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Introduction to Language Policy, Innovations and Practices : A Tale of Two Countries

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2019-12-20 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: TATSUKI, Donna メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2518

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Introduction to *Language Policy, Innovations and Practices: A Tale of Two Countries*

Donna TATSUKI

1. Introduction

This volume explores the mismatches between government language policies/top-down innovations and what actually happens in classrooms in the contexts of Italy and Japan.

This project came into being thanks to an invitation to form a panel *Language Policy, Innovations and Practices: A Tale of Two Countries* at the second International Bilingualism Conference held at the University of Malta in 2019. The invitation arrived just as I had started to teach a doctoral level course on Educational Policy and the doctoral candidates who enrolled in the course brought with them unique perspectives to the educational policies issues currently being faced in Japan. I felt that their perspectives should be shared so I began planning the panel.

My other consideration while planning the panel was connected to the location of the conference itself. Malta, though a sovereign country, has enjoyed a close relationship with Italy for many centuries (Castillo, 2006). So, I was quite sure that many of the conference attendees would be Italian or at least interested in language policy in Italy. In addition, as a result of my 2011-12 sabbatical year at La Sapienza University in Rome, I had the pleasure of meeting and working with many accomplished scholars in the field of language education. It struck me that a joint panel exploring educational policy in two countries where English is a foreign language would be a unique and useful contribution to the field. Therefore, through my network it was possible to contact and attract the right people to make such a panel a reality.

After hearing the papers presented at the panel in Malta, numerous audience members commented that the juxtaposition of educational policy issues in Japan and Italy, both their parallels and distinctions would be important to document in book form. Hence came the impetus to prepare this volume and to seek additional authors to round out the topics.

2. Description of Contents in Part One

The book opens with a historical overview of foreign language policy reforms in Japan with a special focus on English (Chapter 1, Tatsuki). Since the opening of Japan at the start of the Meiji period, there has been a constant swing between opposing camps: Those who espouse communication and intercultural development and those who fear that bilingualism brings with it a loss of identity and threat to culture (Otani, 2008, personal communication cited by Yamaoka, 2011). The beliefs promulgated by these factions continue to influence the shifts in reforms, policy and practice in language education in Japan, although the polarization is frequently characterized as “traditional methods for reading-based cultural enrichment” versus “English for global communication” (Wada & McCarthy, 1984; Kitao & Kitao, 1995). The chapter explores these and other descriptions/interpretations responsible for the current status of English in Japan.

Chapter 2 (Haruoka) describes current Japanese Ministry of Education policies for elementary schools with a special focus on the new *Course of Study*, which will come into effect in 2022. She urges that current teaching materials be thoroughly examined and improved upon in order to ensure that they meet the goals that have been set out for them.

Chapter 3 (Shibuya) considers the serious plight of education in other foreign languages when the Ministry indicates they are to be conducted in accordance with English goals and contents. This chapter explores the possibility of learning other foreign languages (e.g. French) from the aspect of current market demand rather than through strict application of MEXT policy.

Chapter 4 (Glasgow & Paller) describes the various shortcomings of Japanese senior high school EFL textbooks in relation to their articulation of curriculum as a part of MEXT reforms. If educational policy changes, then textbooks, as the agents

of curriculum delivery, should adjust accordingly. Sadly, this does not seem to be the case for Japanese textbooks. Despite their mandate to promote communication, the majority of textbook activities continue to offer mechanical practice, with truly communicative tasks being few and far between.

In Chapter 5 (Hollenback), delineates the various failures of the *Global 30* program, promoted by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) as a means of increasing the internationalization of a small privileged group of universities. Among the sources of failure was a mismatch between intent and capability—for instance, the universities selected simply lacked the organizational flexibility or resilience required to deal with the diversity of values and practices inherent in the international community. The participating institutions either failed or refused to recognize the need for them to adapt towards international norms. The questionable selection process (a small circle of already elite schools) compounded with misguided goals (enhance attractiveness of these schools rather than actually serve the needs of international students) resulted in a poorly executed program with dubious benefits.

3. Description of Contents in Part Two

The second section of the book turns to the situation of language education and government policy in Italy.

The first paper in this section, Chapter 6 (Romagnuolo), provides an overview of the Italian University foreign language policy concerning the teaching of EFL and ESP after the reform movement and will also briefly discuss the effect of the Lisbon agenda and its follow-up, the *Europe 2020* strategy, on the promotion of English language learning in higher education, illustrating some of the author's most recent language teaching experiences.

Chapter 7 (Graziano & Sibi) explores the connections between teacher training, professional development, everyday practices and learner outcomes. Although OCSE data and INVALSI testing results indicate some positive general trends in language learning, despite much economic effort and innovative policies, English proficiency remain quite disappointing in Italy.

Chapter 8 (Cinganotto), describes Italian education policy in recent years, carried out by the Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR), in cooperation with INDIRE (National Institute for Educational Research) where the author works as a researcher. Particular attention is devoted to recent policies developed in the field of language teaching/learning, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and digital competences, according to the latest Reform Laws, with specific reference to Law 107/2015.

4. Conclusion

Governmental policy and top-down innovation are pervasive approaches but rarely successful. The current volume has explored the EFL policy situations in Italy and Japan and has found that these two countries are no exceptions to this tendency.

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