

Ken Hisamura, Shien Sakai

## Promoting Plurilingualism throughout Language Classrooms in Japan

### *Abstract*

Die japanische Fremdsprachenausbildung ist mit einigen Problemen konfrontiert, denn sie ist eine fast ausschließlich monolinguale Ausbildung in der Zielsprache Englisch. Allerdings sind die Englischkenntnisse der Schüler und Schülerinnen nicht hoch. Mehr als 70% der Lernenden in der zwölften Schulstufe erreichen (in den Fertigkeiten Lesen, Hören, Schreiben, Sprechen) nur die A1-Ebene des GER. Das Ministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft, Sport, Kultur und Technik (MEXT) veröffentlichte Richtlinien, die dazu beitragen sollten, die Englischkenntnisse der Schüler und Schülerinnen zu erhöhen. Dazu zählten folgende drei Maßnahmen: englische Muttersprachler werden eingesetzt in Englischklassen, Lehrer und Lehrerinnen werden ermutigt, Englisch in der Zielsprache zu unterrichten, und der Englischunterricht wurde in den Grundschulen implementiert. Die Autoren kritisieren, dass diese Politik nicht geeignet ist für die Herausforderungen der globalisierten Welt. Sie sind der Ansicht, dass die Fremdsprachenausbildung in Japan die Schüler unterstützen und leiten sollte, Fähigkeiten eines plurilingualen Fremdsprachenverständnisses zu entwickeln sowie Sympathie gegenüber Sprechern und Sprecherinnen anderer Sprachen.

### *1. Challenges of English Language Teaching in Japan*

In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment in East Asian countries including Japan, obtaining high scores in English proficiency tests like TOEIC or TOEFL are an indicator of high achievement. English learners are very keen to obtain high scores in high-stakes exams, which often determine their futures since “the examination is the soul of ethos about education in East Asian societies” (Cheng, 1996, p. 9). As a result, they study outside to acquire English proficiency since they do not have ample opportunities to practice English in an authentic context. In other words, students need to take responsibility for their learning if they wish to obtain high scores in tests and be academically successful in today’s test-minded culture. Toward that end, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) has been part of mainstream Japanese English education, but it has one drawback; it requires significant preparation (Sakai, 1990). Therefore, the number of the successful learners using this method has not been very large (see Table 1). Until the beginning of the 1990s, unsuccessful learners of the English language had not been widely recognized among English education researchers in Japan because mainly only successful students entered universities. Then the circumstances surrounding the universities changed. The birthrate is declining, and the number of 18-year-olds eligible for university has been dropping. Many universities have had no choice but to allow unprepared students to enter. Some years after the turn of the century, remedial English education in universities became a buzz-word.

### *2. Education Policies to Raise Japanese Students’ English Abilities*

MEXT has been implementing policies to enhance students’ English proficiencies in three major ways: employing English native speakers in English classrooms, encouraging teachers to teach English using only the English language, and implementing English education in elementary schools.

#### *2.1 Employing English Native Speakers in Classrooms*

This policy is based on the belief that Japanese teachers are good at teaching reading and grammar, but because many of them are poor English performers, they are not as effective at teaching English conversation as native speakers. Since 1987, native foreign language speakers, most of them

is enough for foreign language education. However, in a society where only English and the local language exist, English speakers may have a significant advantage, even though every language has the same value. English monolingual education has a tendency to support this hierarchy. In addition, the English monolingual approach often gives students native English speakers as a learning model, but it may also give students unattainable goals. In addition, English monolingual education does not foster plurilingual views. Therefore, the authors think that plurilingualism throughout language classrooms in Japan should be promoted. In elementary schools, teachers who can teach a foreign language other than English are hardly found, and lessons of intercultural understanding are encouraged, but not always present. In junior high schools English language education and intercultural education are encouraged as well as English language teaching. In senior high schools, more classes should be offered in which foreign languages other than English are taught. In universities, students are expected to take English and one more foreign language. This foreign language education system will support students in Japan to develop abilities of understanding and sympathy to others.

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*Kontakt Daten der Autoren*

Shien Sakai

Professor, Chiba University of Commerce, Japan,  
2-3-1-1204 Ohgi-cho, Naka-ku, Yokohama, 231-0027, Japan  
[shien@cuc.ac.jp](mailto:shien@cuc.ac.jp)

Ken Hisamura

Professor Emeritus, Den-en Chofu University, Japan,  
1-18-2 Sakuragaoka, Tama-shi, Tokyo, 206-0013, Japan  
[dzj01411@nifty.ne.jp](mailto:dzj01411@nifty.ne.jp)