

Innovative curricula in tertiary ELT: A Japanese case study

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Since the Japanese Ministry of Education took its historic decision to do away with tertiary-level general education requirements, new and innovative ELT curricula have begun to surface in colleges and universities across Japan. This paper examines some of these new curricula, and considers a number of issues which may need to be addressed if the current educational trend in Japan is to thrive well into the next century.

Introduction The effect of the 1991 educational reforms was to give each university a measure of freedom to choose the nature and focus of its general education curriculum. Schools could continue with a programme similar to that already in place, change the curricula as deemed necessary, or do away with certain subjects and academic departments altogether.

In Japan, most ELT falls within the domain of general education. This meant that after the Ministry's decision it was thrown into the same turmoil as many other foreign language departments. During the subsequent period of restructuring, Wadden (1994) suggested several scenarios and trends for the late 1990s, and now that the dust has settled, many of them are beginning to emerge. Of these, the most notable is the increase in the number of universities developing innovative EFL curricula.

Some of the issues raised will be of particular interest to change agents in other Asian countries such as Taiwan and China, who share many of the same educational concerns, and face similar challenges to Japan (Holmes and McLean 1989: 232–5). It is also felt that educators involved in language curricula reforms in countries whose educational and cultural dynamics differ from Japan will also find relevance in this study's examination of the forces which can work for or against the process of ELT reforms. In reviewing the significance of these factors, it is hoped that a wider audience will gain additional insight into the issues surrounding their own particular teaching situation.

Definitions The term 'innovation' as defined in this paper means a new idea or practice that is designed to improve a specific educational setting. It will also refer to language curriculum reforms, whether they are top-down or bottom-up in nature (Slater 1987). Innovation should not be equated with change which, though sometimes the result of innovation, can also be regressive, or come about as the result of unintentional actions.

**Innovative
Japanese ELT
curricula**

Most examples of curriculum reform currently taking place in Japan come from private colleges. Some national universities are also attempting to innovate, but at a more conservative pace. Reforms at both private and national institutions will be studied at the point they had reached in 1997, though since the process of innovation has been far from easy in Japan, it is entirely possible that further changes will have taken place in some colleges since the time this report was written. The centres featured in this study are Keio University, Asia University, Tokyo Christian University, Miyazaki International College, and Niigata University.

Keio University

Keio University has developed what it calls a language immersion programme, by which the curriculum designers mean that only English is spoken in the classroom. Most of Keio University's language teachers are bilingual Japanese lecturers, who encourage learners to follow their example, and attempt to express themselves in English. Gone are the teacher-centered lectures, the drills, and the focus on stylistic grammatical accuracy. Learners are now free to work on group projects, discussions, and debates on issues which are of interest to them; as a resource for seeking out topics and improving reading comprehension, they are given full Internet access through the school's English computer labs.

A presentation which featured videotapes of classes at Keio University showed students and teachers laughing, joking, and expressing their opinions in English (Fukuda and Sasaki 1995). The interlingual nature of the students' English made them difficult to understand at times, but the course designers were reported as saying that an emphasis on co-operative learning and fluency, rather than on accuracy, will foster a positive learning environment. A major aim in this programme is to motivate students to speak English without feeling undue levels of anxiety. Instilling self-confidence and fluency in spoken English is a part of Keio University's stated goal to promote the further internationalization of Japanese society (Oishi *et al.* 1996: 51).

Asia University

By Japanese standards, with 7, 500 students in the Tokyo metropolitan area, Asia University is considered to be a small school. It enrolls more than 500 foreign exchange students, most of whom speak English as a first or second language, and is one of the first schools to use 'English lounges'—places throughout the campus where only English is spoken—and to allow native speakers of English to work full-time in their administrative offices.

Students are placed in the classes according to their scores on the university's English aptitude test, and they must all take one year of intensive English language classes. They meet for forty-five minutes a day, five days a week, in classes which are limited to 25 students per room. Four of the classes are taught by native-speaker teachers, the other by a bilingual Japanese lecturer.

All second-year International Relations majors participate in the Asia University America Programme (AUAP), which interested students from other majors are also strongly encouraged to join. For five months, students live on campus with an American roommate, study ESL and attend regular classes at one of five different American universities. Although the tuition for the programme is quite high (over ¥900,000 in 1995), over 700 students enter this programme every year.

Tokyo Christian University

Tokyo Christian University (TCU) is a four-year divinity school with a liberal arts focus, which aspires to help learners to '... develop English communication skills for international encounters ... [and] ... to access theological literature in English' (Poulshock 1996: 3). In 1996 TCU began a new curriculum that requires students to take between 15 and 21 units of an EFL course. Students are graded each year according to their TOEFL test scores. Eighteen elective units of content courses are also offered, ranging from Western Philosophy to Contemporary Theology. These courses are taught in English by native speakers.

TCU takes what it calls a 'modified sheltered approach' (Poulshock 1996: 10), which means that content courses have interpreters on hand to explain the more difficult parts of each lecture in Japanese. Teachers are also instructed to keep the language of their lectures as simple as possible, and to make generous use of gestures. Poulshock (1996: 9) defends this practice, writing that while many of TCU's students do not need interpreters, a certain amount of 'packaging' is necessary to guarantee that the course content is comprehensible for all: 'In sheltered classes, the main objective is to help students master content material. Language learning is incidental.'

Miyazaki International College

Miyazaki International College (MIC) strives to educate 'young men and women with an international orientation who can grasp the reins of leadership and guide Japan into a future which inevitably will be based on international co-operation and understanding' (Otsubo 1995: 1). More than 80 per cent of MIC's tenured language faculty are non-Japanese native English speakers who hold an MA or higher degree in TEFL—the largest ratio of expatriate language teachers of any university in Japan (Stewart 1996: 1). MIC's president (Otsubo 1995: 8), says that students are taught to 'learn how to learn' rather than simply to memorize facts for a test. Classes are small, teachers are not allowed to lecture, and co-operative learning techniques are used to encourage close, interactive relationships between teachers and the learners (Stewart 1996: 1). In MIC's 'integrated classroom', the language curriculum and all first and second-year English courses are discipline-specific. Subjects such as Art History, Economics, and Sociology are studied in English, the aim being to help learners to develop their language and critical thinking skills interactively. MIC also maintains an overseas study programme, which gives students the opportunity to study classes related to their major at a university in the USA, the UK, or Australia.

This very small but representative sample of the many recent innovations taking place in private colleges and universities across Japan is followed by an example of the work underway in the national university, where the author has taught part-time for over four years.

Niigata University Niigata University's first few years following the Ministry's decision were turbulent. In 1992 the Department of General Education was downgraded to the School of Liberal Arts. Tenured lecturers were transferred to other departments, such as Engineering, Science, or Law, which eventually established their own sets of general education requirements. Language teachers from the old Department of General Education were put in charge of the EFL courses, but the duplication of language classes for each department created a need for even more language teachers, which led to large numbers of part-time instructors being hired in 1994.

Most of the new courses were heralded as ESP classes (English for Economists, English for Engineers, English for Elementary School Teachers, etc.), but in reality little had changed in the way of course content or instruction. For the most part, the same language courses were being taught by the same lecturers using the same textbooks and the same teaching methods as before 1991 (Cohen 1995: 27-8).

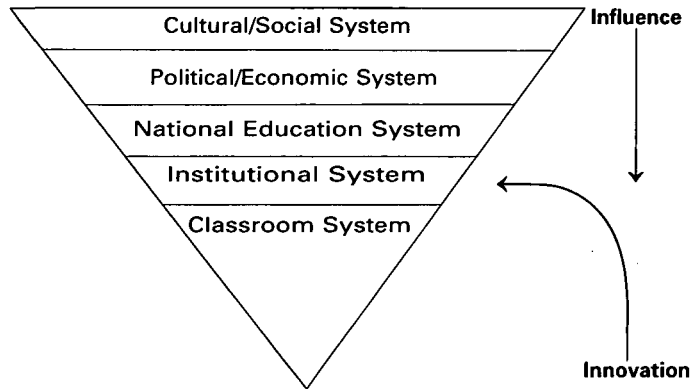
Further reforms were proposed in 1995, after a research group returned from studying the innovations being introduced at the Keio and Asia universities (Oishi *et al.* 1996). In 1997, Niigata began experimenting with English content courses. As a pilot, one general psychology class was taught for a full academic year entirely in English. The course was open to any student, regardless of his or her ability in English. The course instructor reported that the overall experience for learners had been positive, but suggested that in future pre-testing would be needed, to ensure that students had the necessary language skills before being admitted into content courses (Naaykens 1997). In the event, the course was cancelled at short notice. Since then, other reforms, such as a specialized department for training Japanese teachers of English, summer intensive courses for undergraduates, and language classes which meet twice a week have been developed. It is still too soon to evaluate the nature of these innovations, but if they succeed, Niigata University could become one of the more progressive of Japan's national universities.

Can the current trend continue? It is far from clear whether the present developments in Japanese tertiary ELT will result in a language-learning renaissance for Japanese universities, or if a new reform will restrict the teaching of English to a few specialist institutions. The remainder of this report is based upon earlier research in the area of curriculum reform (White 1995), and addresses issues which could determine the success or failure of plans for the ELT curriculum in Japan well into the next century.

External support for reforms

Reports on curriculum reform in Japan rarely discuss the interaction of their innovations with those cultural and political forces outside the institution. White (1995: 18) warns that, however beneficial an educational innovation might appear to its creators, the values and history of the surrounding culture must be taken into serious consideration before moving forward with reforms. If other cultural spheres of influence perceive ELT innovations as incompatible with or disruptive to their agendas, reforms will be resisted, or modified to fit within established norms (White 1995: 152–3).

Figure 1:
Resistance to Culturally Incompatible ELT Innovations



At present, outside support for innovations within Japanese colleges and universities is mixed. The Ministry of Education’s 1991 reforms came just a few months before official recognition that Japan’s ‘bubble economy’ had burst, but in the ensuing years of continued economic decline, Ministry officials, politicians, and business leaders have repeatedly called on universities to provide the Japanese workforce with creative individuals who are fluent in spoken English (Tanaka 1996, *Daily Yomiuri* 1996). Yet a recent study of the actual language needs of top foreign international companies in Tokyo (Kirkwold *et al.* 1995) reveals that most of them do not need fluent speakers of English for their everyday operation. Communication in English, when it is required, is primarily in written form, through letters, faxes, and e-mail. Another study (Hadley 1997: 74–5) that analysed the socio-linguistic roles and domains of the English language in Japan found that outside the educational field, Japan is blissfully happy to continue as a monolingual society. In the light of findings such as these, it is uncertain why Japanese leaders should equate speaking English with creativity and Japanese economic rebirth. Tertiary language curricula reforms are only likely to have a lasting effect when Japanese societal needs catch up with what national leaders would like to happen.

Internal support for reform

In Japanese universities, the question of who proposes reform is just as important as what is proposed in that reform. Japanese culture places much importance on establishing the rank of every individual in an organization, and in this, universities are no exception—they operate under a system which implicitly values the status and power often

determined by age, nationality, and academic standing. Innovations proposed by a widely published, senior Japanese professor will often have a better chance of acceptance and implementation. This can also happen between institutions, so that because of their higher social status and academic standing, for national universities in Japan, progress in innovative language curricula is crucial. The example set by older national universities is then imitated by the newer private institutions (Otsubo 1995: 3). The ponderous rate of reform within national universities should give innovators throughout Japan cause for alarm, especially since lasting change is rarely transferred in the other direction.

Garland's (1996: 69–70) survey of national universities reported that little has changed since the Ministry of Education's 1991 decision. Most tenured language teachers, for example, have not changed either the content or the manner of their language instruction, and lectures on grammatical items and translation remains the norm. Gorsuch *et al.* (1995: 16–17) suggests that influential stakeholders in national universities are quietly resisting major language curricula reforms in order to maintain a scholastic, teacher-centered approach.

Figure 2:
Handy's (1978) Four
Organizational Cultures

Club	Organization revolves around one authority figure.
Role	Collection of job positions. People fill the slots.
Task	Groups work together on common projects.
Person	Individuals get the most attention. Low structure and little organization.

Curriculum reform, by definition, requires change, and innovations proposed at Japanese national universities often call for change not only in the way one teaches, but also in the institution's organizational culture. Handy's (1978: 186) model for educational cultures (see Figure 2) shows the extent to which, before 1991, most Japanese universities operated as role cultures. Language teachers operated more or less independently of each other, and taught whatever and however they saw fit. Current innovations would require language teachers to become more task-centered. This would challenge many preconceived notions about the nature of language education and teacher autonomy, and bring with it the risk of organizational culture shock. Add to this the large number of faculty members in national universities, with their well-entrenched bureaucracies, and departmental rivalries, and one begins to understand why forming a consensus for innovation has been slow.

**Clarity of the
innovation**

Innovations find greater acceptance if their goals are clearly defined. Students and teachers alike should be able to explain what their innovations are, who they are for, and why they are being carried out (White 1995: 144). Most of the available literature on Japanese innovative language curricula explain who the reforms are intended to help, but fail to define the concepts that underly them, or explain why they should be carried out. Terms such as content-based, co-operative learning, and internationalization are frequently used to justify the

direction of a school's curriculum reforms, but their meanings are rarely clarified. In the same way, the need for the further internationalization of Japanese society (*kokusaika*) is often cited as an important basis for implementing language curriculum reforms. However, although *kokusaika* has a decidedly impressive ring, most Japanese have considerable difficulty in defining what the term actually means, and tend to fall back on vague, utopian, or idealistic impressions (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986, Hadley 1996). It is probably not in the best interests of innovators to use terminology that raises public expectations, yet offers so little in the way of definite goals.

Resources and incentives

Little is discussed in the literature about the retraining of teachers in universities where innovations are progressing. This is a serious challenge to the long-term success of Japanese reforms. If resources are not dedicated to teacher training, most will continue unabated with teaching practices that could frustrate the goals of innovators. There are few easy solutions to this problem, not least because most language classes in Japanese universities are taught by part-time lecturers, who often work at several different schools in the same week. Trying to arrange times for retraining all these teachers would be a curriculum co-ordinator's nightmare, not to mention a very expensive project for the university. One solution might be to offer incentives or meaningful recognition to those who participate in the process of innovation. Unfortunately, there is no system in most universities to reward either full-time or part-time teachers who are working to improve their school's curriculum (Gorsuch *et al.* 1995: 17). Also, short-term and part-time lecturers and teachers are not usually included in planning meetings or other functions designed to further reforms and foster communication between faculty members. Part of the problem stems from the traditional Japanese concept of 'top-down relationships' (*jō-ge kankei*), a belief which acknowledges that some people are more important than others in an organization, and considers that they should be afforded greater honour and respect. Part-time and short-term lecturers, while vital for the everyday operation of the curriculum, are still lower in status than tenured lecturers. As a result, they have little or no contact with these colleagues, and limited input on how innovations should be implemented. The obvious potential for cultural misunderstanding and discontent inherent in these practices suggests that innovators may need to search for concrete ways to treat all teachers as valued team members, and allow them to play a greater part in decisions which will affect their classes.

Conclusion

From a historical perspective, Japan has only rarely carried out progressive reforms. In what Darwinists call punctuated equilibria, innovation is resisted until it finally breaks through, resulting in periods of instability. At present, it appears that aspects of the current ELT reforms may be slowly gaining national acceptance nationwide. The next few years will reveal if Japanese society is prepared to accept the changes that might occur if language curriculum reforms become even

more successful. However, there are still lingering doubts as to what effect political, cultural, and economic pressure will have on the long-term success of new ELT curricula in Japanese universities. Innovators will need to focus less on the 'what' and 'how' of curriculum reform, and more on why innovative ELT curricula is important to Japan at large. Concrete goals anchored in widely recognized societal needs will help to strengthen broad-based external support and internal support for innovation. This would create a climate in which more resources could be set aside for retraining teachers, and providing real incentives for active participants.

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