

The panel discussion "View from the Front" covered a wide range of issues to do with English language education in Japan. For the purpose of this brief summary of my own remarks, I have chosen, somewhat arbitrarily, ten points of particular concern. The first two deal briefly with primary and secondary education; the remaining eight are the areas that I believe can most profitably be pursued for reform at the tertiary level (with which the majority of JASEC's members are most closely involved).

Elementary schools:

Should English be a compulsory part of the elementary school curriculum? Simply put, yes. Maybe I should have put that in capital letters. It is frankly absurd for schools to wait until children are almost in their teenage years before introducing them to a subject with such potential impact on their lives. Children are in many significant ways more receptive to foreign language learning than are adults. (The Dutch, for one, have for some time recognized this and have made English compulsory for their 5th and 6th graders. Results so far have been very encouraging: recent international TOEFL score comparisons place the Netherlands at the top of a list of 160 countries. Japan placed 149th. No proof of anything here, but it's food for thought.) Basic conversational patterns should be the focus at this early stage, with plenty of games to encourage interest, and pronunciation practice guided by native speaker teachers.

Junior & Senior High Schools:

Methodical introduction of grammatical patterns, yes. Concentration on this to the virtual exclusion of other important areas of language learning activity, no. The recent changes introduced at the secondary level in response to revised Monbusho guidelines have certainly been steps in the right direction. But they are only first steps, and there is still a long way to go. The emphasis is still very definitely on grammar. Few students have any real chance of becoming good English speakers in their six years at the secondary level largely, I believe, because they lack sufficient practice. Nobody expects you to be able to play the piano without touching the keyboard, or be able to swim without ever getting in the water, and though I wouldn't want to push the parallel too far, the same goes for learning a language. Practice is essential. Learners learn by doing. So, less emphasis on grammar, more on giving the students a chance to practise. Of course, Japanese students feel very odd at first trying to speak to each other in English, but the shock soon wears off. As for the teachers who themselves are unable to carry on a decent English conversation, well, that's another story.

Universities:

English as Optional or Compulsory? My answer: optional. I believe that if after six years of compulsory English (eight or more if my elementary school suggestions get adopted) students have had enough of English language study, they should be allowed to drop it. By the time they enter university, they should have the maturity to decide for themselves whether further English classes are going to be of benefit to them. Unmotivated learners going through the motions for the sake of credits alone are a drag on the rest of the class and the teacher.

Time: For those students who do opt for English, considerably more class time should be made available. The typical one-year university course runs on and off for about 25 weeks (often less if we take into account examinations, school festival, and sundry holidays), with lessons a mere once a week lasting 90 minutes (typically, in practice, more like 80 minutes). This gives the student about 35 real hours in a whole year! Just how much serious progress can be expected with that? Furthermore, the 90 minute time slot is counterproductive - it is too much of a drain on the student's powers of concentration. We need lessons half the current length, but given with much greater frequency.

Class Size: Fifteen to twenty students is, for me at least, just about as many as can be given any worthwhile degree of individual attention by the teacher in the time available. Creating classes of 50 and more - sometimes a hundred - is, essentially, cheating the student. I can't imagine any commercial language school getting away with it. Large classes are fine for lectures. Lectures are not fine for teaching communicative language skills.

Practice: Probably, for me, the single most important concept of all, the key that opens the door to success as a communicating foreign language speaker. The same point was made in the comments given earlier on junior and senior high school education. Those comments are just as valid here.

Lesson Content: Boredom is one of language learning's main enemies. It destroys motivation and turns what should be an intellectually stimulating activity into drudgery. Unfortunately for us, it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that language classes have at least some degree of interest. Fortunately for us, we're not stuck with putting over mathematical formulae or dry economic theories. (My apologies to the economists. My sympathy, too.) We have the entire spectrum of human activity at our disposal. We don't have to stick to simple shopping dialogues and directions to the nearest railway station. It is time to close the gap between the intellectual level of the university student and the rather simple-minded content of many language textbooks. Interest, variety, activity, frequent change of pace - these are the keys.

Entrance Exams: A vexed question indeed, but reform is most definitely needed. Since high schools are in large part the training ground for the university entrance exams, the absence of any oral/aural component in the exam inevitable restricts the amount of time and effort that high school teachers - and their students - are willing to put into such activities. The aural component can be - and at some places indeed already has been - successfully tackled. The oral aspect is much more of a problem: we obviously cannot interview thousands of applicants one by one; nor would group interviews solve the problem. Perhaps the solution here is to hand that judgement over to the Eiken/TOEFL type of professional testing organization and use their results as a factor in determining university entrance.

Teacher training updates: It's all too easy for teachers (as they, uh, mature) to settle into a fixed pattern of teaching, a method that will carry them through to a comfortable retirement. This tendency towards complacency - however tempting - must be resisted. Those who fail to even listen to new ideas, new approaches, new technology are letting themselves down, as well as their students. As newer, better ideas and equipment become available, teachers should be given every opportunity - every encouragement - to take advantage of whatever it is that can improve the chances of success in the classroom.

Teacher cooperation: Following on from the last point, teachers should be talking regularly among themselves about what they are doing and how they are doing it. Much as individual methods are to be respected, much as autonomy is to be valued, the current system leaves teachers more or less unaccountable for their actions, it encourages the complacency mentioned above, it prevents the adoption of any truly organized approach within an institution, and it effectively reduces the students to unwilling participants in a lottery. And with fixed obligatory classes, they don't even get to choose their own ticket. The solution to this, the farewell to what has been referred to as the 'glorious isolation' of the university teacher, is perhaps the bitterest medicine of all for us to swallow. But if we're serious about reform, swallow it is what we're going to have to do.

These, then, are ten of the issues that seem to me to be most significant, most deserving of serious consideration. I realise that all the issues that have been raised are controversial - witness some of the lively interactions we had at the convention - and that not nearly enough space has been devoted to them here. But if anyone cares to pursue any of these topics in more detail, I'd be delighted to hear from them.