英語教育の「和魂洋才」
Turning the Clock Back to the Meiji Era? Japan’s English Education Policy

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ABSTRACT

日本の文部科学省は, 2002年の「英語が使える日本人」の育成のための戦略構想 以来, 2003年の「英語が使える日本人」の育成のための行動計画 など, 次々に英語教育改革についての発表を行ってきている。しかし, 文部科学省が英語教育推進を打ち出すたびに, その計画には, 国語教育充実や, 日本文化・伝統・日本人の価値観を教える教育の充実が伴っている。「グローバル化に対応した英語教育改革実施計画」を例にとってみると, 7ページにわたる書類のうち, 最後の一枚はすべて「日本人としてのアイデンティティに関する教育の充実について」というタイトルのもと, 国語教育, 伝統教育, 歴史教育を充実させる計画が盛り込まれている。文部科学省の英語教育推進は, 英語と英語教育が日本人にとって脅威とうつらないように, 和魂洋才の体裁をもって提示されていると言える。

Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been issuing many documents concerning English language education reform since “Strategic plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English abilities’” (2002), followed by The action plan for ‘cultivating Japanese people who can use English’ (2003). The promotion of English language education by the MEXT, however, reflects the same idea for promoting kokugo-kyoiku (national language, or Japanese language education) as well as enhancing Japanese culture, tradition and values. For example, one of the more recent publication, 「グローバル化に対応した英語教育改革実施計画」[English education reform plan in accordance with globalization] (2013), is seven-page long, of which one whole page is all about ‘Enhancing education relating to Japanese identity’. The MEXT’s own strategy for promoting English education seems to be gift-wrapped as wakon-yosai
(Japanese spirit with western learning) so that the English language and English language education will not threat the identity of the Japanese people.

1. **Introduction**

The introduction of English language education in elementary schools in Japan, which in 2011 started as a foreign language activity class for the 5th and 6th grades, invited many discussions and arguments over the decision by the government. New policies in place such as institutionalizing English language class as a proper school subject, earlier introduction of English language classes (from the 3rd grade), and English only policies in junior and senior high school English classes keep stirring arguments (e.g., Erikawa, Saito, Torikai, & Otsu, 2014; Otsu, 2006). This paper takes a closer look at one of the recent documents published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and analyzes how it attempts to balance the tension between the desire for being part of the globalized world and the preservation of Japaneseness, or the tension between nationism and nationalism (Fishman, 1968). Since Japan is among those countries where the issue of identity is highlighted in the context of English language education (e.g., Dearden, 2015), the analysis will focus on how the discourse of the MEXT document attempts to make up for the possible threat posed by English language education to the identity of Japanese people and places it in the contexts of natioism and nationalism and of wakon-yosai (Japanese spirit with western learning). Since the text is originally written in Japanese, and also because the Japanese version of an official education policy document and its English translation version can be different (e.g., Hashimoto, 2000), this study will help disclose what and how the government intends to communicate with Japanese people about their English language education policies without any changes that might have been made to the translated version for the outside world.

2. **English language education and Japaneseness**

A series of English language policies have been implemented by the MEXT since “Strategic plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English abilities’” (2002), followed by “The action plan for ‘cultivating Japanese people who can use English’” (2003) and others. Hashimoto (2000, 2007, 2013) repeatedly illustrated that Japan’s idea of internationalization (or globalization) of education, including that of English language education, is not exactly what it sounds like. Rather, her critical discourse analyses of government publications, such as the Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century (2000) and the MEXT White Paper (2006), suggest that Japanese government’s primary intention is to protect Japan from globalization and foster new generation of Japanese people with strong traditional values. Hashimoto calls it ‘Japaneisation’ of English language education (2000, 2013). In short, while the government wants future Japanese population to have much better English language skills, they also want them to be and behave and think like very traditional Japanese.

Has the MEXT changed its tone in its recent publications? Its *Plan for English language education reforms for globalization*, issued in 2013, is a seven-page document. It should essentially address English language education, as the title indicates. And yet, on pages 1, 3 and 6, some notes on teaching and learning of identity as Japanese people as well as those on education of Japanese traditional culture and Japanese history are found, and the seventh page, with the heading, *Nihonjin to shiteno*
aidentiti ni kansuru kyoiku no jujitsu ni tsuite, or Enhancing education regarding Japanese identity, is entirely about Japanese language education, Japan’s traditional culture and history education, and moral education. The following paragraphs take a closer look at page seven of the Plan for English language education reforms for globalization.

Page seven is entirely dedicated to the theme of 「日本人としてのアイデンティティに関する教育の充実について」(‘Enhancing the education regarding Japanese people’s identity’). The sub-headline reads: 東京でオリンピック・パラリンピックが開催される2020年を一つのターゲットとして、我が国の歴史、伝統文化、国語に関する教育を推進(Promotion of education regarding our country’s history, traditional culture and Japanese language towards the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics in 2020). The first item on the agenda on this page is changes that will be introduced in the Japanese language education: increasing Japanese classes by 84 hours in elementary school and 35 hours in junior high school; emphasis on Japanese classic literature education; and increasing activities such as discussion and essay writing. The second item is education of traditional Japanese culture and Japanese history. The contents of the education of traditional Japanese culture include the following topics: abacus, traditional Japanese clothing, Japanese musical instruments, and Japanese art. It also proposes making Japanese martial arts classes compulsory. Japanese history classes will be expanded by adding a new course on Japan’s cultural heritage in elementary school and by increasing the class hours by 25 hours in junior high school. To conclude this page-long proposal, it explains the aim of this plan as follows (first given in original Japanese followed by English translation by the author):

趣旨：グローバル化が進む中、国際社会に生きる日本人としての自覚を育むため、日本人としてのアイデンティティを育成するための教育の在り方について検討し、その成果を次期学習指導要領改訂に反映させる。

In the face of further globalization, it is expected [of reformed education] to cultivate students’ awareness as Japanese people living in the international society. Towards that goal, what should be ideal education to nurture their identity as Japanese people is deliberated. The fruit of the deliberation will be reflected in the revision of the next Course of Study.

The importance of young people’s ethnic identity as Japanese repeatedly appears, supported by plans to teach them more about Japanese language, Japanese history, and Japanese culture. To see it emphasized so much when the discussion is, or should be, primarily about English language education is interesting, but may not be surprising. In 2006, the MEXT minister of that time, Bunmei Ibuki, made a comment on the education policy in an interview with the Japan Times and was quoted as saying, “I wonder if [schools] teach children [the] social rules they should know as Japanese… Students’ academic abilities have been declining, and there are [many] children who do not write and speak decent Japanese. [Schools] should not teach a foreign language before improving the situation” (Japan Times, October 3, 2006, parenthesis original, cited by Seargeant, 2009, p.16). This comment was announced at a time when the introduction of English language teaching in elementary school had been decided and people were debating pros and cons of the initiative. Seargeant (2009) states that English language education and Japanese traditional values are seen in this context as mutually exclusive and that the kind of argument presented by Ibuki suggests that English ‘can only impede such values’ (p.16). Although everyone may not agree with the idea of linguistic imperialism originally proposed by Phillipson (1992) that English is now colonializing the world, there seem to be a sizeable number of Japanese people who tend to follow the line of thought.
The amount of attention paid to the education of Japanese history and culture, as well as the national and ethnic identity of Japanese people, in the Plan for English language education reforms for globalization seems to suggest the followings. The MEXT, in promoting English language education, has to deal with its own minister as well as some of the general public who think that English language and studying of it could pose a potential threat to traditional values and identity of Japanese people. To assure those people that it will not come to that, it has been judged necessary by the MEXT to emphasize the importance and increased course load of Japanese language and Japanese history classes as well as the value of teaching of traditional culture. In this light, it is argued that the MEXT made a strategic move to sell the new reformed English language education and supplementary classes with focus on ‘enhancing Japanese identity’ in one package.

3. Nationism and nationalism

The above approach taken by the Japanese government and the MEXT is neither new nor unique. There has always been a tension when language planning and language policy are debated. Fishman illustrated the tension in two words: nationism and nationalism (Fishman, 1968). Although Fishman (1968) was addressing the situation of many of the African and Asian nations that became independent around that time and were facing the challenge of choosing their national and/or official language(s), the concept still applies to what is happening to Japan in a current context. According to Fishman, nationalism aims at the cultivation of a national identity. Based on nationalism, a nation will choose its national language as the emblem of national identity, which is often one of their indigenous languages. On the other hand, nationism places more importance on efficiency in administrative and economic management, which leads a nation to choose an internationally as well as internally useful language, such as English. The strong push for the promotion of English language education in Japan is motivated by the ideas of nationism. At the same time, some people support more nationalistic ideas about language and education, as seen in Ibuki’s comment above. Japan’s official publications, including the Plan for English language education reforms for globalization (2013), could be best interpreted as an official educational policy package to cater for the two camps of nationism and nationalism.

4. Wakon-yosai: Japanese spirit with western learning

As illustrated above, the MEXT makes sure that documents on English language education plan should spare some space for plans for Japanese language education and those for fostering young people’s Japanese identity so that the importance of teaching and learning of Japaneseness not going to be marginalized. Such attitudes seem to echo what Japan has been doing since it opened its doors to the Western world at the end of the Edo era in the late 19th century. With the establishment of the Meiji government, Japan was faced with conflicting needs to catch up with the West and to justify its heritage. In his study on Japanese intellectuals’ search for their identity as Japanese during the Meiji era, Hirakawa (1971) states that 和魂洋才 [Wakon-yosai], Japanese spirit with western learning, was the compromise that the people of that time arrived at when they wanted to maintain their traditional spiritual values while hurriedly introducing western civilization (p.10).

It appears that today’s Japan stands in a similar situation amid accelerating globalization. Since the Self-Other binary is an essential element in Japanese people’s own identity (Befu, 2001), joining the globalized world could be a threat to their identity. In addition, the act of speaking English,
which is not the first language for most Japanese people but the language that is considered to represent the Anglo-Saxon culture, may also cloud the boundary between the self and the other. In order to mitigate the sense of instability that may arise from the blurred boundary, the MEXT documents on English language education emphasize the importance of teaching the Japaneseness and traditional Japanese values, incorporating the wakon-yosai discourse that English language education is provided to the Japanese students so that they will grow up to be proper Japanese citizens who would speak English in addition to Japanese.

Conclusion

This paper examined an official MEXT document on English language education policy. It revealed that a sizable portion of the document is spared for the education of Japanese language, Japanese culture and Japanese history. The strong emphasis given on the teaching and leaning of identity as Japanese inside an English language education policy document suggests conflicting desires for nationism and nationalism. Such an attempt to strike a balance between achieving a global presence and preserving national identity can also be interpreted as a wakon-yosai strategy which dates back to the Meiji era. One of the possible problems with this discourse strategy is that the what and how of the English language education may not receive enough attention while people debate and compare the importance of English education and the importance of the education of Japanese identity. Comparative studies across different countries’ government policy documents concerning English language education will help us understand how unique or universal such attitudes may be and why that may be so.

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