



Comparative Education: Why Does Japan Continue To Struggle With English?

Lee Nuttall

University of Derby

ABSTRACT

This report discusses why Japan continues to struggle with and appears on the surface to be reluctant to embrace the English language as a medium to conduct business and indeed tourism as opposed to their South East Asian neighbours. The topics covered were the historical context of Japan's isolationist policy, Japan's educational system, and their English educational policy. In addition, I compared and contrasted Japan's test performance and/or results with other South East Asian countries based on secondary source data from three recognised international English proficiency tests TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS. Next, I discussed the economic implications, due to the lack of an English speaking workforce. Finally, I included a case study, which focused on a Japanese company who adopted English as the company language.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to investigate and discuss why Japan continues to struggle with and appears on the surface to be reluctant to embrace the English language as a medium to conduct business and indeed tourism as opposed to their South East Asian neighbours. The topics to be considered are Japan's historical isolationism policy, their educational system, and their English educational policy. This is followed by reviewing Japan's performance on three internationally recognised English proficiency tests and the correlation between an English speaking workforce and the impact it has on the economy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ISOLATIONISM

Japan's isolationism model dates back centuries at a time when its borders were historically closed to foreigners because the Japanese throughout their history have always had a deep seeded suspicion of foreigners. Fortunately, this outlook began to dilute, be it in small doses, when the Portuguese in 1571, and subsequently, the Chinese merchants in 1639, (Doboku, 2018) were all granted access at the port of Nagasaki. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century, however, that Japan apparently ended its self-imposed isolationism when in 1853, the American Commodore, Matthew Perry led his four ships into the harbour at Tokyo Bay (History State, 2018).

Since this epic episode in their history, Japan has, therefore, been receptive to outside influences, all be it on their terms in small doses, especially in the post-war period, from the 1950s to the present day. The consequences of this are they have adopted and then adapted products and ideas while at the same time, maintaining their traditional culture that is still prevalent today. For example the automobile or electronics industries and in more recent times their own stamp on international junk food such as the humble burger in the form of a fast-food outlet named; Mos Burger. As a result, in any major city today you will encounter a blend of both western and indigenous influences (Haglund, 1984). However, on the face of it, the only thing that is absent is their inability to fully embrace the English language. I make this claim

because I taught in Japan for over a decade, and it will also become apparent later in this report regarding international proficiency test results.

Once again, I suggest this reluctance is rooted in their self-imposed isolationism policy pre-mid-nineteenth century and their uneasy relationship with the outside world which still impacts Japan in the 21st century. However, in 2003, the government openly acknowledged that English language skills are fundamental in linking Japan with the rest of the world (MEXT, 2003). Unfortunately, this self-imposed model appears to continue to the present time as they have also created the self-image of the uniqueness of all things Japanese. A bizarre example of this ideology was when Japan restricted imports of foreign skis. Arguing that Japanese snow was different (Anon, 2007). However, in their defence, a representative from an investment fund company took a more diplomatic stance when he commented; “the problem is less a matter of irrational xenophobia than a deep fear of change, no matter who is bringing it” (Caryl and Kashigawa, 2008). Here, I would also suggest that such a *change* could also include the use of the English language itself as it is quintessentially foreign.

Another example, on the theme of isolationism, from a contemporary perspective, is the Japanese national football team, known as the “Samurai Blues”. This nickname stems from the fact Japan consists of five main islands, which are surrounded by blue seas and skies. However, this could be interpreted as a legacy of the self-image of isolationism, and uniqueness that is still part of the psyche today...psychologically cocooned and protected by an imaginary blue barrier.

THE JAPANESE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

A significant and worrying objective of the Japanese education systems is it moulds individuals into economic machines by repressing and squeezing any hopes and extracting any independent thought and creativity (Vo, 2016). This is reinforced by a famous proverb: *derukuiwa utareru* which translates as; “*The nail that sticks out gets hammered down*”. As a result of this kind of social conformist rhetoric, combined with the arduous educational process, the consequences, in most cases, students lose their self-identity and aspirations. This process aids the systematic exploitation by major corporations or indeed most employers. However, thankfully, this ideology appears to be slowly coming to an end because there are fewer jobs which offer *cradle to the grave* positions (Kanabayashi, 1996), which was the backbone of Japanese society, and thus, it is slowly shattering the status-quo.

Commentators such as Carnoy and Levin, (1976) argue, education is ingrained in society, and therefore reflect the society individuals live in. The outcome of this is citizens become a mirror image of the education they receive and if the education is not progressive then how is it possible for the citizens of that society to be progressive. This is connected to another aspect of the Japanese educational system, one which does not encourage creativity or critical thinking. As mentioned earlier about the nail and the hammer. The sole purpose of the system is to create rote memorisation for entrance exams into high school and higher education and an unquestioning society. Which Adler argues is not learning. According to Adler (1939), learning is all about expanding knowledge and improving understanding, and therefore, rote learning does not deserve to be called learning. This was further substantiated by Usuki (2000), when she argued there are psychological barriers to the embracement of effective language learning procedures by Japanese students as they are recognised as passive learners, and hence, achieve lower grades for English.

Furthermore, other factors such as economic prosperity and social cohesion of a country can only be achieved by initiating a policy for a type of education which is creative and culture-orientated (Dornyei, 2010). Unfortunately, the consequences of this are that other Asian countries have been swiftly catching up to Japan economically, and in some cases surpassed

them, such as China. An analogy of this predicament would be, if you stand still, do not be surprised if you get overtaken...keep on moving and continue to be progressive.

In addition, the democratisation of education is another significant factor. Here, it is worth noting that not all Asian countries can democratize education because there are certain conditions to be satisfied before education is democratized (Sofa, 2016). In the early twentieth century Dewey (1916) argued there were two criteria for democratic life that interweaves the notion of democracy and education namely; the plurality of interest that is shared within the group and the group's openness towards other groups, an educational ideal. Nussbaum (2010) advocated that the process of the democratisation of education consists of factors such as the socio-cultural diversity of most nations and an obligation to educate its population in a cosmopolitan fashion. She argues further, that an important element of a cosmopolitan democratic education is to systematically encourage multicultural learning, which is imperative in order to promote a democratic ethos despite cultural pluralism. Thus, cosmopolitan democratic education has risen to the fore because of the advancement of technology and the subsequent impact of the internet (Bull, 2014). The following are selected examples of the democratisation of education in relation to an ever increasingly connected world proposed by Bull (2014): (i) Democratizing information and knowledge (ii) Democratizing learning resources and (iii) Democratizing learning networks (see Appendix 1 for descriptors and more examples of the democracy of education).

Now I would like to refocus on Japan and its inability to perform well on English proficiency tests. However, before I go any further a statistic that is worth noting is English is spoken by 1.75 billion people globally. That equates to one in every four people (Neeley, 2012). According to data, Japan persistently underperforms on these tests compared to other English as a Foreign Language (EFL) countries. For example, IELTS and TOEFL score data for the period of 2007 ranks Japan 8th out of 15th for IELTS, with an average band score of 5.72. The average for the fifteen Asian countries was 5.91. This shows Japan is below the average grade. On the TOEFL test, they were ranked bottom out of the same fifteen countries with an average score of 65. The average score for the fifteen Asian countries was 78.5. From the evidence that will be discussed later in this report, I will present and evaluate Japan's English proficiency scores for the TOEIC, TOEFL, and IELTS covering the periods of 2016 to 2017, to discover if they have improved on their 2007 rankings.

ENGLISH EDUCATIONAL POLICY

According to the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), Japan does indeed require English communicative skills. Over the years the MEXT has acknowledged and has taken measures to remedy their lowly ranking for English skills. For example; incorporating oral communication into high schools (MEXT, 2002), and designating foreign language as a compulsory subject in high schools (MEXT, 1999). The MEXT enacted such a program: Five-year Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities in 2002, (see Appendix 2 for policy). However, since the MEXT 2002 five year plan, most high school graduates entering university still lacked adequate intercultural, communication, cognitive and linguistic skills (Caraker, 2012). Subsequently, the findings of this program continued to show that there was a disconnection between the MEXT policy guidelines for English education and the actual classroom practice throughout Japan (Caraker, 2012).

Other criticisms were that the policy initiatives were full of contradictions and ambiguity rather than focusing on the *real* objectives of English language training. Hagerman (2009), argued that policy-makers are still concerned with foreign influences, and therefore, are mindfully protecting the Japanese identity by not implementing effective foreign language policies. Yet again, I would suggest this refers back to the historical concerns of outside

influences, and therefore, such policies are purposely set up to fail. The main concern with this is that the MEXT identifies and executes the curriculum for all schools, approves all textbooks, supplies teachers with lesson plans, which are designed to restrain teachers from being creative with the plans and MEXT standardises teacher training. Following on from the MEXT 1999, five years plan they then announced from 2011, Foreign Language Activities (FLA) would become compulsory at all elementary schools nationwide. Initially, it was to be taught to 5th and 6th-grade students only, however, from my own experience of working in elementary schools it was also introduced to the 3rd and 4th grades. The MEXT principles, other than introducing learners to the production of the language was to also place an emphasis on developing intercultural understanding. In addition, the MEXT also created and provided the student's textbooks which were to a large degree based on the grammar-translation method once again.

On the topic of teacher training and its standardisation, Adler (1982), argued newly trained teachers require appropriate and creative training if they are to develop the intellectual skills involved in teaching and also learning. This was part of the fundamental proposals of the Paideia program that he envisioned as the perfect educational program in 1980's America. The teachers during their Paideia teaching training found the books assigned, and partaking in seminar discussions intellectually refreshing and exciting. As opposed to the boredom they usually encountered with their standardised training, with its repetition of the lesson plan that guides their didactic teaching of subject matters. The objectives of his program were to avoid such policies such as the MEXT, of implementing one-dimensional one-size fits all approach (see Appendix 3 for Paideia Program Principles). Nonetheless, some private universities in Japan have decided to trial innovative methods such as Content-Language and Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach. The following is a case study from Nihon University in Tokyo, who implemented Content-Language and Integrated Learning (CLIL).

First, I would like to address what CLIL is designed for. Its foundations are based on the principles of the communicative approach which is organised exclusively around the content, in this case, study, English Language and Literature for Academic English purposes, as opposed to a prearranged language syllabus. The reason I have included this case study as part of this report was to gauge the general attitude of university students and their response to such a progressive approach. Obviously, it is a small research sample and is not representative of all universities who have implemented the CLIL program. This study focused on research English majors from Nihon University in Tokyo. The data presented below in *Figure 1: Towards a CLIL Syllabus in Japanese Universities*, was anonymous feedback after the conclusion of the course.

The results below in Figure 1, suggest that on the whole students were not adverse to English language instruction. Caraker's (2012) findings showed that in general students had a positive impression of the course. Hence, the results show 60% of the students surveyed were either *very satisfied* or *satisfied*. While a further 36% said they were *neither satisfied*, nor *unsatisfied*. However, an issue with this data was that Caraker never clarified or provided information on how many any students took part in the course, or indeed if it was compulsory or voluntary participation. Nonetheless, it does give you some insight into the student's impression of the course, and therefore, can only be commended for attempting to break the status-quo.

Towards a CLIL Syllabus in Japanese Universities

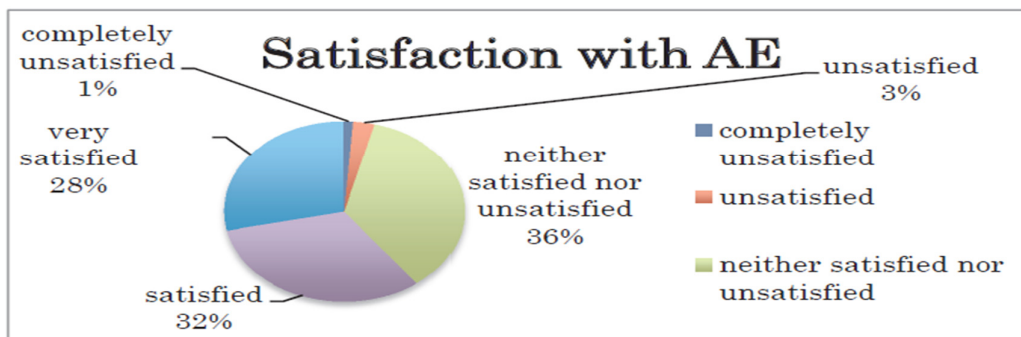


Figure 1

Source: Caraker, (2012, p26).

Another paper of interest produced empirical research regarding the attitudes of Japanese students in English Language Learning. The following data was compiled by Lafaye and Tsuda (2002), on the general opinions of English language learning by Japanese university students at Jinbun Gakuba (Humanities) Department of Tokaigakuen University in Nagoya, Japan.

NB:

- The sample for the data for Tables 1, 2, and 3 was compiled from 518 students who completed the questionnaire
- 67% chose to study English as a foreign language
- 33% chose to study Chinese as a foreign language

Table 1. Student Responses

Student's Attitudes Towards the Usefulness of English					
	Essential	Very useful	Useful	Not very useful	Useless
Travel	145 (29%)	158 (31%)	182 (36%)	16 (3%)	4 (1%)
TV/Movies	26 (5%)	63 (12%)	261 (52%)	126 (25%)	29 (6%)
Internet/Computer Use	80 (16%)	163 (32%)	188 (37%)	61 (12%)	15 (3%)
Communication	311 (61%)	135 (27%)	53 (40%)	5 (1%)	3 (1%)

Source: Lafaye and Tsuda (2002).

As you can see from Table 1, the responses, on the whole, were quite positive for the four categories surveyed. For *travel*, 96% responded favourably from *essential* to *useful*. For the category of *communication*, the figures look promising at first glance, however, after a detailed analysis of the data the figures do not appear to tally (total 130%). As a result, this category would need to be dismissed.

Table 2. Student Responses

Do you like English?			
	Like	Dislike	Total
Basic	48 (34%)	93 (66%)	141
Intermediate	62 (31%)	138 (69%)	200
Intensive	24 (42%)	33 (58%)	57
Chinese	25 (23%)	83 (77%)	108
Total	159 (31%)	347 (69%)	506

Source: Lafaye and Tsuda (2002).

The data collated for Table 2, unfortunately, does not look promising for the future, regarding English language learning in Japan. The figures/percentages are overwhelmingly in the negative category of *dislike*.

Table 3. Student's Attitudes Towards Language Policies

English should be the compulsory first language taught in Japan					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Cannot say either way	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Basic	20 (14%)	60 (41%)	46 (32%)	13 (9%)	5 (3%)
Intermediate	29 (14%)	83 (40%)	71 (35%)	12 (6%)	7 (3%)
Intensive	13 (22%)	20 (34%)	18 (31%)	5 (9%)	2 (3%)
Chinese	12 (11%)	51 (46%)	40 (36%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)
Total	74 (14%)	214 (41%)	175 (34%)	32 (6%)	17 (3%)

Source: Lafaye and Tsuda (2002).

Table 3, represents that more than half of the students surveyed think that English should be taught as a compulsory subject. However, this could be perceived as a contradictory attitude, after taking into account that in Table 2 most students surveyed *disliked* studying English.

INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TESTS RESULTS AND RANKINGS

Now, I would like to return to the topic of international English proficiency tests, and Japan's test takers mean results. As mentioned earlier in this report Japan's performance on both the IELTS and TOEFL tests for the period of 2007, was ominous reading. Subsequently, in this section, I will review and analyse Japan's performance on the TOEIC, TOEFL, and IELTS tests for the periods of 2016-2017. Please note these are the most current statistics published when writing this report.

Table 4. TOEIC: (2016) Mean Performance by Native Country**NB:**

- 6 years of studying English was undertaken by 81% of the test takers (ETS, 2016).
- The total maximum score attainable on the TOEIC test is 990.
- TOEIC does not have a speaking and writing component
- For TOEIC score conversion to the CEFR, please refer to Appendix 4

Country	Listening		Reading		Total	
	Mean	(SD)*	Mean	(SD)*	Mean	(SD)*
(12)* PHILIPPINES	388	(78)	322	(97)	709	(168)
(19)* KOREA (ROK)	370	(84)	309	(98)	679	(174)
(22)* MALAYSIA	360	(92)	285	(109)	644	(194)

(35)* CHINA	302	(96)	284	(101)	586	(186)
(40)* TAIWAN	295	(97)	240	(101)	534	(189)
(41)* JAPAN	288	(92)	228	(96)	516	(180)
(42)* HONG KONG	291	(103)	225	(112)	515	(208)
(43)* VIETNAM	269	(87)	238	(92)	507	(171)
(44)* THAILAND	287	(101)	209	(96)	496	(190)
(49) *INDONESIA	227	(100)	171	(92)	397	(185)
SD = Standard Deviation Statistic = Global Ranking						

Source: ETS. (2016).

The data collated for the TOEIC English proficiency test takers results shows Japan is ranked 41st on a global scale for the period of 2016. Excluding Hong Kong, Japan is ranked just above second world countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. Furthermore, If you consider the Philippines (another second world country), who are ranked 12 in the world for the period of 2016, Japan's mean score is significantly lower with a difference of 193 points on the TOEIC test. This statistic represents a significant difference in English ability. A TOEIC score of 709 would convert to a higher level independent user (CEFR, B1). While a TOEIC score of 516 would be a higher basic user (CEFR, A2). Another factor to consider is the SD between the above countries. The highest total SD score was Hong Kong with 208 and the lowest being Vietnam with 171. Japan is 180. The facts are Japan was closer to the lower SD rate of Vietnam's (171) a difference of (9) points. As opposed to the higher score of Hong Kong's (208) a difference of (28). This suggests that Japanese test takers have not made much progress compared to some of the other countries listed above. An interesting statistic for Japan was that the above *mean score* for both *listening* and *reading* was exactly the same at 288. For all the above other countries there was a notable difference between both *listening* and *reading*, with listening showing a higher score, but not in Japan's case.

Table 5 below represents TOEFL scores for South East Asian countries. The following are in descending order of *total score* performance and do *not* indicate global rankings.

NB:

- The total maximum score attainable on the TOEFL test is 120.
- For TOEFL score conversion to the CEFR, please refer to Appendix 5

TOEFL iBT Tests for January – December 2017					
Country	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total
Singapore	24	25	24	25	97
Malaysia	22	23	22	24	91
Philippines	21	22	23	23	89
Hong Kong	21	22	22	23	88
Indonesia	21	22	21	22	85
North Korea	21	21	20	21	83
South Korea	22	21	20	21	83
Taiwan	21	21	20	20	82
Vietnam	20	20	20	22	82
Myanmar	19	20	20	21	80
China	21	19	19	20	79
Thailand	19	20	19	20	78
Cambodia	16	17	19	19	72
Japan	18	18	17	18	71
Lao	11	14	18	16	59

Source: ETS. (2017).

As you can see from Table 5, Japan's performance for TOEFL test results shows that their performance is even more damning compared to the TOEIC test results. The first and most shocking statistic to stand out is North Korea's. How can this be possible? North Korea is 12 points above Japan. As we know, North Korea is the most secretive state to the point that it is an isolated country with strict global sanctions. All I can suggest is that they are preparing for the day when all sanctions are lifted and they can partake in the global market. The next statistic that is significant is Japan is sandwiched between Cambodia and Lao. These two countries are definitely perceived as third world countries because the majority of its population earn less than a dollar a day. As of 1995, a UN declaration defined both countries as *absolute poverty* (Gordon, 2005). The definition of severe deprivation is the following: shelter, safe drinking water, sanitation, health care and no education system to speak of (Gordon, 2005). Therefore, my assumptions are that Japan has absolutely no excuse whatsoever for ranking so tragically low in the global TOEFL statistics for 2017. On the other hand, it could be argued that both Cambodia and Lao are certainly out-performing themselves considering the deprived conditions most of its population finds itself in.

Finally, I would like to evaluate and comment on Japanese IELTS results. These figures represent the *mean overall* and individual band scores for the General Training test achieved for 2016, from the top 40 countries of origin.

Table 6. The following South East Asian countries are in descending order of *overall* score performance and do *not* indicate global rankings.

NB:

- For IELTS score conversion to the CEFR, please refer to Appendix 6
- Band scores for IELTS increase in increments of 0.5. The minimum would be a band score of 1.0 to a maximum of 9.0. For example, 7.39 would be rounded up to 7.5
- The following are in descending order of overall average *band* scores and do *not* indicate *global* rankings.

IELTS Test Taker Performance 2016					
Mean band score for the most frequent countries or regions of origin (General Training)					
Place of Origin	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall
Singapore	7.69	7.40	6.82	7.42	7.39
Malaysia	7.11	6.80	6.27	6.80	6.81
Myanmar	6.64	6.50	6.11	6.34	6.47
Hong Kong	6.57	6.40	5.87	6.20	6.32
Philippines	6.40	5.93	6.01	6.41	6.25
Indonesia	6.20	5.95	5.71	6.03	6.03
China	6.08	6.08	5.63	5.75	5.95
Vietnam	5.96	5.86	5.69	5.78	5.89
Cambodia	6.10	5.44	5.67	6.04	5.87
Japan	5.72	5.37	5.28	5.63	5.56
South Korea	5.74	5.38	5.28	5.48	5.53
North Korea	5.45	4.88	5.24	5.20	5.26
Thailand	5.36	4.84	5.12	5.49	5.26
North Korea	5.45	4.88	5.24	5.20	5.26

Source: IELTS. (2016).

The data shown for IELTS scores once again sees Japan languishing closer to the bottom of the results table. One familiar pattern is that Cambodia sits one place above them as in the TOEFL result table. However, at least North Korea has ranked two places below them this time. Another pattern that has emerged from the three English proficiency test data, which

was not a surprise, was that Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore (not listed in the TOEIC test), and to some degree Hong Kong (except TOEIC, who were ranked one place below), where in most cases ranked above Japan. I would argue in defence of Japan that the reason for their higher scores, and therefore, their ranking, is because it is widely acknowledged that English is commonly spoken in these countries as a second language.

These countries have also had English educational programs as part of their curriculum for many years, hence their performance results. However, it is still inexcusable, even if you excluded those particular countries Japan would still be under-performing considering they are a first world country, with a huge population, and the third most powerful economy in the world. Obviously, the MEXT policies did not work and whatever policy they intend to implement in the future needs to be a more robust policy which produces better results. Because if they do not, the future will be bleak and could have serious economic implications. Hence, I would now like to discuss the economic implication that correlates to English proficiency levels.















ENGLISH PROFICIENCY LEVELS: ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS


















The president of Mercer Japan, Tsuyoshi Komori stated that the overwhelming lack of conversational English among many educated Japanese was worrying and that companies need to globalise themselves (Caryl, and Kashiwagi, 2008). Unfortunately, the general consensus of the Japanese workforce is that they believe that they do not require English. However, the structure of the Japanese economy has been changing both at home and overseas. For example, the service industry, which requires personal communication. Therefore, I would suggest that this particular growth industry would be considered essential for Japan, considering Tokyo has been awarded the 2020 Olympics, which will see millions of non-speaking Japanese sports fans descend upon the Tokyo region.

Another significant factor is the continuous unstoppable mighty machine of the global economy. The implications of this were Japan's economy had been the second largest in the world since the mid-1970s. However, as of February 2011, Stephanie Flanders an Economics editor reported for BBC News that China had overtaken Japan as the world's second-largest economy (see Appendix 7). The official reason is Japan has seen a decline in exports and consumer demand, while China has experienced a manufacturing boom. However, it could be argued that this seismic shift in economic power is possibly related to the English proficiency levels of both these countries and Japan's reluctance to embrace the global business language of English.

This argument is substantiated by a study conducted by the British Council (2010), which shows the correlation between English skills and the economy. Their study strongly indicated English language proficiency does indeed have a positive impact on a countries ability to be competitive in the global economy and more importantly boosts investment.

Table 7. Data Compiled by the British Council (2010): EF English Proficiency Index for Companies

Countries Workforce English Scores: %					
High Proficiency		Moderate Proficiency		Low Proficiency	
 Denmark	72.58	 Uruguay	61.28	 France	55.68
 Netherlands	71.47	 Spain	61.14	 Italy	54.31
 Sweden	71.31	 Germany	60.48	 Indonesia	53.83
 Norway	71.09	 Czech Republic	57.52	 Japan	53.61
 Finland	68.01			 China	53.49

 Belgium	67.40		 Taiwan	53.20
 Poland	65.44		 Columbia	52.34
 Switzerland	64.69		 Panama	50.13
 Argentina	64.33		 Vietnam	50.03
			 South Korea	49.88
			 Turkey	49.79
			 Mexico	49.05
			 Russia	48.59
			 Brazil	48.30
			 Chile	47.60
			 Venezuela	45.34
			 Costa Rica	44.71
			 Algeria	43.25
			 Saudi Arabia	38.84

Source: Education First. (2010). Images from: flagpedia (2018).

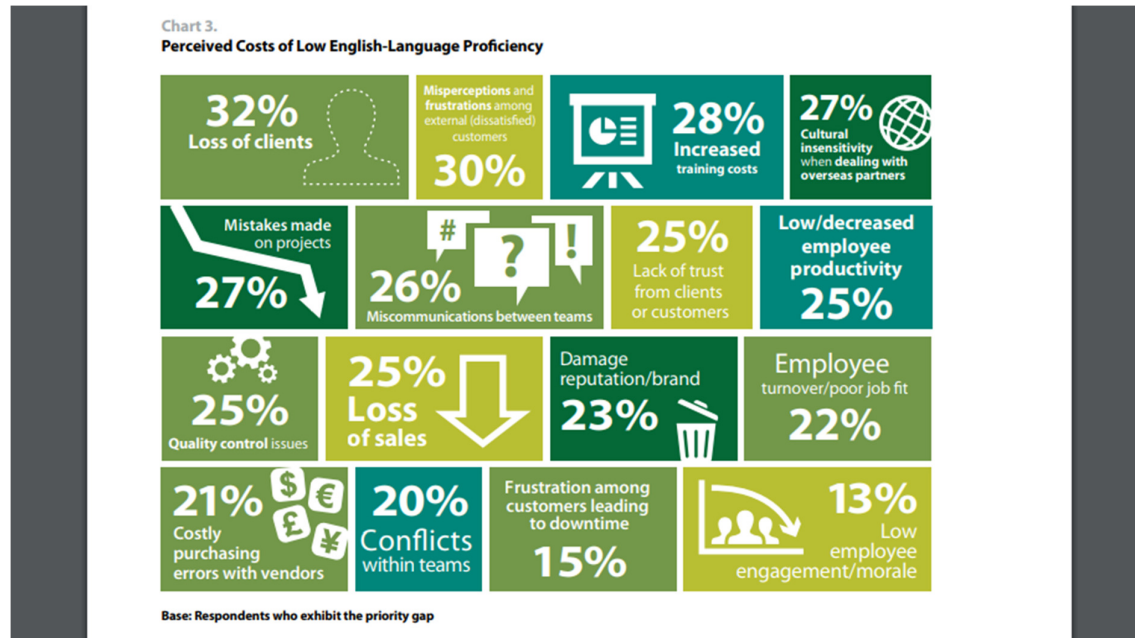
The above data in Table 7, compiled by the British Council (2010), represents there are differing levels of English proficiency in terms of the global economy. Factors such as indicators of income, innovation and trade correlate positively with English proficiency. However, for the purpose of this report, I am only concerned with the performances of the Asian countries and in particular Japan. The countries are categorised under three levels of English proficiency from high to low.

As the table shows (Table 7), Japan is ranked in the low proficiency level, sandwiched between Indonesia and China with a score of 53.61. If you analyse the data in more depth and take into account the populations of both China and Indonesia compared to that of Japan the disparity in English scores would represent a much larger gap. For example, Indonesia's population is 266,591,516, which roughly equates to double the population of Japan, who have a population of 127,206,909 (Worldometers, 2018). However, this pales in significance compared to China's of about 1,414,645,986. These figures represent a ten-fold increase to that of Japan's population. Therefore, realistically Japan could be ranked even lower if these factors were taken into account.

Another issue would be the wealth of Japan, particularly compared to Indonesia and Vietnam, which would imply that Japan should have an overall higher proficiency percentage for both these countries. However, all is not lost because some progressive Japanese companies have realised the limitations of conducting business in the global economy and the economic implications that arise due to a lack of English speaking staff.

Following on from the British Council (2010) study, TOEIC Global (2015) conducted their own research that strongly indicated potential business costs and losses due to the lack of English in the globalised marketplace. Chart 3 below shows a variety of factors and potential business costs that companies incur by having employees with low English language proficiency such as loss of clients, misperceptions by customers, increased training costs and mistakes made on projects. However, they report these potential costs with less frequency than they mention the potential benefits of English proficiency. This suggests that for some companies, the potential benefits to the business are perceived to be insufficient to justify placing a higher priority on improving English proficiency. Nonetheless, if they have a desire to keep on progressing they will need to place more internal emphasis on improving English

skills. Companies that persistently ignore this may find themselves unable to keep up with the challenges of operating in a global environment (TOEIC Global, 2015). A further study conducted by The International Research Foundation for English Language Education (TIRF), also found that English language training leads to better retention of the workforce, improves e-mail communication and a stronger performance in business meetings.



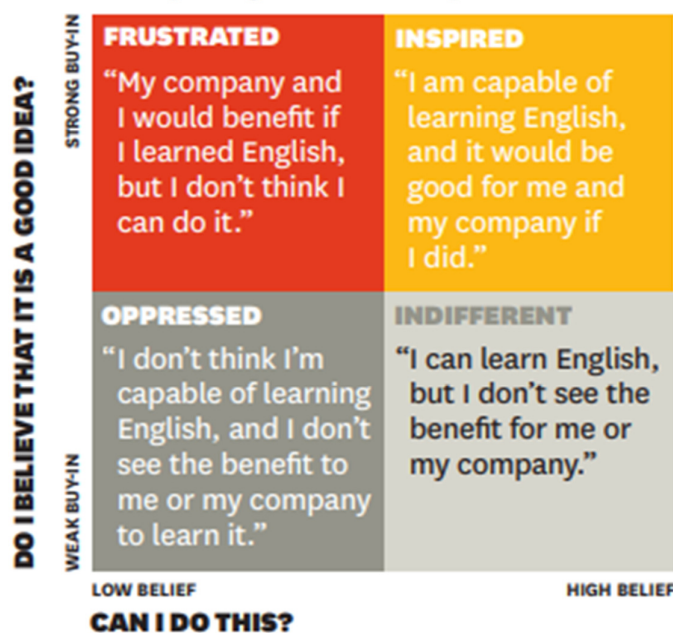
Source: TOEIC Global (2015).

Nonetheless, all is not lost, because back in 2010 a Japanese company embarked on the Englishisation of its employees. The following is a case study based on Rakuten and its pioneering and progressive policy.

CASE STUDY: ADOPTING ENGLISH AS THE COMPANY LANGUAGE

The Japanese internet services firm Rakuten made a drastic decision in March 2010, to enforce the Englishisation of the company which employed 7,100 staff (Neeley, 2012). The vision of the company was to become the global leader in internet services. However, such a policy was always going to be controversial and difficult to execute particularly for mono-cultural Japanese companies. Nonetheless, this aggressive policy was introduced overnight to include all internal signage and even the canteen menu. The CEO, Hiroshi Mikitani, went as far as enforcing a policy that included all employees having to demonstrate their English competence in an internationally recognised language test within two years. The consequences were any member of staff who refused or performed badly on the said test would be either demoted or even fired. Subsequently, this was reported in the Japanese media with mixed responses. However, over the intervening years, it has indeed produced results, with half of the Japanese workforce able to communicate adequately enough in English, with a further 25% (Neeley, 2012) able to communicate in English with partners and colleagues in overseas subsidiaries. How these results were achieved were by no means conducted in a dictatorial manner. Mikitani consistently reassured his employees that he would strongly assist and support all staff to achieve their language targets on the proficiency test as he did not want any member of staff to leave the company because of the English-only policy. The following matrix represents staff feedback and responses from Rakuten employees since the English policy was implemented:

Four Types of Employee Response



Source: Harvard Business Review (2012).

As you can see from the above responses when people are asked to voice their opinions on any given topic the above responses do not appear to be out of the ordinary. Because you will always get respondents who are “for” the proposal and others “not for” the proposal with others placed somewhere between, with no real opinion and/or concerns.

CONCLUSION

The Japanese education system is perceived as an archaic institution compared to its counterparts, and at Higher Education level, students are certainly trailing their counterparts for example in Europe and Asia. Evidently, the data published by the three international proficiency tests clearly shows that Japan is truly underperforming compared to their South East Asian counterparts. Hence, I would suggest the proficiency test takers performance tables are a damning report on their overall performance and embarrassing reading for all, especially the MEXT. Furthermore, the evidence presented in this report did indeed give credence to my assumptions posed by my research question. Let’s hope the MEXT pay attention to these annual publications and react with a more robust policy in the very near future, rather than a half-hearted attempt to embrace English. Moreover, until the perception changes that English language learning is not an academic subject such as; maths and science, but is a *real-life* skill to be produced as communication.

Additionally, tests such as university entrance exams or the TOEIC English proficiency test, which do not offer a speaking component need to place greater emphasis on the benefit of speaking English. This is also compounded by the lack of interaction with English speakers which all contribute to lower production (speaking) skills. Therefore, if the Japanese education system is to better serve society, it has to find ways of introducing new ideas. Furthermore, the evidence put forward by both the British Council (2010) and the TOEIC Global (2015) studies, highlighted a variety of factors and potential business costs that companies incur by having employees with low English language proficiency.

Nonetheless, the Englishisation policy implemented by the CEO Hiroshi Mikitani of Rakuten was a brave and pioneering policy, which did indeed prove to be both successful for the company and its employees. However, and unfortunately, it would appear that no other Japanese companies embraced or even attempted a less stringent policy of implementing, or in fact encouraging their staff to adopt English as a useful business tool. As a result, I would also conclude, that Japan needs to heed the warning signs, otherwise Japan may find itself left further behind in the coming years because of its legacy of isolationism and a reluctance to capitalise on the opportunities of globalisation, which has had a dramatic effect on their economy and will continue to do so.

Lee Nuttall is a graduate from the University of Manchester. More recently, as part of his continued professional development, he has recently completed a Master's of Education with TESOL at the University of Derby. He has been an English Language Instructor since 2001. His interests are EFL reading, writing and the research of contemporary issues concerning the use of EFL in the 21st Century.

Email: nuttalllee@hotmail.com

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

The following 6 elements proposed by Bull (2014) on the topic of Democratizing Education within the sphere of online technologies.

Democratizing Information & Knowledge

Many people in the west have smartphones with Internet access. As a result, the information and knowledge available are immense. Thus, this democratizes education by providing the self-directed learner with content to study and to learn from.

Democratizing Learning Resources

Online resources have democratized access to organized learning resources in the form of lectures, course content, and learning activities.

Democratizing Learning Networks

We have seen an increase in access to learning networks, people have taken advantage of the power of the web to connect with other people and communities around the world. For example, communities like [Cafe Mocha](#), free language instruction by interacting with people around the world. More recently, we've seen the development of [Google Helpouts](#), further democratizing access to experts and learning coaches from around the globe. We also have a history of largely accessible online groups, communities and networks. For example [cooking](#) to computer programming, home repair to getting a job. Furthermore, we see social media outlets like *Twitter*, *Google+*, *Facebook*, and *LinkedIn* thriving.

Democratizing Feedback for Learning

In addition to the communities, we also see the democratizing of learning feedback through initiatives like the [Khan Academy](#), [CodeAcademy](#), and language apps like [DuoLingo](#).

Democratizing Courses

From the above elements, it is natural that we would see people blending these democratizing features into full courses. That is where we see the emergence of open courses, with the most recognizable ones being the many [MOOCs](#) on the web today.

Democratizing Credentials

The democratization of learning credentials is also at a tipping point. Because, much of contemporary society uses diplomas, transcripts, and certifications as evidence of one's learning.

Now consider the emergence of democratizing credentials. Consider the possibility of open badges becoming increasingly accepted evidence of one's learning through the other democratized elements above. Think about efforts like [Degreed.com](#), resources that allow you to provide evidence of your learning and share it with others. Consider the tracking and documentation of learning in some of the resources already mentioned like the Khan Academy and Code Academy.

We do not live in a time when the public widely recognizes credentials from Code Academy, Coursera, or self-study through Academy Earth as having the same value as a degree from an accredited University. However, we do see alternative credentials gaining recognition. People are earning new jobs, gaining access to Universities, even procuring social recognition and influence by using alternate evidence of learning from democratized resources. As these numbers grow, so will the perceived value of alternates to traditional credentials. I do not expect to see these alternates as necessarily replacing traditional credentials, but I do envision a time in the near future where democratized credentials become a form of academic currency that holds significant value in society. I see a day when democratized credentials will allow more people to gain admission to careers and social groups that are currently only open to those with an A.A., B.A., or M.A. Or, we are likely to see a growing number of alternative credentialing system that can lead to obtaining a degree (as we already see in competency-based education and prior learning assessments).

Source: Etale Newsletter. (2014).

Appendix 2

MEXT: Developing a strategic plan to cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities."

Article 3

With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international

language, in order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation.

With a view to ascertaining the importance of English education, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) listened to the opinions of experts in various fields with a view to ascertaining the importance of English education. Specifically, MEXT accepted the suggestion about the improvement of English education from the "Round-table Committee for the Improvement of English Teaching Methods" in January 2001, and heard the opinions of experts at the "Round-table Committee on English Education Reform" in 2002. Based on the deliberations of both these committees, MEXT developed the strategic plan to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities" - Plan to improve English and Japanese abilities on July 12, 2002, with the aim of drastically improving English education.

The attainment targets of this strategic plan are to ensure that lower secondary school graduates acquire the ability to hold simple conversations comprising greeting and responses as well as a similar level of reading, writing and listening (English-language ability of graduates should be the third grade of the *STEP Test (Eiken), on average), and that upper secondary school graduates acquire the ability to hold normal conversations on everyday topics as well as a similar level of reading, writing and listening (English-language ability of graduates should be the second grade or pre-second grade of the STEP Test, on average). (*STEP -the Society for Testing English Proficiency)

To attain these targets, the MEXT will take the following measures:

1) Improve the qualifications of English teachers and upgrade the teaching system

Establish targets for expected English-language abilities of English teachers, enrich training for English teachers and promote the utilization of native speakers (those whose mother tongue is English)

2) Boost motivation of learners

Promote overseas study among upper secondary school students and introduce a listening test into the National Center for University Entrance Examinations (NCUEE) examinations in FY 2006 as a target year

3) Improve educational content

Increase the number of "Super English Language High School" and conduct a survey on the state of the implementation of improvements to foreign language education

4) Enhance English conversation activities in elementary schools

Support English conversation activities carried out in the Period for Integrated Study so that teaching can be conducted by Assistant Language Teachers (ALT)

5) Boost Japanese-language abilities

Identify "Japanese-language abilities required for the future", encourage children to read books and enrich Japanese-language education at school

On the basis of the strategic plan as described above, MEXT is going to implement the feasible measures immediately and develop action plans in line with the strategic plan.

Source: MEXT Gov. (2002).

Appendix 3

Adler, Mortimer, J. (1982). *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto*.

The following were the seven principles of academic coaching Adler proposed, in relation to the Paideia program:

- i. The teacher must be very familiar with the student in order to coach effectively.
- ii. Students discover and develop an understanding from a project or problem or concept in a meaningful manner.
- iii. Students are engaged from the very beginning to the conclusion in an increasingly important manner.
- iv. The parts and whole are understood by the students during the process of coaching as students demonstrate their understanding.
- v. While academic coaching is often challenging, it is most open with great rewards.
- vi. Communication is at a premium in "the cooperative process" of academic coaching.
- vii. Civility and patience are important virtues. Effective coaching takes considerable time and attention.

Appendix 4

Correlation Table

TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test Scores and the CEFR levels*

NB: The total minimum TOEIC score of 785 is the frequently required score to gain entry to overseas Higher Education institutions and companies

TOTAL minimum scores (10 to 990 pts)	TOEIC Listening minimum score	TOEIC Reading minimum score	CEFR levels	
945 pts	490	455	Proficient user - Effective Operational Proficiency	C1
785 pts	400	385	Independent user – Vantage	B2
550 pts	275	275	Independent user – Threshold	B1
225 pts	110	115	Basic user – Waystage	A2
120 pts	60	60	Basic user – Breakthrough	A1

Source: ETS Global (2018).

Appendix 5

Comparison Table

Below are the adjusted TOEFL iBT scores mapped to their corresponding CEFR Level

CEFR level	Reading (0–30)	Listening (0–30)	Speaking (0–30)	Writing (0–30)	Total (0–120)
C1 or above	24	22	25	24	95
B2	18	17	20	17	72
B1	4	9	16	13	42
A2	n/a	n/a	10	7	n/a

Source: ETS. (2018).

Appendix 6

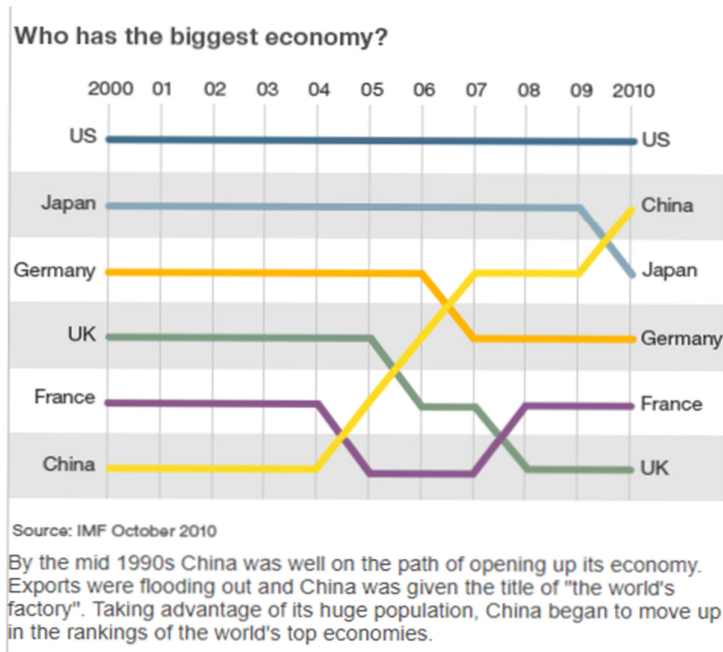
Conversion Table

IELTS	CEFR
9.0	
8.5	
8.0	C2
7.5	
7.0	
6.5	C1
6.0	
5.5	
5.0	B2
4.5	
4.0	B1

Source: British Council. (2018).

Appendix 7

The following chart represents China's economic growth over a period of 10 years from 2000 to 2010



Source: Flanders (2011).