative competence in foreign language, in general, or in English, in particular; the other is whether or not to make foreign language/English a required subject particularly at lower secondary school. Most of the other topics raised in the national curriculum discussions, as will be seen below, can be subsumed under either or both of these topics. In addition, the two classes of topics often get mingled, especially when the popular understanding of English as an international language comes into play. We will, therefore, try to take as examples those utterances that focus on relatively simplex topics so that we can highlight as clearly as possible what is implicitly assumed in the speaker's expression of his/her view on a particular topic.⁵

In the document of the 9th general meeting of the Council, we find one of the attendants criticising inefficient English language teaching at a lower high school by saying that if the English being taught there is for preparing the students for entrance examinations, it is utterly useless in this internationalizing world. He/she stresses the importance of acquiring the speaking ability of English. A radical change in the current entrance examination system is also called for elsewhere in the Council's documents. In the 19th general meeting minutes, such a change is said to be a prerequisite for not producing Japanese who cannot express themselves in an international conference. A different person who attended the 12th general meeting compares competence in English and computer literacy, and predicts that any Japanese who have not attained beyond the average in either of these abilities will not be able to become the head of an internationally operating institution. The communicative competence requirement is particularly vociferous in the business sector. Thus, we can identify

in the minutes some apparently business-related people by some such words like “as I’m in international business” (the 2nd division meeting for the lower secondary school curriculum), “I have opportunities to meet various people in ASEAN and other countries... English is a necessity in business” (the 3rd division meeting for the lower secondary school curriculum), etc. Incidentally, in Hong Kong, Angel Mei Yi Lin points out a similar phenomenon:

The government, academic and media discourses repeatedly assert that Hong Kong’s economic prosperity depends on attracting foreign investors, which in turn depends on providing them with an English-conversant labor force. This saturation of consciousness by the ‘economic argument’ has legitimized the subordination of all sociocultural and educational goals to the single goal of mastering a socially, culturally, and linguistically distant language for the majority of children in Hong Kong.⁶

Another characteristic of the arguments which are supportive of fostering communicative competence at school is that provision of assistant native-speaker language teachers, technological equipment such as videotapes, network-connected computer sets, community resident foreigners’ involvement, etc., is thought to be sufficient to develop functional competence in English. For instance, there is such a remark in the 15th general meeting record as the following: “As we are living in an age when such oral communication abilities as listening and speaking are particularly deemed high, we should, with the help of ALT (Assistant Language Teachers), further promote English education for practical purposes.” Again, in the same document, a different speaker is also observed to emphasise the importance of developing communicative ability in terms of a written medium, i.e., the Internet. Moreover, involvement of resident foreigners in the community in language classes or in the “period for integrated study” at primary schools is suggested in the 27th general

meeting document.

With all this kind of supportive measures, we are still in doubt if they really work in such a way as to produce as much communicative competence as its proponents expect. Comparing the Irish revitalization experience with the Hebrew renativization enterprise, Robert L. Cooper (1989:161) writes that "...no matter how accomplished the schools are in imparting language acquisition, they are unlikely to lead to the language's *use* outside the classroom unless there are practical reasons for such use" (original emphasis).⁷ As one of the council members says, there simply are not such reasons in Japan. Cooper also writes on the same page that "[n]ot only exposure to the language but also incentives to learn it is greater when it serves as medium than when it serves merely as subject of instruction." Although some council members favour this mode of foreign language acquisition, and reportedly it has already been practiced at quite a number of institutions, it is very much likely to present in the long run a serious problem in the functional allocation of the languages concerned, thus leading to a diglossic situation, with English being a high and Japanese low varieties of language.

A final noticeable point to make in the present connection is that every child, when grown up, is assumed to be working in some international contexts. It is intuitively absurd to think that this will happen. And what is more interesting here is the implication that jobs which are performed on the international stage are better than domestic ones.

III

Discussion on the appropriateness of the optional or compulsory status of foreign language as a category of school subjects and English as a specimen of such a category is pervasive in the Council documents. The discussants can be divided into two major groups according to their attitudes toward the optional/compulsory question:

one is the group of people who assert the English-only claim; and the other the supporters of diversified provision of the first foreign language. This latter group of people is further divided into those who maintain that foreign language education should be completely optional and those who support the so-called required elective system in the sense that one must choose from among some specified languages. A careful reading of the documents would show that bitter competition was fought particularly between the English-only supporters and the proponents of required electives, the traces of which can be observed in an inconsistent description in the midterm report. Under the heading of "Kokusaika-he-no Taiou" (How to Deal with Internationalization) in Chapter One, the report says: "As for foreign language education, basic and practical communicative competence for the expression of one's mind must further be promoted and, at the same time, reforms like making English compulsory at lower secondary school must be carried out." However, under "Gaikokugo" (Foreign Language) in Chapter Four, it runs that "further consideration is necessary as to which of the two, foreign language or English, must be prescribed as required."

Let us observe some competing ideas of the discussants. A member of the Curriculum Council's lower secondary school division maintains at the 2nd division meeting that English, being the international language (judging from the context, it would be safe to say that, to him/her, it is the international language), ought to be compulsory at the lower secondary level. He/she also talks about the great opportunity that the language brings to children. Another member of the same division, already referred to above and, as mentioned there, presumably connected with the business world, in order to emphasise his/her view that English makes the world go round, comes up with his/her personal experience of operating in Asia fairly successfully only with the knowledge of English; but he/she at last concedes that foreign language study must be made a required subject with English obligatorily chosen, in principle, at the lower

secondary school level.

Contrary to opinions of this kind, there are many other people who support diversity in foreign language provision. Thus an advocate of this cause argues at the 2nd meeting of the lower secondary school curriculum division that one should respect the ideas advanced in the midterm report that foreign language education must be in accordance with the diversity of children's interest and concerns, and that foreign language learning other than that of English must also be promoted. A different member of the same division even contends that although English has become the world *de facto* official language, the fact must be acknowledged that there is increasing disagreement to that state of affairs. Therefore, he argues, the government should not adopt a policy that only allows English. Another supporter of diversification of foreign language provision points out, at the 8th Council's general meeting, a need to regard as national resources those languages other than English that Japanese children residing overseas will bring home. He/she calls for a system which enables such children to exploit what they have acquired abroad. A somewhat different orientation appears in the 3rd lower secondary school division meeting. There, involvement of community resident foreigners in foreign language education is suggested.

Now to comment on the competing discourses about the optional-vs-compulsory question of foreign language/English, there are at least three important points to be brought out. The first concerns the worldwide tendency toward diversity in school language provision and in market language demands. As mentioned above, there are, on the one hand, many people among the Council members who are aware of such a tendency, but, on the other hand, there are as many who are content with the Anglo-centricity and pay little, if none, critical attention to it. In the European Community, school pupils have to learn two non-native languages; and even in Britain one of the few countries with negative reputation for foreign language learning, it is reported, one of nineteen languages can be studied for the

requirements of the National Curriculum although schools have to offer one EU language before any other language can be chosen by the pupil.⁸ Diversity in foreign language in education has also been promoted in Australia and other countries. Recent motives for such promotion are, however, increasingly economic.⁹ The market has reportedly started to require multilingualism even from native-speakers of English. A spokesman for the London Chamber of Commerce is quoted in a weekly newspaper as saying, "Companies realise that there is business to be won out there and they need the staff who can speak foreign languages."¹⁰ Therefore, to the Curriculum Council member cited above as saying that he/she is very happy using only English wherever in Asia, Loonen's following statement would sound very sarcastic, "... by the side of an increasing importance of English there is a noticeable tendency to use the local languages also for straightforward communication: international companies have always felt that the native tongue is the best medium for advertising since they want to convince, not just communicate..."¹¹

Furthermore, the subject of diversification in school foreign language reminds us of some Council members' words suggesting the possibility of involving community resident foreigners in language or "integrated study" class. It must be pointed out, however, that this is a one-way relationship. The Japanese children may benefit from such a programme; but their counterpart, the resident overseas children are not very likely at the receiving end. There is nothing planned for their education in their mother tongues, nor any provision to be taken for their maintenance. An apparently governmental official, in answering a Council member's question regarding education of required subjects for unskilled guest workers, flatly denies possibility of providing anything of that kind.¹² In many other industrialized countries various educational measures have been taken for immigrant or temporal minorities. This country at the moment seems unprepared at all despite the fact that more than 1,600,000 are said to be living here.¹³

The second point to comment on the optional/obligatory question is that the proposal to officially make English a compulsory subject does not mean the same thing as to propose that it remain optional on the ground that almost 100% lower secondary school students take it. It is not simply a matter of changing the government policy from an implicit to explicit one. It no doubt has a psychological effect. This is because the change in the official status of the language raises its relative position still higher in the politically and economically defined hierarchy of languages and makes people more conscious than ever about its prestige. In this society there has long been a trend to cherish Anglo-American culture. It is feared, therefore, that children, too, will soon be possessed with an idea that to say anything in English is "cool" and better than in any other languages, hence that English is superior to other languages they come into contact with in the "integrated study" class—a phenomenon called "colonization of the mind."¹⁴ Although the primary school division members of the Curriculum Council seem to have exerted extra efforts not to use the word "English" (it being used just once at the 7th division meeting) when discussing the primary school's "integrated study" period, during which pupils are exposed to various foreign languages and learn about foreign life and culture, their efforts will go for nothing. Furthermore, the hierarchical position of English is particularly pertinent to the historical background of English. But, perhaps with a single exception of the person mentioned above who refers to the increasing critical attitudes toward the present status of English, nobody among the members talks about the colonial background; nobody questions whether it is necessary to teach this negative aspect of the language.

Our final comment on the Council members' discussion is about the function of English as a social barrier. This may be the most immediate concern of the general public. And, indeed, at many places in the documents under examination references are made to the possibility that the elective-to-compulsory change in the status of English in the curriculum may exacerbate the already fierce

competition in entrance examinations for higher education. Although examination can often be a good incentive in language learning, it all too often function as a barrier in social mobility. In this sense, English can be used to control access to work, to economic resources and to political power.¹⁵ It has been said that, thanks to their ability in foreign language, English, in particular, returnee students have started to constitute a privileged class in this society.¹⁶ As is mentioned by one of the members of the lower secondary school division of the Curriculum Council in the 6th division meeting, EFL has perhaps already assumed an ESL status for a considerable number of Japanese. The question of the possibility of social stratification in terms of English proficiency, as in Singapore or Hong Kong, could have been addressed more squarely at the meetings.¹⁷

IV

Japan has chosen to make English, "in principle," compulsory at lower secondary level and even to "experimentally" introduce it into the primary level of education. However, as we saw above, when the growing tendency of the market toward multilingualism is taken into account, the decision is not sustainable. As many academics maintain today, diversification in the first foreign language provision should have been given more attention. Not the technical but the social and structural aspects of language education should have been afforded more time to discuss.

Lastly, there must have been considerable debate between the midterm report and the final report especially on the elective/ compulsory issue. However, this crucial part of drafting guidelines for the national curriculum has not been disclosed. It would be interesting to know what sort of ideas were most influential at this stage. We can only hope that the decision would not have been made based singularly on such mostly technical matters as the way to improve communicative competence.

Notes

¹ The Ministry of Education, *Kyouikukatei-no kijun-no kaizen-no kihonhoukou-nituute: Chuukanmatome* (Fundamental Approach to National Curriculum Standards Reform: Midterm Report) (17 Nov. 1997), Online, Internet, 28 Oct. Available <http://www.monbu.go.jp/singi/katei>.

² The Ministry of Education, *Youchien, Shougakkou, Chuu-gakkou, Koutougakkou, Mougakkou, Rougakkou oyobi Yougo-gakkou-no Kyouikukatei-no Kijun-no Kaizen-nituute: Toushin* (Reform of the National Curriculum Standards for Preschool, Elementary School, Lower and Upper Secondary Schools, and Schools for the Handicaped: Report) (29 Aug. 1998), Online, Internet, 28 Oct. Available <http://www.monbu.go.jp/singi/katei>.

³ Such an English teaching experiment was originally started in 1992 and the total number of schools so far involved amounts to 64. See the data attached to Osamu Kageura, et al., *Shougakkou Eigo Kyouiku-no Tebiki* (Introduction to English Language Teaching at Primary School) (Tokyo: Meiji Tosho, 1997), pp.116-117.

⁴ The Ministry of Education, *Chuou Kyouiku Shingikai Dai-1-ji Toushin* (Preliminary Report of the Central Council for Education) (19 July 1997), Online, Internet, 28 Oct. Available <http://www.monbu.go.jp/singi>.

⁵ What is helpful with the documents of the meetings for our analysis is the fact that, except the record of the 6th general meeting, they are not synoptical. It seems that they are more or less faithful transcripts of the actual utterances of the participants, though, of course, it is hard to exclude, to some extent, possibilities of editing the original recordings on the part of the clerical officials.

⁶ Angel Mei Yi Lin, "Analysing the 'Language Problem' Discourses in Hong Kong: How Official, Academic, and Media Discourses Construct and Perpetuate Dominant Models of Language Learning, and Education," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 28 (1997), 431.

⁷ Robert L. Cooper, *Language Planning and Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.161.

⁸ Dennis Ager, *Language Policy in Britain and France* (London: Cassell, 1996), p.74. As for US, another country, also widely known for its lack of much interest in foreign language learning, see Thomas Ricento, "Language Policy in the United States," in *Language Policies in English-Dominant Countries*, ed. Michael Herriman and Barbara Burnaby (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1996), p. 149.

⁹ Christopher Brumfit states in his *Language Education in the National Curriculum* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) that "Those in power are beginning to realize that our [British] complacency regarding language learning in general is costing us valuable export orders, not to mention jobs" (p.152). Though written in Japanese, Yasuteru Otani, in his "Shogaikoku-no Gaikokugo Kyouiku" (Foreign Language Education in the World), in *Gendai Eigo Kyouiku* (Modern English Language Teaching), 1994, 29-31, gives a list of 38 countries showing the foreign languages offered at the primary and secondary school levels with the number of compulsory foreign languages included.

¹⁰ *Weekly Telegraph* 21-10-1998: 37.

¹¹ Pieter Loonen, "English in Europe: from timid to tyrannical?" *English Today*, 46 (1996), 6.

¹² See the record of the 20th general meeting of the Curriculum Council.

¹³ More than half of that number are those who came in the 1980s. Their needs now vary from necessities of life to information about Japanese economy, politics, culture, history, etc., and to children's education. For more details, see *Mainichi Shinbun* (the Mainichi) 11-3-1998: 6. Incidentally, according to *Yomiuri Shinbun* (the Yomiuri) of 8-7-1997, the number of foreign resident children who are enrolled in Japanese schools and need Japanese language assistance is: 14,186 (10,323 primary school, 3,803 lower secondary school, and 57 higher secondary school children).

¹⁴ See Yukio Tsuda, "Hegemony of English vs. Ecology of Language: Building Equality in International Communication," in *World Englishes 2000: Selected Essays*, ed. Larry E. Smith and Michael L. Forman (University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p.24. Also Mamoru Morizumi, "Gaikokugo Kyouiku=Eigo Kyouiku-de Yoinoka? (Is the Formula, Foreign Language Education=English Language Education, Really What We Want?)," *The English Teachers' Magazine* (1996), 10.

¹⁵ Literacy is often made to serve as a barrier to political participation. But it more often functions as a basis for either explicitly or implicitly controlling access to work, and to economic resources. See James W. Tollefson, *Planning Language, Planning Inequality* (London: Longman, 1991), pp.207-209.

¹⁶ Roger Goodman, *Japan's 'International Youth': the Emergence of a New Class of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ John Platt and Heidi Weber write in their *English in Singapore and Malaysia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) that "[a]s far as

Singapore English is concerned, one can certainly distinguish variations in speech along the social scale, with what we have previously described as the *acrolect* being the sociolect for the group with the highest social status and the *basilect* being the sociolect for those with low social status" (p.107; original emphases). See also Lin (1997) quoted above, and Eddie C. Y. Kou, "Language and Social Mobility in Singapore," in *Language of Inequality*, ed. N. Wolfson and J. Manes (Berlin: Mouton, 1985), pp.342-343.