

A Critical Discussion on the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities”

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An Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” was formulated by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 2003. This article shows the outlines of this plan and a critical discussion focusing on its defects and problems. The article is divided into three parts. The first part shows introduction and the background information that leads to the formation of the Action Plan. The second part, which is the main part of this article, gives the critical discussion on two parts of the Action Plan, that is “Goals to cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’” and “Action to Improve English Education”. The third part shows conclusion. In this part, the author concludes the article by claiming that the Action Plan is an improper control to education.

Key words: Courses of Study, MEXT, Strategic Plan, economic circles, language policies

INTRODUCTION

A Strategic Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” was drawn up by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2002. After that, it developed into an Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” in 2003. The purpose of this article is to criticize the Action Plan in terms of EFL education at Japanese schools.

The Strategic Plan and the Action Plan have so many problems that they

have been criticized by some language education researchers in Japan so far. For instance, Morizumi(2004) investigates the significance and problems of the Strategic Plan and the Action Plan, and Erikawa(2005) makes a critical examination of them. On the basis of these recent studies and the actual EFL situation in Japanese high schools, I made an oral presentation under the same title as this article at 2006 Asia TEFL International Conference. This article shows the fruits of the study developed from the oral presentation.

BACKGROUND THAT LEADS TO THE ACTION PLAN

The Courses of Study

In Japan, English was once the language for enemy, USA and UK, during World War II. After the end of the Second World War, English teaching began as an elective subject in the tentative Courses of Study published in 1947. In reality, however, most of the junior and senior high school students in those days chose English, because they were eager to speak English with American people. After the notice of the official Courses of Study in 1958, many high school students came to study English not as the means of communication but in order to pass the entrance examinations. The guideline of English curriculum design has come to be strictly regulated by the Courses of Study, which have been revised once every ten years. Courses of Study at any era emphasized the achievement of listening and speaking skills as well as reading and writing skills. In spite of that, Japanese people have been criticized around the world for being unable to speak English even though they understand grammatical rules. Considering such a situation, in 1978 revision of the Senior High School Courses of Study, MEXT abolished the grammar textbooks, which had long been used in senior high schools. Instead, they established the new subject, English I and English II, in which students were supposed to learn basic four skills, and also they established English IIA to enhance listening and speaking skills, English IIB to enhance reading

skills, and English IIC to enhance writing skills. After eleven years, in 1989 revision of the Senior High School Courses of Study, they established new subjects, Oral Communication A/B/C, one of which was a mandatory subject. The present Courses of Study for Junior High School was notified in 1998, when English changed from elective to mandatory subject, and those for Senior High School was notified in 1999. In the present Courses of Study for Senior High School, revised in 1999, every senior high school has to teach either English I or Oral Communication I as a mandatory subject.

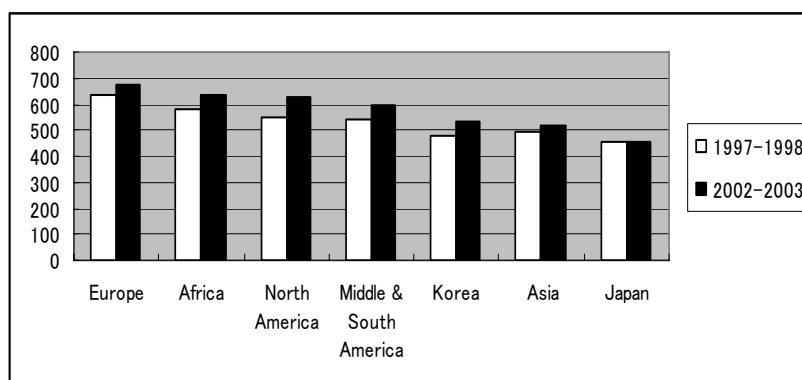
The main difference of the present Courses of Study from the previous ones is the Aims of foreign language education. One of the Aims of foreign language education stipulated there is to cultivate “practical communication abilities”. What do they mean by “practical communication abilities”? Canale and Swain (1980) states that the construct of communicative competence is made up of four different components, or subcategories: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Canale & Swain (1980) describes grammatical competence as:

that aspect of communicative competence that encompasses “knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology” (p. 29)

Thus, grammatical competence is one of the four components of communicative competence. On the other hand, as we could see in the 1978 abolition of the grammar textbooks, Japanese Ministry of Education seems to regard grammatical competence as irrelevant to communicative competence. MEXT (1998) defines practical communication abilities for junior high school students as “to listen and to speak, etc.(p. 90)”, and MEXT (1999) defines practical communication abilities for senior high school students as “to understand information and others’ intention, etc, and to express his or her own thought, etc.(p. 119)” Were these Courses of Study successful in giving Japanese student practical communication abilities? Educational Testing Service (2005, January) shows the average scores of TOEIC® researched during two periods of time in each area of the world. I drew up

Figure 1 shown below on the basis of the data.

FIGURE 1
Changes of Average Scores of TOEIC® in Each Area of the World
(Comparison between 1997-1998 and 2002-2003)



As for Japan, the Total Average of TOEIC® was 451, the worst in the world, in both two terms of researches. In spite of repetitive revisions of Courses of Study, there seemed to be no sign of improvement in communicative competence for the Japanese, while people in other areas of the world had improved their English communicative competence in some degree. What is the reason for such incapability of English communicative competence for Japanese people? It is presumed that one of the main reasons is the geographical and political background of Japan. Japan is an island nation and general Japanese citizens seem not to be governed by English-speaking countries, so they do not perceive any necessity of using English in their daily lives. They need only Japanese for the living. Unless their English abilities are evaluated for the entrance examination or job application, they need no communicative competence in English. That is also the main reason for their inefficiency in TOEIC®. Some people said, however, that it was due to grammar based instructions in Japanese junior and senior high schools. They also began to claim that it was school teachers' responsibility to give

students “practical communication abilities”.

The Strategic Plan

The demand for “practical communication abilities” was spreading through ruling Liberal Democratic Party and economic circles throughout Japan after the announcement of the new Courses of Study. Economic and educational reform was discussed in the Cabinet. To materialize the aim of English education in Japan, that is “practical communication abilities”, the Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities was formulated on July 12, 2002.

According to the proceedings from the Meeting for English Education Reform, 20 people met only 5 times for the total of 8 hours to discuss the Strategic Plan. Erikawa (2005) states that there was no incumbent English teacher in the participants and claims that it is a major problem for such an important foreign language education policy to have been determined in such a short period and in a top-down manner. It was of crucial importance, however, for the ruling LDP and economic circles to cultivate the super elite who had an excellent command of English and could cooperate with the United States of America in order to survive international economic competition. Japanese government has also been dependent on US military power through Japan-US Security Treaty. Under these backgrounds, the Strategic Plan was drawn up by the Japanese leaders, although English is not needed for general Japanese citizens. Thus, the Strategic Plan was announced not only for the educational benefits but also for the economic and political survival for the ruling party of the Japanese government and economic circles.

The Action Plan

In the previous section, I have stated the background before the Action Plan was announced. I have also analyzed that there are some economic and political needs as well as educational needs of cultivating “Japanese with

English Abilities”. In order to enforce the Strategic Plan, the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” was publicized by MEXT on March 31, 2003. In “Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’”, Toyama (2003), as the Minister of Education at that time, states as follows:

Recently, globalization in various fields of the economy and society has advanced rapidly. Transfers of information and capital across national borders as well as the movement of people and products have increased. Thus, international interdependency has deepened. At the same time, international economic competition has intensified entering a so-called period of “mega-competition”. Much effort is necessary to meet such challenges.

As she states, one of the biggest motives for establishing the educational policy was international economic competition. In the actual situation, however, English abilities for Japanese people were not enough to survive the competition. She states this situation as follows:

At present, though, due to the lack of sufficient ability, many Japanese are restricted in their exchanges with foreigners and their ideas or opinions are not evaluated appropriately. It is also necessary for Japanese to develop their ability to clearly express their own opinions in Japanese first in order to learn English.

She also states about the various measures that MEXT has taken as follows:

In response to this situation, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has formulated various measures such as the revision of the Ministry’s Courses of Study with a further focus on cultivating students’ basic and practical communication abilities. However, in order to make such improvements bear fruit, it is necessary to carry out simultaneously a number of different measures. These include improving teaching methods, improving the teaching ability of teachers, improving

the selection system for school and university applicants as well as creating better curricula.

In this statement, Toyama means that the revision of the Courses of Study is not enough, and that it is necessary to carry out a number of different measures other than their revision. In this background, “the Strategic Plan” was formulated as she states as follows:

To this end, opinions of numerous experts were obtained through bodies such as the “Round-table Committee for the Improvement of English Teaching Methods,” and the “Round-table Committee on English Education Reform.” Based on such opinions, “A Strategic Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’” was formulated in July of last year, as a comprehensive and concrete plan for the purpose of drastically reforming English education in our country. Building on the strategic plan, this Action Plan establishes a system for cultivating “Japanese with English abilities” in 5 years, based on measures included in the strategic plan and measures included in the budget for 2003.

The measures were planned by “numerous experts” to be “the Strategic Plan”, and it developed into more concrete “Action Plan”, which was based on the national budget. This is a national project to inject 1.117 billion yen in fiscal 2004 for compulsory training for English teachers (Erikawa 2005, p. 321). All the English language teachers teaching at Japanese junior or senior high schools must take this training program for a year during five years from 2003 to 2008. Toyama states that opinions of numerous experts were obtained through bodies such as the “Round-table Committee for the Improvement of English Teaching Methods,” and the “Round-table Committee on English Education Reform.” As Erikawa states, however, there was no incumbent English teacher in so-called “numerous experts”. Thus, general opinions of English teachers were not reflected in the Action Plan.

In this way, the educational policies of the ruling party were reflected in the current Courses of Study, and then, the Strategic Plan and the Action Plan were formulated to reinforce the Courses of Study. The Action Plan, however,

contradicts the current Courses of Study, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

DISCUSSION ON THE ACTION PLAN

I. Goals to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’

The Action Plan begins with “Goals to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’”. MEXT established the goals of English education in Japanese schools, dividing into two categories. One is “English language abilities required for all Japanese nationals” and the other is “English language skills required for specialized fields or for those active in international society”. As for the former, that is “English language abilities required for all Japanese nationals”, MEXT states as follows:

“On graduating from junior high school and senior high school, graduates can communicate in English”

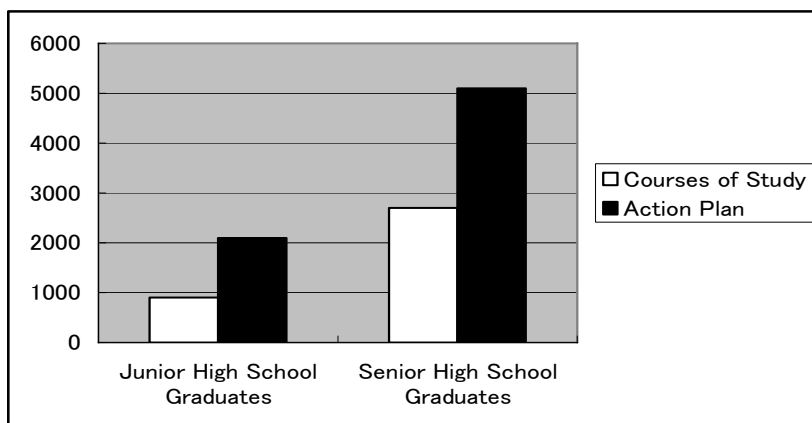
- On graduating from junior high school, students can conduct basic communication with regard to areas such as greetings, responses, or topics relating to daily life. (English-language abilities for graduates should be the third level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) on average.)
- On graduating from a senior high school, students can conduct normal communication with regard to topics, for example, relating to daily life. (English-language abilities for graduates should be the second level or the pre-second level of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) on average.)

As for the latter, that is “English language skills required for specialized fields or for those active in international society”, MEXT states as follows:

“On graduating from university, graduates can use English in their work”
Each university should establish attainment targets from the viewpoint of fostering personnel who can use English in their work.

My first criticism for this part is that the statements concerning “English language abilities required for all Japanese nationals” contradict the Courses of Study. The Action plan regards STEP, a Japanese domestic test of English proficiency, as one of the “objective indicators” to evaluate English abilities as well as TOEFL and TOEIC. In general, the third level of STEP is considered to be equivalent to junior high school graduates’ level, and the second level to senior high school graduates’ level. In reality, however, the third level is far from being “average” of the junior high school graduates, and the second level is also far from being average of the senior high school graduates. Actually, the vocabulary level required in STEP, on which the Action Plan is based, is more than twice as high as that required in the Courses of Study. The Figure 2 below indicates the number of English words required in the Courses of Study and the Action Plan (drawn up by referencing MEXT, 1998, 1999 and STEP, n.d.).

FIGURE 2
Comparison of Vocabulary Level Required in the Courses of Study and the Action Plan



In the current Courses of Study, junior high school teachers are required to instruct only 900 words, whereas students are required to learn about 2,100

words to pass the third level of STEP, which the Action Plan aims to make average of junior high school graduates. In the same way, senior high school teachers are required in the Courses of Study to instruct only 2,700 words, in which 900 words in junior high school are included, whereas students are required to learn about 5,100 words to pass the second level of STEP, which the Action Plan aims to make average of senior high school graduates. Vocabulary level is one of the important factors in setting goals of EFL education in each phase. In the present English education at Japanese schools, however, the target goals of vocabulary established by the Action Plan is almost twice as high as those established by the Courses of Study. As I mentioned before, the Aim of foreign language education set by the Courses of Study is to cultivate “Practical Communication Abilities”, which is not enough in passing the STEP. Grammatical competence and vocabulary are also needed in passing the STEP and getting high scores in TOEFL or TOEIC. Even if the junior and senior high school teachers of English attained the target goals set by the Courses of Study, they could not attain those suggested by the Action Plan. Thus, the Action Plan contradicts the Courses of Study, both of which were formulated by MEXT.

My second criticism for the part concerns the “English language skills required for specialized fields or for those active in international society”. Here, MEXT uses the term “skills” distinguished from the term “abilities”. The Action Plan claims the goal of English skills acquired by university graduates to be able to use English “in their work”. Needless to say, English, as well as other languages in the world, is one of the means of communication among Homo sapiens. Is the goal of EFL education in Japan to use English in their work? It is true that English has been widely used in international society as a means of business communication. However, fostering personnel who can use English in their work should not be the goal of EFL in public education. For example, the goal of researching English Literature at universities cannot be to use English in their work. In Japan, the Courses of Study is not applicable to universities, in which Academic Freedom has been guaranteed by the Constitution of Japan. Thus, it is illegal

for MEXT to force the goal of certain field of study to universities.

Action to Improve English Education

“Action to Improve English Education” consists of the following seven parts:

1. Improvement of English class
2. Improving the teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading the teaching system
3. Improving motivation for learning English
4. Improvement in the evaluation system for selecting school and university applicants
5. Support for English conversation activities in elementary schools
6. Improvement of Japanese language abilities
7. Promotion of practical research

First, as for “Improvement of English class”, the Action Plan sets the following goals:

“Cultivating communication abilities through the repetition of activities making use of English”

- The majority of an English class will be conducted in English and many activities where students can communicate in English will be introduced.
- Small-group teaching and the streaming of students according to proficiency in the English classes of junior and senior high schools will be positively adopted.
- Progressive schools in terms of English education will be formed within local communities.

For the purpose of cultivating communication abilities, “an English class conducted in English” is considered essential in the Action Plan. Studies, however, have not proven yet the effectiveness of using English only in EFL classes in Japan. In recent studies, on the contrary, Yoshida and Yanase

(2003), Kanetani (2004) and Okuno (2006a) emphasize the effectiveness of using Japanese to assist comprehension of English for Japanese students. Dodson (1973) had emphasized the effectiveness of using students’ mother language for foreign language teachers to convey the meaning, and developed the Bilingual Method. Nevertheless, MEXT claims that the majority of an English class should be conducted in English. It is true that using English only has a certain effect on some part of English skills. However, it is not always the case. Yoshida and Yanase (2003) claims that in acquiring BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills), teachers need not use Japanese and should use it as little as they can, but that in acquiring CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), Japanese will be helpful in comprehension of English. Thus, “an English class conducted in English” is not an essential factor in cultivating English communicative proficiency.

As for the small-group teaching, it is essential in all the subjects in school education. In looking at the present public schools in Japan, however, there are 40 students in each class. In such a large class size, some part of the students drop out of class, and the differences of academic level among each student are becoming large. The Action intends to divide each class into two groups, which means 20 students in each group, but the idea is not adopted in other school subjects. They are also suggesting the streaming of students according to proficiency. It is not clear, however, in what criteria they intend to divide the students. That means high-level students might become higher, while slow-learners might lose their spirits. This policy might cause the large diversification of English abilities among each Japanese people.

As for the third item, progressive schools in terms of English education, such as the Super English Language High Schools (SEL Hi), are mentioned. In this plan, they were planning to designate a total of 100 schools as Super English Language High Schools — a school where practical research is conducted in areas such as; the development of a curriculum focusing on English education; education where part of a subject is taught in English; or effective policies and measures for linking with universities and sister schools overseas (MEXT 2003). Those schools designated for SEL Hi must

submit their educational plans and reports to MEXT, and MEXT budgets for them. On the other hand, schools that are not designated for SEL Hi cannot get any benefit.

Next, I will move on to “Improving the teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading the teaching system”. The Action Plan sets the following goals:

- Almost all English teachers will acquire English skills (STEP pre-first level, TOEFL 550, TOEIC 730 or over) and the teaching ability to be able to conduct classes to cultivate communication abilities through the repetition of activities making use of English.
- Centering on leading teachers at the local community level, the improvement of English abilities in the community will be enhanced.
- A native speaker of English will attend English classes at junior and senior high schools more than once a week.
- People living in the local community proficient in English will be positively utilized.

As for the first item, even if the English teacher has English skills equivalent to STEP pre-first level, TOEFL 550, or TOEIC 730, it does not necessarily mean that he or she has the good teaching ability, especially for slow-learners. Moreover, as I discussed before, the repetition of activities making use of English does not always lead to cultivating communication abilities.

In order to accomplish these goals, MEXT is now practicing intensive training for English teachers from 2003 until 2008. The aim of the training is to enhance teachers’ ability to cultivate students’ practical communication abilities using only English during each lesson. Slow-learners, however, cannot understand the meaning of what the teacher says in English, and as the result, drop-out students are increasing in many schools.

In the third item, a native speaker of English, that is Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), is mentioned. Thanks to this system, many English speaking people can get job opportunities of teaching English in Japan. Their working hour is seven hours a day, while Japanese teachers of English have to work

more than eight hours a day. Generally, ALT does not have TESOL or other teaching licenses and is not necessarily proficient in teaching English to slow learners. The same problem might occur with “people living in the local community proficient in English” as shown in the fourth item.

Then, let me move on to “Improving motivation for learning English”. The goals are as follows:

- 10,000 high school students will study abroad every year.
- Opportunities to use English outside the class will be enhanced.
- International exchange will be further developed through such means as communicating with the world using English.

As for the first item, many high schools have exchange programs with high schools abroad. In the high school where the author is teaching, for example, they have an exchange program with Glendale High School in California, USA. In order to support this program, the Higashi-Osaka City Board of Education expends money on the program for exchange students and teachers in the Japanese school. However, the Glendale City Board of Education cannot spend any money on the program for their exchange students and teachers. So they come to Japan every year for their own money. Moreover, teachers in charge of classes at Glendale High School cannot leave their school to accompany their students. If they do so, they have to find substitute teachers and they cannot get any pay during the program. Fortunately in the Japanese high school, the City Board of Education expends all of the money that is necessary for their exchange students and teachers, but in many other high schools in Japan, students participate in the exchange program or Study-abroad Program for their own money, and teachers accompany their students for the money from the Parents and Teachers Association or Alumni Association, not school administration. In this plan, MEXT is encouraging overseas study saying, “For 2003, support to cover part of students’ round-trip expenses will be provided for a target number of about 1,000 students.”(MEXT 2003, p. 11) However, support to cover part of students’ round-trip expenses is not enough. This plan would be pie in the sky without

financial aids by national governments throughout the world.

As for the second item, MEXT is planning to enhance opportunities to use English outside the class. However, Japanese people are living their lives by using Japanese language in their daily lives. In Japanese junior and senior high schools, English is taught not as a second language but as a foreign language. The situation in Japan is quite different from that in the United States of America, where English is taught to immigrants, who live their lives in English, as a second language. In Japan today, it is almost impossible for general high school students to live their lives in English all the time no matter how many opportunities to use English they have outside the class. This plan confuses EFL with ESL.

As for the third item, international exchange could not be developed only by communicating with the world using English. International exchange means not only exchange with English-speaking countries but also with many other countries including neighboring countries such as China and Korea. Unfortunately, even government officials in Japan cannot communicate well with these countries today. “Japanese with English Abilities” is not essential for real international exchange.

The fourth Action is “Improvement in the evaluation system for selecting school and university applicants”. The goals are as follows:

- Communication abilities, including listening and speaking, will be appropriately evaluated.
- Utilization of listening tests or external proficiency examinations will be encouraged for entrance examinations of universities and high schools.

In Japanese high school and university entrance examinations, listening tests had not been practiced for a long time. The reason is the lack of practicality. No matter how high the validity and reliability are, listening tests have some difficulties in respect of practicality. Especially in the University Center Examination, examinees all over Japan should take tests under the equal condition without any trouble. After the Action Plan was announced, the University Entrance Examination Center was wondering how to practice the

listening tests. After enough consideration, they thought of handing out an IC-player to each examinee, who would listen to English through headphones. It was first introduced in the 2006 entrance examination, when a lot of troubles did occur, with some IC-players out of order during the test. In 2007 examination, the same troubles occurred. There are still a lot of challenges in introduction of a listening test in the University Center Examination. I agree with the idea that language education should aim at developing four skills, not only reading and writing but also listening and speaking. However, it does not mean that all of these skills should be evaluated in the entrance examinations. It goes without saying that foreign language education is not for entrance examinations but for mutual communication among people all over the world.

The fifth Action is “Support for English conversation activities in elementary schools”. The goal is as follows:

- At elementary schools where English conversation activities take place in the Period for Integrated Study, approximately 1/3 of these sessions will be guided by personnel such as foreign teachers, those who are proficient in English and junior high school English teachers.

They also explain as follows:

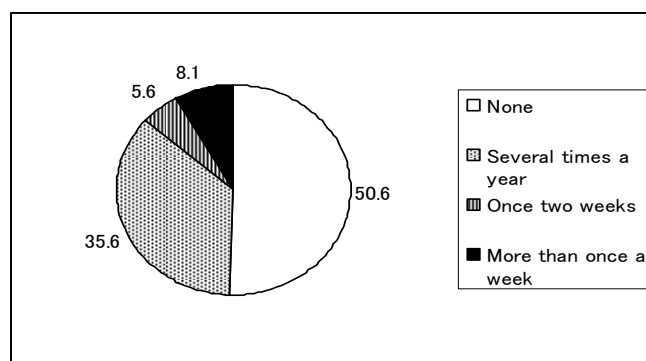
At elementary schools, based on the new Courses of Study implemented in 2002, foreign language conversation can be performed as part of education for international understanding during the newly established “Period for Integrated Study.” In 2002 when the new Courses of Study were fully implemented, English conversation activities were carried out at approximately 50% of all public elementary schools.

There are some pros and cons concerning English education in elementary schools. The Action Plan does not show any significance of English conversation activities in elementary schools. It is generally said, however, that beginning to learn English at an earlier stage might give children more motivation for learning English afterwards. In order to prove that English conversation activities were carried out at approximately 50% of all

elementary school in 2002, and see if the activities have some effects on students' motivation to learn English, in April, 2006, a survey was conducted in the senior high school where the author is teaching. The examinees are 160 freshmen in the Department of Regular Curriculum of the senior high school. These students graduated from their elementary schools in March, 2003, when the Action Plan was publicized. It was predicted that most of them do not have enough experiences of learning English in their elementary school days because it was before the Action Plan was announced. They were asked to fill in a questionnaire, which consisted of the two questions: 1. "Did you have classes concerning English in your elementary school days?" 2. "Which of the following school subjects are the most favorite and the least favorite?"

As for question 1, students were asked to choose one among four multiple choices, that is "(1) None", "(2) Several times a year", "(3) Once two weeks", "(4) More than once a week". The results are shown in Figure 3 below.

FIGURE 3
Percentages of Students Who Learned English in Elementary School Days

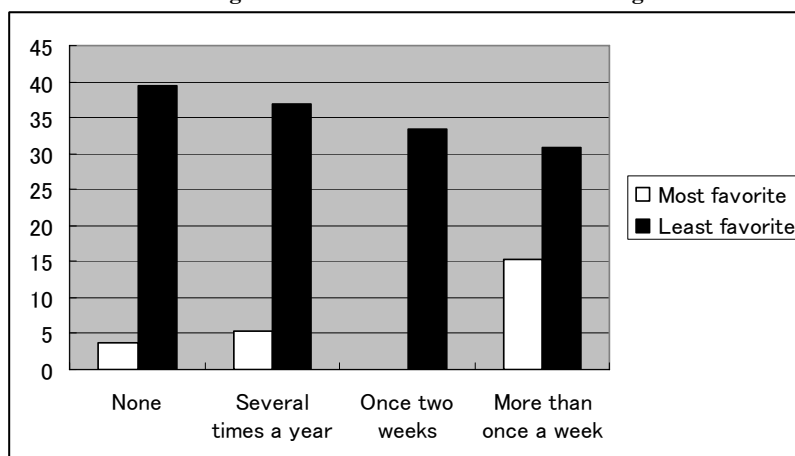


The results of the survey prove that English conversation activities were carried out at approximately 50% of elementary schools as the Action Plan refers, but they also indicate that 50.6% of the students do not have any

experiences of learning English in their elementary school days. Only 8.1% of the students had English classes more than once a week. This shows that most of the elementary school pupils did not have enough English conversation activities before the announcement of the Action Plan.

As for Q2, they were asked to choose the most favorite and the least favorite subjects among 9 school subjects: Japanese, Social Studies, Mathematics, Natural Science, English, Physical Education, Art, Home Economics, and Information Science. The author counted the number of students who chose “English” as either of “the most favorite subject” or “the least favorite subject”, and drew up a figure to show the percentages of them with different frequencies of English conversation activities in their elementary school days. All these students have experiences of learning English after going up to junior high schools. Thus, it is not clear whether their interests are due to the frequencies of English conversation activities in their elementary school days. It, however, suggests some tendencies as shown in Figure 4 below.

FIGURE 4
Percentages of Students Who Like or Dislike English



Out of 8.1% students who had English classes more than one a week,

30.8% answered that English is their least favorite subject, while 15.4% answered English is their most favorite subject. Compared to the group who had no English classes or had several times a year, more percentage of the students in this group answered that English is the most favorite subject. Twice as many students yet answered that English is the least favorite subject, in spite of the fact that they had enough experience of English conversation activities in their elementary school days.

In this survey, it is not clear what kind of English lessons they took during their elementary school or junior high school days. This result, however, suggests that whether elementary school English will be a successful motivation or not depends on many factors such as teaching methodology, materials, facilities, etc. Without any consideration to these factors, English conversation activities in elementary schools would not increase students who like English. *A Survey for Practical Situation of Elementary School English Activities* conducted by MEXT shows that the English conversation activities are put into practice in the 6th grade once two weeks on average in 2006. This frequency, however, does not bear any fruit, as shown in Figure 4, in which no student who had taken English lessons once two weeks answered English was the most favorite subject.

As for the teachers' qualification, elementary school teachers are not qualified to teach English on the present situation. Nevertheless, they cannot help teaching English conversation in the Period for Integrated Study, cooperating with assistant language teachers, who are proficient in English itself but do not necessarily have enough skills to teach it to elementary school pupils. Neither do junior high school English teachers. In order to introduce English education to elementary schools, radical reforms in various aspects including teachers' qualification systems and school facilities would be necessary. This Action Plan does not suggest any concrete plans for the future to put elementary school English into practice. English conversation activities only in the Period for Integrated Study do not necessarily enhance pupil's motivation to learn English.

The sixth Action is "Improvement of Japanese language abilities". The

goal is as follows:

- In order to cultivate communication abilities in English, the ability to express appropriately and understand accurately the Japanese language, which is the basis of all intellectual activities, will be fostered.

This statement seems acceptable, but it contradicts the elementary school English that is referred in the fifth Action. In the present situation, Japanese language education is not enough at elementary schools. As a result, some high school students, to whom the author teaches English today, do not have enough Japanese language abilities. This causes lack of English abilities. It is natural that any foreign languages are acquired after the acquisition of their mother languages. It is essential for elementary school teachers to have more time and energy in teaching not so much English as Japanese language to their pupils. Acquisition of English for Japanese people would be impossible without sufficient abilities to express and understand Japanese. This Action Plan admits it and suggests the importance of Japanese language abilities, but does not show any concrete plans to cultivate the abilities.

The seventh Action is “Promotion of practical research”. The goal is as follows:

- Practical research relating to English education at junior high schools, high schools, and universities will be comprehensively implemented for promoting approaches to improve English education.

Concerning this Action, MEXT suggests the following five fields of researches:

1. Research relating to levels of English ability required at the junior high and senior high school levels
2. Research relating to English education at junior high and senior high schools, and training programs for teachers
3. Research regarding the target goals for the English ability required by English teachers

4. Research relating to English education at universities
5. Research relating to approaches to English education in other countries.

As for the third research, MEXT regards three examinations, STEP, TOEFL, and TOEIC as the target goals for the English ability required by English teachers. Concerning this, Erikawa (2005) states as follows, claiming that the goals based on these three examinations are unscientific.

We cannot regard these three kinds of scores as an equal standard, since the goal and level of each test is different. This is obvious from Ishida (2004), who is the research leader of “the target goals for the English ability required by English teachers”. It says that out of those who had passed the pre-first level of STEP (58 junior and senior high school teachers of English), only 33% got more than 550 in TOEFL and 730 in TOEIC. One of its causes is the difference in vocabulary levels. In TOEIC and the pre-first level of STEP, the percentage of the high-level vocabulary in more than 10,000 word-level is only 4%, while it goes up to 14% in TOEFL. Thus, “in regard to vocabulary, TOEFL is far more difficult than the first level of STEP” (p. 323).

Thus, these three kinds of standards could not be the target goals of the same value for the English ability required by English teachers. As I mentioned in respect of the second Action, “Improving the teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading the teaching system”, getting high scores on these tests has nothing to do with improving the teaching ability of English teachers. There is no evaluating the teaching ability, which is consisted of many factors other than English ability, by making use of these tests. The target goals for the English ability required by English teachers cannot be set by the national government, no matter how far the research is done.

In general, these kinds of researches should not be led by government officials, but they should be done spontaneously by many language teachers and researchers in high schools and universities.

CONCLUSION

I have criticized each item in the Action Plan one by one. Then, what are the main problems of the Action Plan? Morizumi (2004, p. 46) states the following three problems:

- (1) They lack the idea and the philosophy of foreign language education.
- (2) The foreign language education is led by “English”.
- (3) They put too much emphasis on practicality of English.

As for (1), Morizumi (2004) cites Article 1, the Aim of Education, stipulated in the earlier version of *The Fundamental Law of Education*, which was revised somewhat at the end of 2006, and claims that the relationships between the Aim of Education, that is the full development of personality, and the Action Plan ought to be explained. As for (2), Morizumi (2004) claims that the name of the plan should have included not “Japanese with English Abilities” but “Japanese with Foreign Language Abilities”. And as for (3), claiming that the Action Plan confuses EFL with ESL, Morizumi (2004) insists that practicality should not be the only goal of foreign language education, although he admits that they are one of the goals.

These three are the main problems in the Action Plan. Morizumi claims that the ultimate goal of EFL education is everlasting peace (Morizumi, 2004, p. 46) based on the earlier version of Fundamental Law of Education.

Morizumi also states that the foreign language education is led by “English”. This Action Plan takes it for granted that English is all that “foreign language” means. Japanese students do not necessarily have motivation to learn English as a foreign language. It is desirable for each student to choose which foreign languages to learn. For instance, the population of Chinese speaking people is almost twice as large as that of English speaking people all over the world. As far as Japan is concerned, there live many Korean people. Taking these facts into consideration, Japanese government should encourage students to learn not only English but

also Chinese or Korean as a foreign language. The government of a country should not impose their people on a certain foreign language, English.

The third item of Morizumi's criticism is that they put too much emphasis on "practical" goals of English education. This "practical" idea comes from the current Courses of Study as mentioned in the previous chapter. The goal of foreign language education in the Courses of Study is "practical communication abilities", while the ultimate goal for university graduates is to be able to use English in their work. Both have the "practical" goals in common. Japanese school education, however, cannot necessarily cultivate students with high English skills partly because there is no lesson on Saturdays, and partly because of geographical and political background of Japan as mentioned in the first chapter. In Japan, English has been taught not as a second language but as a foreign language. Unless English is used in daily life, it is almost impossible for school teachers to make students acquire practical English skills. It is unreasonable for MEXT to set such practical goals for EFL education at schools.

The Action Plan, based on the Strategic Plan, is one of the main language policies led by MEXT and economic circles. Is it their real role to establish the goal of a certain school subject? Article 16 of the revised Fundamental Law of Education, concerning the matter, stipulates that education shall not be subject to improper control and shall be executed based on this law and other laws. This means that any organizations or individuals shall not give improper control to school education, unless the control is based on any laws. The article also states that the nation and local governments shall take necessary financial measures for smooth and continuous education.

The most required financial measure in Japanese schools now is to minimize each class-size. In Japan, each class has 40 students. I presume that such a large class-size is one of the main causes of the lack of communicative competence in Japanese people. MEXT does not intend to minimize the class-size due to financial reasons. Although the Action Plan allows "small-group teaching of approximately 20 persons", it is restricted "in certain subjects such as English". Minimizing the class-size only in English,

however, is not enough. Class-size should also be minimized in all the other subjects. That would allow students to express their opinions freely, and as a result, it would lead to their improvement of communicative competence.

The Action Plan is based on the economic circles’ viewpoint to boost up Japanese economic status. It is the improper control toward education. In language teaching, there is no best method for all the students. Thus, it is up to the teachers to set goals and choose the most suitable method for their students’ goals. Imposing a certain goal or method on all the English teachers by the “Action Plan” through MEXT exceeds the authority of economic circles.

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