

# Assessing the Action Plan: Reform in Japanese High School EFL

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## Abstract

In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) introduced potentially far reaching reforms to EFL curricula in high schools entitled “The National Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’ ” (the Action Plan). However, given the failure of previous attempts at reform, there was some doubt as to whether the Action Plan would meet with success. This paper investigates the state of policy implementation through a review of the literature and presentation of new research. By means of a multi-regional five site study (N=309), first year university students were asked about the EFL lessons they experienced in their senior high schools. The study finds that many schools are meeting at least some of the aims of the Action Plan, but few if any are meeting all of them. Relevant issues and apparent trends are explored and discussed.

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## 1 Introduction

One of the universities that have yielded data for the current research begins Freshman English classes with a unit on ‘learning to learn’ and ‘communicative language methods’ (CLT). It is an attempt to demonstrate for students a ‘new’ way of learning English, i.e. different from their assumed previous experience. However, over the last few years, increasing numbers of students have indicated that they were taught by CLT methods at senior high school (SHS). Increased CLT came as a surprise to the researchers and inspired a deeper look into an apparent trend. In an informal survey of 324 freshmen students, it was found that around 50% had experienced oral communication lessons, 40% had played games as part of language lessons and about 20% had taken part in English debates in class. The university concerned is a specialist language university in Kanto and the students might have been expected to come from higher performing and perhaps more language oriented schools; the researchers thus decided to look at students enrolled in other universities to see if the trend was more widespread, or in fact isolated to this special case.

The Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (hereinafter MEXT)<sup>1</sup> has made two recent attempts, in 1989 and 2003, to reform English language education; this paper investi-

gates the outcome of these reforms and seeks to establish whether they are being implemented in schools, or whether they are being consigned to the dustbin of educational history. This current study is necessary as there appears to be relatively little research available pertaining to the Action Plan, despite the fact that MEXT launched it with great fanfare and millions of yen have been pumped into it.

## 2 Background to EFL education in Japanese schools

The learning of English enjoys a history of over two hundred years in Japan and methods and purpose have changed, and are changing, with the times. The original attempts to learn English were in response to aggressive attempts by the British Empire to demand trade and resupplying rights for its merchants and armed forces during the Napoleonic wars; Russian study was also commenced at the same time and for similar reasons. These were added to the long established study of Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Dutch and Portuguese. Originally, the Dutch interpreters assigned to the task of English study had only books from which to learn, but in 1849 a British colonial sailor called Ranald Macdonald, from what is now Washington State, USA, marooned himself in Japan. While he was waiting to be deported, he became the first English conversation teacher to these students who had no idea how to pronounce the language they were learning; this served those same students well when, a few years later, Japan became embroiled in treaty negotiations with various countries from the occidental world (Schodt, 2003).

As more and more Japanese went abroad to study, the panoply of European languages increased, but as Britain was the dominant power of the time, English remained pre-eminent among them. The decision that English should in principle be the primary foreign language to be studied in Japanese schools was finally made in the 1880s, probably by the anglophone first Imperial Minister of Education, Mori Arinori, himself an alumnus of University College London (Cobbing, 2000).

Today, Japanese students study English, from 12 to 15 in junior high school, and generally to 18 if enrolled in SHS (Butler & Iino, 2005). In 2011, 'English conversation activities' became mandatory in the last two years of primary education, although English and 'international studies' activities have been common since the late 1990s (Bjork & Tsuneyoshi, 2005).

Traditionally, from the 1880s onwards, a methodology called *yakudoku* was used; *yakudoku* concentrates heavily on the minutiae of English grammar and rendering it into Japanese (Guest, 2008); listening, speaking and even writing of texts is rare. Lamie (1998) noted that this leaves the traditional Japanese language classroom with a lack of exposure to spoken English and hence a lack of confidence in communication skills. She also commented that lesson materials, mainly textbook based, were overly difficult for the majority of students. One should additionally mention a lack of 'authentic' English in the texts used, as *yakudoku* is characterized by non-authentic, and some would argue, antiquated language. Rohlen (1983) noted, even after translating a text line by line into Japanese, many students didn't understand it. He was, however, of the opinion that *yakudoku* had suited "a nation seeking information from the world" (Rohlen, 1983, p. 100). During the 1970s and 1980s, however, Japan was regaining its self-confidence and had become a major power again; it was economically and technologically overtaking the countries it had traditionally sought knowledge from, and now those and others were seeking information from Japan.

### 2.1 1989 Guidelines and native speaker teachers/assistants

In the 1980s the Japanese government recognized that Japanese people needed to be able to actively interact with the rest of the world for Japan to take an active role within it. MEXT changed the "Course of Study Guidelines for Modern Foreign Languages" (hereinafter the Guidelines) in 1989, stating for the first time that the primary goal of English lessons was to develop communicative abilities (Lamie, 1998) and creating a new class called 'oral communication.' However, it "was difficult to see how teachers could make the major adjustments necessary [...] without exten-

sive retraining” (Lamie, 1998, p. 515). The 1989 Guidelines were judged a failure due to their top down nature and lack of support for teachers (Browne & Wada, 1998).

During the 1980s, native speaker teachers (NST) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) appeared for the first time en masse in schools (McConnell, 2000). The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme was set up in 1987 and provides ALTs for schools all over Japan; some private schools also employ NSTs independently. Neither NSTs nor ALTs necessarily require any teaching qualifications, only a university degree in any subject (McConnell, 2000).

Browne and Wada (1998) stated that the positive effect of JET on both Japanese Teachers of English (JTE) and students alike cannot be underestimated. “Before [JET] most students and teachers [...] had never seen a foreigner beyond television or the movies, much less had a chance to use English as a tool for communication” (Browne & Wada, 1998, p. 106); it was a major step on the road to reform of language education in Japan (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001).

## ***2.2 2002–2003: The Strategic Plan and the Action Plan***

In 2002, MEXT published the planning document entitled “Developing a Strategic Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’ - Plan to improve English and Japanese Abilities” (hereinafter the Strategic Plan). This preceded the change to the Guidelines in 2003, entitled “The National Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’ ” (hereinafter the Action Plan). The Strategic Plan outlined practical measures to fulfill the Action Plan, which stated as its objective: the development of “practical communication abilities” and “fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages” (The Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2003, p. 7).

The Action Plan aimed to promote a four skills approach to teaching: stating that teachers should use “material that gives sufficient consideration to actual language use”, cover topics that relate to students’ “interests and concerns” and enhance their ability to “make impartial judgments” (MEXT, 2003, p. 14). It further advocated teaching methods such as team-teaching, pair and group work, summary writing, audio visual teaching materials, computer use, and lessons with native speakers to develop students’ communication abilities and deepen their international understanding (MEXT, 2003, p. 14).

The Strategic Plan included compulsory in-service training (INSET) for all 60,000 public school teachers of English (MEXT, 2002). Training was conducted by specially trained expert teachers between 2003 and 2008 and aimed at enabling participants to “recognize the potential in a range of methods and resources beyond the textbook for developing communicative English in their students” (Yamada, 2005, p. 77). MEXT included targets for improving English teachers’ minimum proficiency levels to TOEFL 550 or TOEIC 730, employing up to 1000 native speakers as regular teachers, and expanding study abroad opportunities for teachers and students (MEXT, 2002).

The foundation of 100 Super English Language High Schools (SELHi) to enable action research into progressive English education in SHS was seen as a significant step in disseminating best practice and convincing the public that other effective ways of teaching English existed (Aspinall, 2006). Schools, spread around the country, and therefore familiar, locally respected and easily accessible, were to spearhead the Action Plan and put various new methods into practice, as well as develop programs to be propagated among other local schools (MEXT, 2005).

MEXT also sought to build on previous modifications, in 1998 and 2000, to the “National Center Examination for University Admissions” (hereinafter referred to as the *senta shiken*; Guest, 2008). Both changes had aimed at “fostering general comprehension and analytical skills over and above those of memory or recognition” (Guest, 2008, p. 87). The Action Plan went further, adding a listening component to the *senta shiken* from 2005 and suggesting that universities also use external examinations such as TOEIC or TOEFL as part of entrance criteria (MEXT, 2002). The inclusion of a listening test in the foreign language entrance examinations for individual universities (MEXT, 2002) was also promoted, however MEXT has no control over implementation of individual university policy.

### 2.3 Problems

Several significant problems are identified in the literature as major barriers pre-2003. The first was a continued reliance on the yakudoku method (Lamie, 1998) and lack of training opportunities to expand educators' teaching repertoires. Furthermore, use of yakudoku was deemed necessary because of the concentration of yakudoku type exercises in university entrance exams (Lamie, 1998). In Sato and Kleinsasser's (2004) study, teachers readily admitted that students were negative about their lessons; many teachers were depressed and felt that they were not doing their jobs properly. A concentration on behavior management to the detriment of pedagogy was also an issue; "I think people just have to turn up for class and keep students under control" (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004, p. 808).

Aspinall (2006) suggested that the culture within schools was a major contributing issue. He showed students' English performance was being hampered by humility and a reluctance to show off in mixed ability settings as well as the idea that there must always be a 'correct' answer. Aspinall also found that teachers were being discouraged from allowing students to speak through simple issues such as not wanting to disturb other classes with the noise, and not wanting other staff to think that a class was out of control.

### 2.4 Results of the 2003 reforms

Wedell (2009, p. 27), in his book about the human context of educational reform, suggested that "large-scale changes [...] take upward of five years of consistent effort to become institutionalized" and proposed a figure of 10 years for full implementation. Wedell emphasized that long term commitment and continued support from, and for, all parties is crucial; "given the range of contexts, the implementation process will never be uniform. It will look different, proceed at different speeds and follow different routes in different institutions" (Wedell, 2009, p. 42).

Two papers, Yamada (2005) and Kikuchi and Browne (2009), collected data in 2005 and 2006, respectively, and sought to assess certain aspects of the Action Plan. Neither collected data after the end of compulsory INSET training in 2008. Yamada (2005) reported mixed reactions from INSET participants whom she interviewed in Fukui Prefecture on the northeast coast. Teachers felt that the opportunity for reflection and collaborative work was useful but some felt they were being bullied into change; they still thought the university exams necessitated the yakudoku approach. Yamada (2005) did find that there had been a notable change in attitude among teachers, but less than initially hoped for. Kikuchi and Browne's data, collected three years after 2003, pointed to modest improvements. Their tables, created from a six point Likert scale based questionnaire, showed that nearly half of students indicated the highest three responses to questions such as "the way I was taught English [for oral communication] helped me to have a more positive attitude about studying English" (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009, p. 182). Responses to questions about oral communication suggested that between 30–50% of students believed they had been taught with a strong emphasis on how English should be used in real situations and had learnt useful communicative phrases in areas which interested them. The outcomes for questions concerning writing were also relatively positive, with 30–50% of students believing that they had been taught to express opinions, feelings and ideas.

Nishino (2008) found that since 2003, some teachers had been actively brushing up on new practices, often on their own, not as a result of INSET training. Nishino found that teachers believed that communication and enjoyment of lessons were highly important for students; over half believed their role was to be a communication model. The kinds of activities her research participants were using included games, role play, class discussion and data handling exercises. Almost all teacher participants wanted to engage even more with these methods, but lack of time and large classes were barriers. Nishino's (2011) follow-up paper was larger scale (N=139 compared with N= 21 in 2008) but appeared to contradict the 2008 findings. A mismatch was found between teacher beliefs about CLT, which were very positive, and actual in-class activities, which rarely included CLT. Reasons given for this discrepancy were lack of confidence stemming partly from

inadequate pre-service training, lack of experience from when teachers were themselves studying at school, and a disregard for MEXT directives.

The SELHi programme was praised for its scale and vision by Aspinall (2006), who believed that the extra funding for action research and promotion of best practice was a way to prove to the Japanese population that alternative methods could work in Japan. SELHi's reported improvements in all four skills and other areas such as opinion expressing (MEXT, 2010a). Students had also become more aware of Japanese and world cultures, and were more motivated. Teachers mainly used English in lessons and felt they were teaching better with greater variety in activities. The type of tests in class (81.99%) had changed and 44.72% of schools had introduced a speaking test on their entrance exams; many schools, however, felt that grammatical standards had slipped. A SELHi type approach was advocated by Wedell (2009) who explained that one way of making changes less onerous is by "developing new channels of communication within and between schools and offices to share the 'burden' of change" (p. 39), without which reforms will be ignored.

Nishino (2008) reported that listening tests had become more widespread in university exams and found that only 10% of teachers interviewed perceived entrance exams as a barrier to communicative teaching, though her study was small and geographically limited. In a detailed examination of question types and section weightings on the 2006 *senta shiken*, Guest (2008) found considerable differences compared with the 1981 test. Specific grammar questions were now only evident on 20% of the test and even in the grammar section the focus was "upon more communicative aspects of language, such as norms of social interaction and uptake" (Guest, 2008, p. 96). Guest (2008) found that in order to complete the new tasks, "comprehensive, holistic reading skills are required, as opposed to mere knowledge of English minutiae" (p. 96). The test has become a better measure of actual English skills and more suitable for examinees with varied learning styles.

## 2.5 *The next Guidelines change, 2013*

As noted above, the Guidelines change approximately every 10 years and the next change is due to be implemented in 2013. In preparation for this next revision, in 2011, MEXT (2011) released a document entitled "Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication." This document (hereinafter *Five Proposals and Measures*), noted that actions taken as a consequence of implementing the Action Plan have been successful in achieving some results, but acknowledges that some targets, such as student and teacher proficiency aims have not been fully achieved. *Five Proposals and Measures* seeks to address deficient areas of the Action Plan and build upon its successes.

The specific measures that MEXT (2011) set out included further use of independent tests within the education system and the further promotion of speaking tests in university entrance exams. It did not specifically mention the *senta shiken*, but as past experience shows, it is likely that MEXT will lead the way with the only exam under its control, in the hope that universities and high schools will follow. Furthermore, MEXT outlines multiple ways to increase student awareness of the need for English in many careers in the present and future world, and ways of increasing classroom motivation through the use of real world resources and activities. Both training of existing teachers and recruitment of non-Japanese and highly proficient native Japanese English speakers are to be increased greatly. An expansion and renewal of the SELHi programme under the name of Core Schools (250 of which are to be established nationwide) will take place and MEXT hopes that up to 200 schools will offer the International Baccalaureate in the next five years. Finally, and somewhat controversially, MEXT (2011) stated that in principle, the language of instruction in classrooms should be English, i.e. the L2.

Bearing in mind that the 2013 Guidelines are to be implemented in a matter of months, it is important to know what effect the previous Guidelines have had. This paper will therefore attempt to answer the following research question:

- Has the Action Plan of 2003 been successfully implemented?

### 3 Methodology and research context

#### 3.1 Participants and procedure

The questionnaire was administered in June 2011 at five sites to increase the strength of the data and allow for greater generalizability. Participants were 18–19 years old and had graduated from SHS within the previous year. Answers from respondents who had not attended a Japanese SHS (e.g. overseas or international schools) were excluded. Participants in this research should have been taught by re-trained teachers as INSET was due to end in 2008.

University 1 ( $n=83$ ) is a private foreign language university near Tokyo. 68.7% attended a public SHS and 13.3% a SELHi; 82% were from the Tokyo area. University 2 ( $n=70$ ) is a high ranking national university specializing in languages and international studies. 37% of respondents had attended private SHS and 4% SELHi; 61.4% were from the Kanto area. University 3 is a private women's university near Tokyo offering undergraduate and postgraduate childcare, music, psychology and education degrees. One third of respondents attended a private SHS and only one attended SELHi. 83.3% were from Kanto. University 4 is a private women's university in the Chugoku region. There are 5 departments: Nutrition, Early Childhood Education, Welfare, Psychology, and Global Communication. 43.5% went to private SHS, none attended a SELHi, and 91.3% were from the Chugoku area. University 5 ( $n=97$ ) is a private university in Kyushu with five faculties, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Engineering, Computer and Information Sciences, Biotechnology and Life Sciences, and Arts. 45.4% went to private school and 4.1% to SELHi. 96% were from Kyushu.

#### 3.2 Questionnaire

Kikuchi and Browne (2009) conducted a study with a similar focus. They administered a questionnaire with 47 Likert scale items based upon the wording of the Action Plan, rewriting the guidelines to “reflect the student's point of view” (p. 177). For example “[...] In this class our teacher helped us to develop our English pronunciation through rhythm and intonation practice” (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009, p. 178). This research took a similar approach. A 34 item questionnaire (Appendix 1), developed from the exact wording of the Action Plan, was administered, asking questions about participants' exposure to teaching methods advocated in 2003, and open-ended qualitative questions, seeking to reveal students' attitudes towards their language learning. No Likert scale was employed. Participants indicated the presence or absence of activities as they were likely only to have attended one SHS and therefore logically should be unable to quantify different levels of Action Plan uptake. The questionnaire was administered online in both Japanese and English. Participants were able to respond in either language.

The three open-ended qualitative items were constructed in an effort both to assess student feelings and opinions, and to provide for triangulation. As such, potentially evocative terms including “most remember” and “any negative aspect” were used in the wording. The data were gathered from the respondents at each of the five universities, with a response rate to the optional open-ended section exceeding 47% at each of the institutions.

### 4 Results

#### 4.1 Statistical data

##### 4.1.1 Study abroad opportunities and lesson types

The data gathered show a distinct picture of the current state of EFL lessons in Japanese SHS. Table 1 describes the type of lessons that participants reported experiencing and whether they had the opportunity to travel abroad. Larger percentages of the students from language universities, 44% and 27.1% respectively, travelled abroad than those from non-language universities, 12.2%,

4.3%, and 10.8%. It should be noted here that the *Averaged* row is an equally weighted average of the responses from the five institutions. It intends to be a better representation of students in different areas of the country studying despite differing numbers of participants from each site.

University	oral communication lessons in your senior high school?	grammar lessons?	listening lessons?	reading lessons?	writing lessons?	lessons involving more than one of Reading /writing/ listening /speaking/ any other lessons e.g. Global Issues or International Understanding?	the opportunity to go abroad with school?
1) Private Language University (Kanto) n=83	73.5	94	60.2	98.8	90.4	89.2	15.7
2) Public Language University (Kanto) n=70	74.3	95.7	57.1	100	95.7	80	8.6
3) Private Women's University (Kanto) n=42	85.7	90.5	71.4	95.2	88.1	78.6	4.8
4) Private Women's University (Chugoku) n=24	87	100	73.9	100	100	95.7	4.3
5) Private Engineering University (Kyushu) n=90	52.7	93.5	79.6	81.7	89.2	87.1	4.3
Averaged	74.6	94.7	68.4	95.1	92.7	86.1	7.5
Combined N=309	70.2	93.9	67.6	93.5	91.3	85.1	8.1

**Table 1: Did you have ...?**

As far as specific class activities are concerned, oral communication lessons were about 10% more prevalent for the students enrolled at the private women's universities (85.7% and 87%) than for students at the private and public language universities (73.5% and 74.3% respectively). However, only 52.7% of the students at the Kyushu university reported this class. Fewer oral communication classes is coupled with generally lower results for the four skills type activities. With the exception of additional lessons such as *Global Issues or International Understanding*, students at the private women's university in Chugoku had the highest or second highest response rates for all types of classes.

Participants from all institutions indicated that dedicated grammar lessons were common (94.7%). Similarly, participants from all institutions bar the Kyushu university reported a strong emphasis on reading (95.1%). Listening lessons were common, but students from the language universities reported fewer listening lessons (60.2% and 57.1% respectively) than the non-language institutions (68.4%).

Writing lessons were reported at high percentages by the students (92.7%), with lessons involving more than one of the four skills slightly lower (87.1%). The opportunity to study other lessons such as *Global Issues* and *International Understanding* in an English medium were report-

ed at higher percentages by the language university students (15.7% and 8.6% respectively) than by students at the other three universities (4.8%, 4.3%, 4.3%).

The overall picture given by the participants surveyed suggests that travel abroad options and the opportunities to study English in a variety of formats is very common, while at the same time explicit grammar instruction is still ubiquitous. Writing, reading, and multi-skill classes, however, are also being reported at high percentages, while oral communication and listening lessons increasingly appear to be offered.

#### 4.1.2 Lessons in English

The results (see Table 2) indicate that 55.1% did not experience any lessons with a JTE taught in English. The average number of respondents reporting only one JTE using English was 14.8%, with 19.7% reporting two or three of their JTEs using English. All teachers using English was reported by 10.5%. These figures do not mean that 44.9% of teachers are teaching in English; departments in schools are large (19 teachers in Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004), and not all students will be taught by all teachers. There is no way to conclusively divine from this data what percentage of teachers are actually teaching in the L2.

University	None	Only one	Two or Three	All of them
1) Private Language (Kanto) n=83	43.6	18.1	34.9	3.6
2) Public Language (Kanto) n=70	64.3	14.3	14.3	7.1
3) Private Women's (Kanto) n=42	48.8	22	14.6	14.6
4) Private Women's (Chugoku) n=24	52.2	4.3	21.7	21.7
5) Private Engineering (Kyushu) n=90	66.7	15.1	12.9	5.4
Averaged	55.1	14.8	19.7	10.5
Combined N=309	56.6	15.9	20	7.8

\*All figures in percentages and rounded to one decimal place

**Table 2: Did you have any Japanese teachers give lessons in English?**

#### 4.1.3 What is happening in class?

The data regarding in-class activities (Table 3) show that grammar study (with a textbook) is the most reported type of study (94.5%). Reading texts aloud in class (76.2%) and making summaries of texts that were read (69.8%) were also frequently reported. The first two are indicative of yakudoku and the third perhaps less so, though it would be easily incorporated into yakudoku type teaching methods and may hence explain its large showing.

Measures of 41.5%, 36.7%, and 43.8% were found respectively for studying matters in English that interest students, speaking about feelings, and writing opinions. Discussions and debates, using English in 'real' situations, and learning about world peoples and Japanese culture in English all measured below 35%. Practicing grammar in oral communication classes had a higher measure of 39.9%, although what kind of grammar (e.g. spoken grammar) was not established. Writing paragraphs was 32.6%, whereas writing letters or emails was only 23%. More creative activities such as making magazines, video or radio programs were 6.5%.

Participants from the two language universities tended to report more in the way of MEXT's desired activities, whereas the Kyushu university students reported having experienced fewer of these. The students at the women's universities reported some variation in the types of activities they experienced.



University	study things that interested you in English?	speak your opinion or feeling about a topic?	write your opinion or feeling about a topic?	discuss or debate your and other people's opinions?	make summaries of texts you read?	use English in a "real" situation, e.g. a skit, presentation, speech or debate?	practice grammar in oral communication lessons?	practice grammar with a text book?	read aloud in front of the class?	write paragraphs?	write letters or email?	make a magazine, video, advertisement, TV or radio programme in English?	learn about the lives of people round the world in English?	learn about Japanese culture in English?
1) Private Language University (Kanto) n=83	48.2	37.3	57.8	37.3	68.7	36.1	43.4	96.4	75.9	37.3	24.1	13.3	34.9	22.9
2) Public Language University (Kanto) n=70	35.7	45.7	55.7	30	68.6	32.9	47.1	95.7	68.6	42.9	24.3	10	24.3	37.1
3) Private Women's University (Kanto) n=42	40.5	40.5	42.9	28.6	61.9	19	50	85.7	85.7	47.6	23.8	4.8	33.3	28.6
4) Private Women's University (Chukoku) n=24	56.5	30.4	26.1	17.4	82.6	47.8	26.1	100	78.3	17.4	26.1	0	43.5	47.8
5) Private Engineering University (Kyushu) n=90	26.4	29.7	36.3	24.2	67	22	33	94.5	72.5	17.6	16.5	4.4	29.7	33
Averaged	41.5	36.7	43.8	27.5	69.8	31.6	39.9	94.5	76.2	32.6	23	6.5	33.1	33.9
Combined N=309	38.5	36.9	46.6	29.1	68	29.8	40.8	94.2	74.4	32.7	22	7.8	31.1	31.7

Table 3: Did you have the opportunity to ...?

#### 4.1.4 Teaching method

Table 4 shows a high rate of team-teaching between JTE and NST (78.2%); pair-work was 60.4%, whereas group-work was 53.7%. Mild variation existed between institutions on these practices, with the two language universities and the women's university in Chugoku tending to report higher percentages. Learning from DVDs and online programmes was not as frequently reported (22%) with higher percentages reported by students now enrolled at the private language university and the Chugoku women's university.

The two language universities had more participants who had used computers to study English (private, 27.7%; public, 20%) and the same for communication with native speakers (private, 63.9%; public, 61.4%). For both activities, the students now studying in Kyushu reported far fewer opportunities. Indeed, looking at students who reported *none of the above*, the highest percentage clearly came from the participants at the private Kyushu university (15.6%).

University	Team teaching (JTE and NST)	Pair work	Group work	Learning from DVD/online programmes (e.g. Youtube)	Language Lab	Computers to help you learn English	Communication with native speakers of English	None of the above
1) Private Language University (Kanto) n=83	81.9	61.4	60.2	28.9	4.8	27.7	63.9	3.6
2) Public Language University (Kanto) n=70	75.7	64.3	55.7	12.9	0	20	61.4	5.7
3) Private Women's University (Kanto) n=42	73.8	52.4	33.3	11.9	2.4	11.9	40.5	9.5
4) Private Women's University (Chukoku) n=24	90.9	72.7	63.6	40.9	0	9.1	40.9	4.5
5) Private Engineering University (Kyushu) n=90	68.9	51.1	55.6	15.6	1.1	4.4	25.6	15.6
Averaged	78.2	60.4	53.7	22	1.7	14.6	46.5	7.8
Combined N=309	75.7	58.3	54	19.7	1.9	15.5	46.9	8.4

**Table 4: Did you experience any of these teaching methods in your lessons?**

#### 4.1.5 High School lessons and attitude towards English

Table 5 shows that 66.3% of the students now enrolled at the private language university reported a positive effect on attitude, and 72.9% for the public university students. Conversely, only between 40 and 43% of the non-language students reported that their SHS experiences with English resulted in a positive impression.

University	Yes	No
1) Private Language (Kanto) n=83	66.3	33.7
2) Public Language (Kanto) n=70	72.9	27.1
3) Private Women's (Kanto) n=42	42.9	57.1
4) Private Women's (Chukoku) n=24	40.9	59.1
5) Private Engineering (Kyushu) n=90	43.3	56.7
Averaged	53.3	46.7
Combined N=309	55.7	44.3

\*All figures in percentages and rounded to one decimal place

**Table 5: Do you think that your high school English lessons gave you a positive attitude to English?**

## 4.2 *Qualitative data*

Participants were able to respond to the three open-ended items in English or Japanese as they preferred. A professional translator rendered all Japanese replies into English. Responses to these items were coded in an inductive and interactive process that sometimes resulted in the gradual addition of categories, aggregation of categories and/or bifurcation of categories as the data warranted (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). The categories and responses were reviewed individually by the three researchers to check for accuracy, consistency and researcher bias. Participant responses were sometimes coded for more than one category. Responses to this type of question report what respondents *most remember* and are not necessarily indicative of the nature of the whole SHS experience.

### 4.2.1 *Most remembered about SHS English*

The first of the questions was: *What was the thing you most remember about your high school English lessons?* Of 259 responses, 67 provided little to analyze with the most common answers in this category being: “nothing,” “nothing in particular” and “I don’t remember.”

The largest category of responses (n=93) evoked images of more traditional lessons focusing upon grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing and textbook study. Responses included “lessons about vocabulary and grammar,” “translation from Japanese to English,” and “lessons with a textbook.” Some responses appeared to indicate very little variety in class: “Only the teacher (sic) were speaking. We were just listening.” Another respondent wrote: “Teachers taught us English in Japanese. Only grammar and reading.”

Action plan style responses (n=48) were interesting; the most frequent responses included “pair-work,” “speaking and studying with a foreign teacher,” “games using English,” “presentations,” “debates,” and “skits/plays.” Other interesting responses included “a presentation about Japanese history,” “We made songs in English,” and “We read about John Lennon’s life in English and worked on the contents.”

Thirteen students explicitly stated that what they remembered most about their English classes was studying for tests or entrance exams. One student wrote, “I studied a lot about English structure and grammar. I only studied English needed for exams.” Said another, “We studied English just to pass the examination of university so I felt boring (sic) to study English.”

Unsolicited value judgments were made by some respondents. Fourteen respondents indicated a negative view of English lessons, discussed further in the next section. Nine of these fourteen statements explicitly used the word “boring;” one wrote, “The teacher wasn’t so good, although he was a nice guy,” another, “I hated English class.” Ten respondents used positive adjectives about their English lessons, five of whom used the word “fun” and four of whom used the word “good” in their writing. The tenth student explained, “I enjoyed talking with ALT!” Indeed, five of these students expressed enjoyment at being able to speak with a foreign teacher. Others indicated that English games and activities were enjoyable.

What this open-ended survey item has perhaps most importantly elicited are the innovative ideas being used by teachers in English lessons. Thirty-four responses reflected what the researchers felt to be innovative methods of teaching. The most frequent responses of this type involved the use of presentations, debates, skits, videos, singing in English, and learning about world cultures in English. Some of the more creative responses included “We made songs in English,” “made a chapter in the textbook,” “reading Harry Potter and analysing it” and “vocabulary competitions.”

### 4.2.2 *Negative aspects of SHS English*

The second of the two open-ended questions asked respondents the following: *Was there any negative aspect to your high school English lessons?* Of the 229 responses to this survey item, 119 responded that there was no particularly negative aspect to their lessons. Of the 110 respondents

who did feel that some aspect of their English education was negative, clear patterns formed around three overarching, but interrelated factors: teacher, classroom, self.

It can be very difficult to tease apart the distinction between teachers and their classrooms. For the purposes of organization, however, and because the participants specifically referred to a teacher in their responses, the authors have made this distinction for the following responses. Nine respondents indicated that they were somehow disappointed with their teacher. Three respondents clearly indicated that they felt their teachers were not adequately proficient in English. Another complained, "The teacher basically did everything so we didn't do much."

The second factor, the classroom, focuses more widely on classroom practices as stated by respondents. The responses of 52 participants fit this category. Twenty-two responses indicated that the participants were disappointed in having "had few opportunities [where] we could actually speak English in class. I couldn't have chances to use my English skills," and "I didn't have the opportunity of discussion" were other expressions of a similar sentiment. Some students (n=6) complained that lessons were overly focused on entrance exams. One captured both of the above concerns: "Lessons focused on the entrance exams and we did not have opportunities to speak up in English." Additional concerns included complaints about grammar instruction (n=11), vocabulary instruction (n=4), boring lessons (n=3) and textbook based lessons (n=2). Two participants mentioned classes conducted in Japanese and three indicated that they had insufficient opportunity to communicate with ALTs.

The third factor concerning negative experiences related more to the individual. As noted above, the distinction between the individual student, the teacher, and the classroom can be imprecise. Most of the responses that fit this category (n=45), however, referred to the participant as either the subject "I" or the object "me." The vast majority (n=40) referred to some sort of inability on the part of the student. Statements such as "I can't practice listening English well," "It took me time to understand grammar," and "I did not understand English at all so I had troubles in class" were typical. Some weren't sufficiently interested in the subject (n=4), or very simply, "I wanted to sleep."

### ***4.2.3 Oral communication open ended responses***

In the participants' brief descriptions of oral communication classes, several patterns emerged. Of 114 responses, 67 emphasized some sort of actual speaking. Typical responses included "discussion in English," "conversational English," "talked with friends in English," and "we learned English through speaking." This is not to say that the other respondents did not necessarily have this component to their classes, only that they were not mentioned. Twelve participants indicated that listening activities were prominent in oral communication classes, two specifically mentioned singing. 16 mentioned games in class, such as, "The teacher taught English through playing games like Bingo." Only eight participants indicated that actual oral communication was limited. One such response is the following: "We used one textbook to learn reading, writing and listening. Only our teacher talked in this class and we spoke up when we were asked questions." Another participant said: "It looked like a writing class. We didn't talk about anything. Only solving questions and checking our answers."

Fifteen responses suggested participants' classes had more of a focus on grammar, vocabulary and/or the textbook. Typical responses included the two above as well as responses such as "learned vocab and did tests," "grammar lessons," and "it mainly consisted of grammar." The final important finding from this item is that 38 participants independently discussed ALTs and NSTs in describing their experiences with oral communication classes.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 *MEXT aspirations being met*

With only 7.8% of respondents reporting no exposure at all to Action Plan advocated teaching techniques, it is clear that most schools are grappling with change to at least some extent. Figures for language university students (3.6% and 5.7%) are much lower than the Kyushu university students (15.6%), indicating a possible connection between Action Plan exposure and continued language study. One concern was that lessons might be oral communication in name only. Just over half of those who chose to comment on the qualitative question, however, indicated that lessons were indeed communication focused, with a wide variety of four skills and motivational activities mentioned; a positive sign for MEXT that many schools are enacting oral communication seriously.

Nishino (2008) found only 10% of her participant teachers thought exams were still a barrier to reform, and the large number of listening lessons (68.4%) and the data for a more practical writing focus are further evidence that schools are reacting to the *senta shiken* and probably making a gradual departure from former methods. It is noteworthy that writing also seems to be experiencing change, neither being neglected because of the shift to speaking/listening nor remaining purely a grammar/translation exercise.

The proliferation of team teaching (78.2%), and pair and group work (60.4% and 53.7% respectively) are encouraging figures. Coupled with the comments about what students most remembered from SHS English, there is greater evidence of a more four skills approach. It is likely that given the 2013 Guidelines changes, which call for speaking to be part of entrance exams, the profile of speaking will increase further, given the changes wrought after previous exams modifications (Guest, 2008) in listening and other areas.

However, only 46.5% of students reported actually talking with native speakers, suggesting that team teaching may not be very interactive or that ALTs are thinly spread (there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest this from conversations the authors had with ALTs), although the qualitative data show that many students remember their interaction with NSTs/ALTs positively. Perhaps the discrepancy in the above figures indicates that NSTs/ALTs are also not using student centered methods, which would allow them to communicate on a personal basis. A question that may arise here is over training that ALTs are receiving: could their performance be improved with better training? At present ALTs are, in the main, not education specialists and only receive minimal training on arrival in Japan and on the job.

The Action Plan aspired to 10000 students studying abroad; looking at the figures for those who reported traveling with school, 36% of the language university students had, compared with only 9.1% of students from the non-language universities.

### 5.2 *MEXT aspirations not being met*

Only 41.5% reported studying topics that interested them in English. This figure is a little difficult to qualify as views on what constitutes 'interesting' vary, but it is perhaps telling of an adolescent malaise that many participants could not enunciate any particular negative aspect of SHS English in their comments. Further investigation is needed to qualify what study students would find interesting.

Although there appears to be increasing pair and group work, students felt there was little chance to share opinions or debate issues, in both speaking (36.7%) and writing (43.8%). Figures for using English in a real situation (31.6%), practicing spoken grammar (39.9%), writing letters or email (23%), and writing paragraphs (32.6%) were also below 50%, suggesting the full potential of newer teaching practices is not being met. These figures appear to affirm Nishino's (2011) findings that teachers, although open to CLT, were not sure how to use CLT exercises, having had little experience themselves and inadequate pre-service training.

### 5.3 *Other interesting issues*

Participants reporting that SHS gave them a positive attitude to English range from 72.9% and 66.3% at the language universities to the low 40%s at the other universities. The averaged figure for positive attitude is 53.3% and although the level of students naturally gifted in languages could never be quantified, in the experience of the authors as language educators, it is likely to be well under 50%. Thus lessons may be at least stimulating some students who would not otherwise be keen on them.

Whether English lessons should be taught in English is contentious; some educators (Cummins, 2010) advocate teaching only or primarily in the L2. In the context of Japan, however, there have been suggestions of little L2 use in the classroom historically, partially because of teacher inability (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). However with the new 2013 requirement to teach English in English, these questions are particularly pertinent at this time and the results of this research, that about 45% reported that they were taught in L2 by at least one JTE and nearly 30% of students had more than one JTE teaching them in English, seem quite encouraging.

Some schools are creating what can only be termed innovative curricula (global issues and international understanding classes, 7.5%; see Table 2). The number is still very low, though Lockley (2011) found that precisely this kind of course was the most motivating for students. There is some small encouragement from 33.1% of respondents saying they had opportunities to learn about Japanese culture in English and 33.9% who were able to learn about foreign cultures in English. Ideally, however, these figures should also be much higher.

Two of the authors have taught high school languages (French, German, Chinese and Japanese) in the UK and Australia, and understand the need to teach not only language but also prepare students for exams as gate-keepers to higher education. It is hard to see how an education system could function without examinations to ensure standards. One question is posed however: Perhaps if a student is not going to major in languages, the student shouldn't need a language exam? This would potentially allow teachers to teach in a more motivating way, by removing the pressure that comes with high-stakes assessments.

Japanese SHS has an unusually high completion rate, 96% (compared with 70% in New Zealand and 87% in the EU; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2007, p. 42) and a foreign language is commonly taught until the end of it. Could it be that Japan is aspiring to educate far more non-natural linguists than other countries? Compelling everyone to study a language seems likely to contribute to negative perceptions and attitudes. In this situation with its attendant low-motivation and achievement, the concentration by teachers on classroom management to the detriment of actual language learning is understandable and could be counter-productive for many schools and pupils.

## 6 Conclusion

The participants in this research come from both private and state schools and from a variety of universities around the country. While the sample of 309 participants is not large enough to claim generalisability, the authors suggest that it does give a good idea of the trends in Action Plan implementation nationwide. This research should be carried out at other sites to improve the validity of these findings. The main limitations here are the length of time between the participants graduating from SHS and completing this questionnaire (about three months) and no conclusive report on the frequency of lesson activities.

With reference to the literature, particularly Wedell's (2009) work on planning for major educational policy change, the authors have chosen to call this an interim assessment. Wedell (2009) wrote that change takes upwards of ten years to take root; therefore only by repeating the study in 2018 (10 years after the last teacher retraining had finished) could a study be treated as a full term answer as to whether the Action Plan has truly been successful. By 2018, of course, the next Guidelines will be half way through their operational life and it would be interesting to see how

they have built on the modest, yet clear, successes evident in this research. This could be an opportunity for further research.

The data show that there is some way to go to fully realize the four skills orientated goals of the Action Plan. For example, what is happening in the 25% of schools with no oral communication and the 31% with no listening? Furthermore, it is clear that many students do not enjoy language classes, though how much education should be ‘enjoyable’ is questionable. Is it truly realistic to expect nearly all Japanese students at the age of 18 years to be conversant in English and examined in it? Not everyone in the world is a natural linguist and not everyone will need to use English in their future careers. When teachers have to rely on behavior management rather than intrinsic motivation, it must surely sour classroom atmospheres, harming the education of those who want to learn and restricting teachers who want to change teaching styles, but feel that to do so would unleash chaos. There is a further need to support such teachers and those who for other reasons want to change the way they teach over time, in a manner in which they feel they can remain in control. The data suggest that this is happening, but there is some way to go yet.

This research suggests that many of the changes in SHS English lessons are in reaction to changes in the university exams, new teacher training and the work of SELHi in passing on best practice to other schools. The current study has given an indication that SHS lessons are more four skills orientated than before, yet possibly focus more on passive skills than on active ones. Looking at the MEXT (2011) proposal to include an active speaking component in the university entrance exams from 2013, likely pedagogical implications include a further impetus on increased speaking activities in SHS classrooms over the course of the next decade. Since a sizable number of schools are clearly not enacting the 2003 recommendations, MEXT will have to take further action should it truly desire 2003 and 2013 to bear the fruit that the progressive spirit of those two Guidelines changes undoubtedly deserve. The necessary action would be to support those teachers and schools who are still unwilling or unable to implement government policy. In this light, the 2013 changes would seem sensible and well made.

This paper contends, from the evidence presented here, that the problems facing EFL education in Japanese SHS are to be expected, but are surmountable and, to a greater or lesser extent, are being confronted by many of the parties concerned. If the majority of SHSs can be at least part of the way along the road to implementing a more varied curriculum in the last eight years, then it is to be hoped that the rest will follow in the future. As Aspinall (2006) puts it, “Actions and policy decisions that are condemned by prevailing social or cultural attitudes and norms at one point may come to be accepted after the lapse of a relatively short period of time” (p. 261).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: the Japanese Ministry of Education changed its name and portfolio in 2001. For ease of comprehension, this paper will use the current English appellation “MEXT” (Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology) to refer to the ministry, regardless of the name at the time of the mentioned event. The “Course of Study Guidelines” provide Japanese schools with instructions on what and how to teach and are changed approximately every 10 years. Schools have a considerable amount of freedom as to how they are implemented.

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## Appendix 1

### High School Experience Questionnaire

(The original was in English and Japanese)

- 1) What is the name of your University?
  - 2) What senior high school did you go to?
  - 3) Was it a private school? Yes No
  - 4) Was it a Super English High School? Yes No
  - 5) Where is it?  
Hokkaido  
Tohoku  
Kanto  
Chubu  
Kansai  
Shikoku  
Chugoku  
Kyushu  
Okinawa
  - 6) Did you have oral communication lessons in you senior high school? Yes No  
Please write a bit about them
  - 7) Did you have grammar lessons? Yes No
  - 8) Did you have listening lessons? Yes No
  - 9) Did you have reading lessons? Yes No
  - 10) Did you have writing lessons? Yes No
  - 11) Did you have lessons that involved more than one of reading/writing/listening/speaking?  
Yes No
  - 12) Did you have any other lessons e.g. Global Issues or International Understanding in English?  
Yes No
  - Please explain.
  - 13) Did you have any Japanese teachers give lessons in English?  
None  
Only one  
Two or three  
All of them
  - 14) Did you go abroad with school? Yes No
- In any of your lessons did you have:**
- 15) The opportunity to study things that interested you in English? Yes No
  - 16) The opportunity to speak your opinion or feeling about a topic? Yes No
  - 17) The opportunity to write your opinion or feeling about a topic? Yes No
  - 18) The opportunity to discuss or debate your and other people's opinions? Yes No
  - 19) The opportunity to make summaries of texts you read? Yes No
  - 20) The opportunity to use English in a "real" situation, e.g. a skit, presentation, speech or debate?  
Yes No
  - 21) The opportunity to practice grammar in oral communication lessons? Yes No
  - 22) The opportunity to practice grammar with a text book? Yes No
  - 23) The opportunity to read aloud in front of the class? Yes No
  - 24) The opportunity to write paragraphs? Yes No
  - 25) The opportunity to write letters or emails? Yes No
  - 26) The opportunity to make a magazine, video, advertisement, TV or radio programme in English.  
Yes No
  - 27) The opportunity to learn about the lives of people round the world in English? Yes No
  - 28) The opportunity to learn about Japanese culture in English? Yes No
  - 29) Did you have any of the following in your lessons?  
Team teaching  
Pair work  
Group work

Learning from DVD/online programmes (e.g. youtube)

Language lab

Computers to help you learn English

Communication with native speakers of English?

30) Do you think that your high school English lessons gave you a positive attitude towards English?

Yes                      No

31) What was the thing you most remember about your high school English lessons?

32) Was there any negative aspect to your high school English lessons?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.