



Improving English education in Japan, with an emphasis on  
promoting communication skills in elementary schools

Inspiration from the Icelandic national curriculum

Sherine Otomo

Thesis for B.A. degree  
International Studies in Education



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**  
**MENNTAVÍSINDASVIÐ**



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***What can be learned from the Icelandic national curriculum?***

Sherine Otomo

Thesis for the B.A. degree in International Studies in Education

Supervisor: Renata Emilsson Peskova

Education Department  
University of Iceland School of Education  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on improving Japanese pupils' English communication skills by examining the current Japanese curriculum from a perspective that reconsiders the teaching methods employed and emphasizes internationalizing the classroom. There are three main reasons for the writing of this thesis: First, English education has long been an interest of the author. Second, living as a Japanese student in Iceland for the past few years (and having spent one year in England) has brought about a certain awareness on the author's part of the extremely low level of English ability in Japan; this is particularly apparent in comparison to Icelandic students' high performance in English. Third, Japan is experiencing a wave of rapid globalization as a result of preparing for the 2020 Olympic Games. These reasons represent the main motives for reconsidering English education in the author's home country, Japan, by writing this thesis. The paper conducts a literature review in order to examine the current Japanese curriculum and to present a comparison of the Japanese and the Icelandic curricula. The existing Icelandic curriculum has an excellent policy structure which identifies teaching objectives and the recommended teaching method. It serves as an inspiring source of comparison and provides ideas for improving the Japanese curriculum.

This paper focuses on the following two research questions:

1. What are the differences between the Japanese and the Icelandic national curricula in terms of teaching methods and internationalization?
2. What can be learned from the Icelandic national curriculum concerning the communicative approach and internationalization, and how could such findings be adopted in the Japanese national curriculum in order to improve students' communication skills in English?

The first chapter examines English education in Japan and identifies the problems currently affecting it; furthermore, it introduces the current Japanese curriculum. The second chapter examines the Icelandic national curriculum with regard to the methods of English education that it recommends. The third chapter focuses on comparing the

perspectives on teaching methods and internationalization found in the two nations' curricula. Following this comparison, a proposed reform is suggested, and a discussion is presented. Thereafter, in Chapters 4 and 5, the communicative approach and internationalization are introduced as suggestions for improving English education in Japan. In the final chapter, the author strongly suggests that the Japanese curriculum should be changed in order to meet the government's goal for 2020.

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## Preface

This thesis was written solely by me, the undersigned. I have read and understand the university's code of conduct (November 7, 2003, <http://www.hi.is/is/skolinn/sidareglur>) and have followed it to the best of my knowledge. I have correctly cited to all other works or previous work of my own, including, but not limited to, written works, figures, data or tables. I thank all who have worked with and take full responsibility for any mistakes contained in this work. Signed:

Reykjavík, \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ 20\_\_

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## 1 Introduction

Students in Japan spend an extensive amount of time studying English as a foreign language. This period usually exceeds eight years, as students engage in language activity classes starting from the fifth grade of elementary school and take compulsory English classes in junior high school. Students then continue their English studies in high school and, often, in college and university. Despite the substantial amount of time devoted to learning English, students rarely achieve fluency and accuracy in the language.

In the era of globalization, Japan is beginning to realize the true importance of improving the English skills of its population. One relevant example is Japan's offer to host the 2020 Olympic Games in its capital, Tokyo; this will require a great deal of intercultural cooperation, in which English will be the language of communication. Improving English skills could also benefit individuals, as a greater number of people could travel and discover opportunities to work or study abroad. English is also the key to economic competitiveness at the individual and national levels (EF Education First, 2017).

As a student from Japan who is studying education in Iceland, the author believes there are some important key points that could be learned from the Icelandic national curriculum in terms of developing pupils' proficiency in areas such as communication skills. The Icelandic national curriculum has been developing over recent decades (Lefever, 2009) and provides excellent examples of how the Japanese government's goal can be achieved by using a variety of approaches and the concept of internationalization in English teaching.

This paper compares the Japanese and the Icelandic national curricula for the teaching of English in elementary schools, focusing on teaching methodologies and the internationalization of classrooms. These are areas that require improvement within the Japanese English curriculum; identifying the differences between the two different curricula may indicate what the shortcomings of Japanese English education are. Moreover, comparing the Icelandic and Japanese educational curricula for English education in elementary school in terms of teaching methodology and

internationalization could provide an impression of how the Japanese curriculum could be improved in relation to the Japanese government's new educational reform goals for 2020.

Finally, suggestions for new national guidelines are proposed and discussed. These could prove helpful for Japan in reaching its reform goal, which would then help Japanese pupils to not only have better experiences in their classrooms but also to become confident English speakers in the near future.

## **2 English Education in Japan**

### **2.1 English in Japan**

According to the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) report on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) world score rankings for 2017, Japan is ranked 105<sup>th</sup> out of 115 countries, with an average score of 70 points; this is significantly lower than most other countries. In comparison, Iceland scored 94 points and placed 15<sup>th</sup> in the world rankings. Even within the Asian regions, Japan ranks 26<sup>th</sup> of 31 countries. This report clearly indicates that, while Japanese students were keen to take the test, their many years of effort did not yield good results.

Furthermore, Japanese university graduates and workers use the target language poorly in higher education institutions and in workplaces. The TOEIC statistics for 2017 indicate that, among Asian countries such as China and Korea, Japan ranked very low in English communicative ability. This also shows that Japanese communicative abilities are presently deemed uncompetitive in the business environment.

There is not only a lack of academic English ability but also practical English ability, such as speaking about everyday topics and listening. While other Asian countries continue to improve their results in English education, Japan needs to reconsider how it prioritizes English education (Choi & Lee, 2008). As the national curriculum provides the main guidelines for teaching and has a major impact on both schools and teachers, re-considering the curriculum could be one approach to improving the situation (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2017).

### **2.2 History of English Education**

English has long been a compulsory subject at the junior high school level. However, it was not until 2002 that the Japanese Ministry of Education started to implement English language activities into “the period of integrated study” in elementary schools, starting from the fifth grade (Bennese Educational Research and Development Institute, 2006). To explain, the period of integrated study is defined as a course that includes several

subjects that are organized by theme (Collins Dictionary, 2017). English language activities were only a part of this class. Even though the concept was to encourage pupils to learn basic English, such as becoming familiar with the alphabet, singing children's songs, and playing simple games in the language, the majority of schools were not ready for this new curriculum; therefore, no textbooks were available, and no specific training was provided for teachers. The objective of the activities shifted to exposing elementary school children to a foreign language and learning about foreign cultures in Japanese. Many Pupils and even teachers were confused by this change and could not benefit from these classes as a result of this challenge (Bennese Educational Research and Development Institute, 2006).

In 2011, MEXT introduced another educational reform, introducing *Gaikokugo Katsudo* (a foreign language activity class) once a week for fifth and sixth grade students (MEXT, 2011). English language activities were previously part of the period of integrated study, but, in 2011, it became an independent class which focused solely on teaching English. This foreign language activity class had a textbook called *Eigo Note (English Notebook)*, in which students could write and read some basic English words and phrases. The basis of English education has not been altered since 2011.

### **2.3 Problems with English Education in Japan**

Despite the government's various efforts, many challenges still remain in English education in Japan. Some of the main obstacles include the following:

- ◆ A strong focus on entrance examinations and test-based classes (Jardine, 2012);
- ◆ Textbooks that fail to facilitate meaningful oral communication (Yuasa, 2012);
- ◆ Teaching methods that only require students to translate from Japanese to English (the "grammar-translation method") (Miller, 2014);
- ◆ Low-quality English teachers and a lack of teacher training (Yokoi, 2012); and
- ◆ A lack of opportunities to use English, both inside and outside of the classroom (Wakabayashi, 2017).

These are five of the main reasons why Japanese English education has not produced significant results. The author believes the significant factors in terms of the low quality of English education in Japan to be the teaching method used and the lack of internationalization in classrooms. Another reason for focusing on these areas is that

potential improvements could be made to them more rapidly than other areas such as changing textbooks or improving the quality of teachers.

### **2.3.1 Traditional teaching method**

Many Japanese teachers of English still use the grammar-translation method, which has long been considered outmoded in the West (Saito, 2012). To clarify, the grammar-translation method is “a method of language teaching where students practice grammar rules through translation exercises between the native and the target language” (Zainuddin, Yahya & Morales, 2011). As Zainuddin, Yahya, and Morales (2011) claim, the main priority of the grammar-translation method is not speaking and communication but instead focusing on written language. Therefore, students learn the language in question passively, without adequate practice in terms of using it.

It is clear that, in order to develop students’ communication skills, they need to communicate using the target language. Simply listening to teachers’ explanations of grammatical rules is certainly a difficult way to acquire communicative abilities (Kurahachi, 1993). To be able to “make use” of English and improve one’s fluency, it is not only necessary to have knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language but also to regularly practice one’s communication skills. Therefore, the classic teaching approach used in Japan, the grammar-translation method, is considered an obsolete means of teaching a foreign language.

### **2.3.2 Lack of opportunities to use English, both inside and outside the classroom**

When Japanese students are asked the question “Why do you want to learn English?”, the majority of them would likely provide responses along the lines of “Because I want to be able to work globally” or “I want to be able to communicate with many different people from all over the world.” However, the manner in which they study English in school does not resonate with their perceived goals. Students mainly study English for school tests and exams, TOEIC tests, entrance exams for further education (Wakabayashi, 2017). As such, it is hard to imagine that what they study in school is connected to what they want to learn or achieve with English.

According to Wakabayashi (2017), it is important to create an opportunity to communicate with people who is only possible to communicate in English in order to allow pupils to “broaden their horizons through English.” It is necessary to ensure that they are placed in situations in which they are required to learn English, as, otherwise they will not broaden their horizons through the language. Clearly, Japanese English classes do not provide any opportunities for students to access other cultures, languages, and people in order to learn when and with whom to use the target language. As Wakabayashi (2017) claims, the most important priority for pupils with regard to the process of learning English is that they in which situations and when to use the language that they are learning; the language is not just a subject that they should learn, but a tool that can be used to communicate with other people from different nations.

How are these two factors—the outdated teaching method and lack of opportunities to use English, both inside and outside the classroom—addressed in the national curriculum? Since the national curriculum is generally used as a guideline for teaching methodology by faculty members themselves, studying detailed curricula from other countries can be highly beneficial. Moreover, studying such curricula can help to identify different approaches to the teaching methodology and internationalization concepts that are discussed in the following chapters.

## **2.4 Theoretical framework**

This chapter serves to provide basic introductions to and definitions of the teaching method and internationalization concepts.

The teaching methods in language teaching have a long history, with a variety of methods having been invented and discarded. In particular, various effective teaching methods were created during the 1970s and 1980s. This time period is known as the “post-methods era” and witnessed the development of methods such as the grammar translation method, the direct method, the audio-lingual method, suggestopedia, the silent way, total physical response, the natural approach, and the communicative approach (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

These teaching methods have been in use for some time now, and a number of them have been abandoned. The use of a variety of teaching methods is recommended, as it makes it possible to cater to the needs of different students. These needs vary depending on students’ settings, abilities, and levels.

Internationalization in education is best introduced with reference to various researchers' definitions. Internationalization in higher education is defined as "the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of [an] institution" (Knight, 1994, p. 7). In the context of the elementary school level, Lin and Chen (2013) explain the purpose of this concept as follows:

At the elementary school level, the intention and focus of international education are to give students early exposure to international contacts, networks, and relationships in order to share knowledge, develop an international perspective, and gain early training and experience in cooperating and/or competing with international partners and competitors.

In other words, internationalization in early education refers to the creation of an international environment in which pupils can use the target language in the setting similar to real-life in order to improve their communicative skills. Such efforts have been proven essential in developing students' English ability to a level at which can communicate and cooperate with foreign people.

## **2.5 The current Japanese national curriculum for English education**

The current national curriculum is available on MEXT's website; however, it is important to note that the latest version is already six years old (MEXT, 2017). The section titled "Foreign language activity" is found in Chapter 4 and is only three-and-a-half pages long, including *I. OVERALL OBJECTIVE*, *II. CONTENT (for grade 5 and 6)*, and *III. LESSON PLAN DESIGN AND HANDLING THE CONTENT*. As this is the only source that presents a national guideline for English education in elementary schools, it is clear that the information provided is not sufficient to allow one to develop a clear, detailed understanding of the teaching methodology that it suggests. It is important to note that the curriculum does not distinguish between skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Furthermore, although Japan seems to understand the importance of improving its

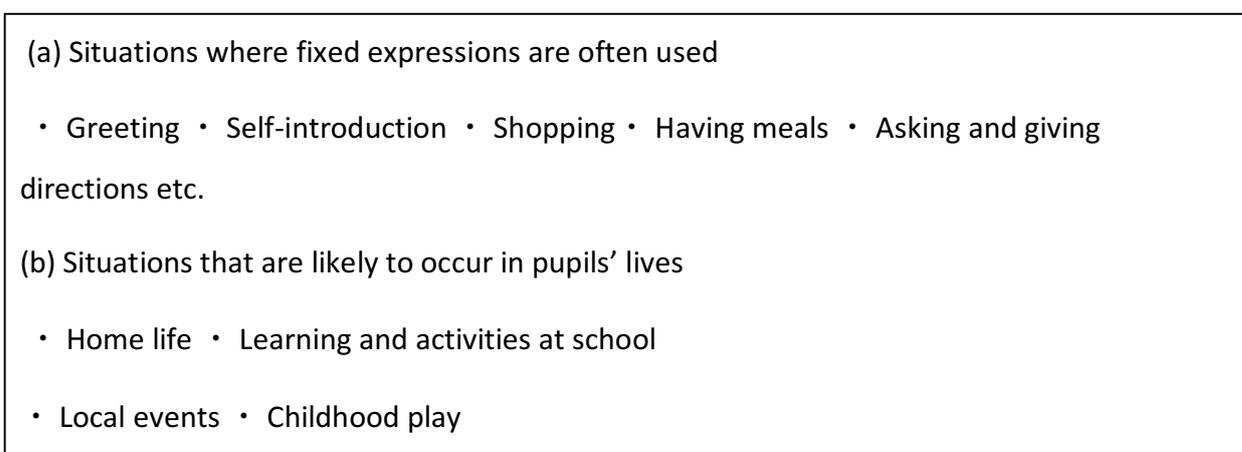
English education system, the section on the place of foreign languages in the national curriculum is barely four pages long and lacking in details.

### 2.5.1 Teaching method used in the Japanese curriculum

As was mentioned on page 12, Japan has used the traditional grammar-translation method for the past half-century. While no section of the national curriculum focuses on teaching method in particular, one of the few sections that addresses recommended teaching methods is *II. LESSON PLAN DESIGN AND HANDLING THE CONTENT*, which states the following:

Teachers should give consideration setting pupils communication situations familiar to them in order to let them experience communication using the target language (MEXT, 2011).

The document also provides examples of communication situations such as “situations where fixed expressions are often used” and “situations that are likely to occur in pupils’ lives.” As an example, Figure 1 (MEXT, 2014) (below) shows that the curriculum recommends using a “theme-based study” which includes different activities that are linked together by their content and intertwines with a communicative approach to teaching language (Cameron, 2001, p. 180). Even though the Japanese national curriculum does not identify a particular teaching method, some sections clearly suggest the use of the communicative teaching method.



**Figure 1 Examples of Communication Situations**

In contrast, another part of *III. LESSON PLAN DESIGN AND HANDLING THE CONTENT* states that audio-visual learning is the best way to develop children's communication skills, meaning that students should listen to CDs and DVDs to learn correct pronunciation.

The curriculum features a contradiction in that "theme-based study," which is part of communicative language teaching, is highly recommended, whereas it also mentions methodology that emphasises listening to audio materials as key in developing communication skills. According to Wang (2009), using audio-lingual materials to gain listening and speaking skills in learning a foreign language is defined as being in opposition to communicative language teaching.

The curriculum does not identify a clear methodology and seems confusing in that it supports using opposing methodologies when it comes to discussing which teaching styles are appropriate for enhancing students' communication skills

### **2.5.2 Internationalization in the Japanese curriculum**

Internationalization needs to be more widely adopted in order to create more opportunities for students to connect with individuals and cultures from different nations. (Lin & Chen, 2013) Both *II. CONTENT* (for grade 5 and 6) and *III. LESSON PLAN DESIGN AND HANDLING THE CONTENT* mention that "intercultural learning" should be part of English lessons and that it plays an important role in language learning. The curriculum goes on to identify the following objective: "To experience communication with people of different cultures and to deepen the understanding of the culture" (MEXT, 2011).

This sentence states that foreign language classes should provide students with opportunities to communicate with people from different cultures. However, no clear instructions are given regarding how these opportunities can actually be provided within the classroom. It should be noted that the curriculum seems to focus more on "intercultural learning", in which students learn about other cultures and people, rather than "internationalization". There is no need for actual communication embedded in this term; in other words, the curriculum does not prioritize providing opportunities such as international exchanges but rather emphasizes intercultural understanding: "Teachers should enable pupils to deepen their understanding not only of the foreign language and

culture, but also of the Japanese language and culture through foreign language activities” (MEXT, 2011).

Enhancing intercultural competence is important in language learning; however, given the current situation of Japan’s English education system and its goal of improving pupils’ communication skills, increasing the number of the opportunities to use the target language and allowing students to develop a sense of when to use it are of greater importance. These topics are compared to certain aspects of the Icelandic national curriculum in subsequent chapters.

### **3 Inspiration from English education in Iceland**

#### **3.1 English in Iceland**

According to the results of the TOEFL iBT Score (2017) that were previously discussed in the introduction, Japan placed 105<sup>th</sup>, with a score of 70 points. Iceland, on the other hand, scored 94 points and placed 15<sup>th</sup> in the world rankings; this number reflects the Icelandic people's high levels of proficiency in English. To describe Iceland briefly, it has a population of 332,529 and an area of 103,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Statistics Iceland, 2017). Similarly, to Japan, Iceland is an island country located in the ocean, and its natural beauty has become increasingly important to the Icelandic tourism industry.

As a student studying in Iceland, it is interesting to investigate the origins of this high level of English. There are some prominent reasons, one of which is the major influence of English-language media, such as movies, books, computer games, and magazines. Moreover, "the context of using English in Iceland includes huge part in tourism, business, commerce, finance, and education" (Lefever, 2009). It is a fact that their daily environments have a significant impact on people's English skills. There are also other educational factors: As a matter of fact, the approach to English education in Iceland has been developed in detail by the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture. The following paragraphs provide further detail concerning the current state of English education in Iceland.

#### **3.2 English Education in Iceland**

Compulsory education in Iceland is structured as follows; Primary education (Grunnskóli) for ages 6-13 and lower secondary education (Gagnfræðiskóli) for ages 13-16 (Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2017). Due to the expanding influence of globalization on Iceland, since 2007 most Icelandic elementary schools have taught English from the first grade (Lefever, 2009). Similar trends are found elsewhere, as many of the European countries are adopting early English education. According to the

European Commission (2012), most schools in Europe encourage children to start learning foreign languages from an early age, such as six to nine years old, and the number of schools dedicated to early English instruction is increasing. This fact shows that European countries, including Iceland, place strong emphasis on teaching English.

Second, according to a survey conducted by the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture in 2001, the majority of participants found English to be the most important second language to know and admitted that English is the language they most use in daily life after Icelandic (Lefever, 2009). Therefore, one could conclude that Icelandic people seem to be aware of the importance of learning English to their personal lives.

### **3.3 The Icelandic National Curriculum**

The following paragraphs examine how the subject of foreign languages is presented in the Icelandic national curriculum. First, the general curriculum, from preschools to upper secondary school, has six fundamental pillars: health and wellbeing, literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. These pillars are well connected to all subject areas, including foreign languages (Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014).

One can find the national curriculum for compulsory schooling on the website of the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture. The curriculum is divided into a general section, established in 2011, and curricula by subject area, established in 2014; the “Foreign Language” section can be found in the pages that address the subject area. It has 15 pages, which are divided into four different chapters: *1. Educational values and main objectives of foreign languages*, *2. Competence criteria for foreign languages*, *3. Teaching methods and assessment in foreign languages*, and *4. Assessment criteria for foreign languages at the completion of compulsory school*.

Second, the Icelandic national curriculum is more detailed than the Japanese and focuses not only on goals but also on how those goals can be met.

It has detailed criteria for each skill, such as listening, reading comprehension, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing, cultural literacy, and learning competence. Compared to the foreign language section of the Japanese national curriculum, it has a more detailed description of what teaching method should be used and gives clear examples of how teachers should conduct classes.

The Icelandic curriculum claims that teachers should first emphasize spoken language and listening, as reading and writing will follow. As discussed previously, the author believes that the teaching method employed and the lack of internationalization within the classroom are the two factors that have the strongest influence on the state of English education in Japan. In order to provide a comparable example, the following chapter examines how the Icelandic national curriculum approaches these factors.

### **3.3.1 Teaching method discussed in the Icelandic national curriculum**

The methodology used in foreign language education can be found in the third chapter of the national curriculum set by the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture (2014), *Teaching methods and assessment in foreign languages*.

It states that a teaching method should be suitable for the grade and the content of a class (135p). In addition, it mentions a variety of teaching methods, such as cooperative learning, pair work, group work, peer teaching, portfolio education, carousel learning, the story-telling method, outdoor education, and learning stations, which should be applied differently in different situations (Iceland's Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2014, 135p). The curriculum encourages teachers to apply different methods in support of their teaching objectives and to make their classrooms places in which students can practice communicating with each other.

Other important factors are identified as speech and listening: "Pupils get used to hearing the language and understand how it is used in real situation and have ample opportunity to do their best at using themselves in a meaningful context and on their own terms" (135-136p). Pupils are encouraged to listen to the language in real-life situations. It is preferred that teachers use diverse methods to allow students to practice the spoken language. It is also the teachers' role to encourage students to use the language, both in and outside of the classroom, by finding relevant sources, such as books, CDs, and age-

appropriate television programs (136p). While it is clear that there are some differences between the Japanese and Icelandic curricula when it comes to teaching methods, a similarity can be found in that both emphasize gaining communication skills.

### **3.3.2 Internationalization in the Icelandic national curriculum**

The following paragraphs examine how internationalization is addressed in the Icelandic national curriculum.

First, internationalization is mentioned frequently in the Icelandic curriculum, yet without the use of the word “internationalization.” The Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture (2014, 136p) encourages students to read many sources that can broaden their horizons, such as those relating to current affairs, cultures, and lifestyles in other countries. What is important here is that students do not simply read texts from outside sources and their set works; rather, they are encouraged to collect knowledge from various resources.

Second, it also mentions that language and culture are interlinked in many ways: For example, students gain understanding of other nations through learning foreign languages. Similarly, learning a foreign language can give pupils the opportunity to see their own culture and lifestyles from a different perspective (138p). The curriculum also states that “[i]n order to make relations with other nations more realistic, it is ideal to organize cooperation with pupils in other countries” (Iceland’s Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2014, 138p). It is clear that the Icelandic national curriculum mentions that there should be internationalization in a foreign language class in that learners should be able to cooperate with students from other cultures. “Cooperate” refers to situations in which pupils can engage with other foreign students through school visits, exchange programs, workshops, and Skype.

As one can see, the Icelandic national curriculum emphasizes “internationalization” heavily, not just to deepen understanding of and respect for other cultures and people but also to develop relationships between Icelandic students and those from other countries. While the Japanese national curriculum focuses more on

intercultural learning, the Icelandic curriculum focuses on establishing “real connections” with other cultures and lifestyles.

## **4 Responding to new educational reform by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in Japan for 2020**

In 2013, the new educational reform plan, “English Education Reform plan responding to the Rapid Globalization,” was announced by MEXT. The announcement included new goals and some suggested reform plans.

As a new goal, students are required to demonstrate competence in four skills, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking, by the time that they complete their compulsory education by achieving a TOEFL iBT score above 60 or grade pre-1 to level 2 on the EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency (MEXT, 2017). Since these English tests feature oral interview tasks, it is clear that they place emphasis on pupils gaining basic communication skills in terms of developing listening and speaking skills by engaging in activities such as having conversations with foreign individuals. The following paragraphs highlight specific reforms that have been suggested by the Japanese government in order to meet the new goal.

### **4.1 Proposed reform**

Many improvements are suggested in the proposed reform of English education in Japan, such as empowering teachers in elementary schools by developing teacher training and materials, developing the content of English textbooks, and increasing the number of assistant language teachers from other countries (MEXT, 2017).

However, according to the report published by MEXT (2017), further dialogue concerning the reformation of the national curriculum for English teaching is required, including discussions about number of hours, class content, teaching materials, teacher training, and the use of new technology. In order to achieve its stated goals, MEXT should describe the new national curriculum developed in response to the English Education Reform plan before the year of 2020. Until now, however, MEXT has only announced a handful of changes, such as making English classes a compulsory part of the curriculum for the fifth and sixth grade and having students start taking *Gaikokugo Katsudo* (foreign

language activity class) from the third and fourth grades in elementary school. The purpose of these changes is to raise the level of English language proficiency in middle and high school by beginning education in earlier grades (MEXT, 2017). Moreover, for the third and fourth grades, classes devoted to English language activities are held once or twice a week in order to provide the foundations for communication skills. For the fifth and sixth grades, English language classes are held three times a week (including module classes wherein students review what they have studied in the previous lecture for 10 minutes every day) in order to nurture basic English language skills (MEXT, 2014).

This decision to shift foreign language activity classes to earlier grades is the most important part of this reform. This change is clearly novel, as it is something that is being attempted for the first time. As mentioned previously, many countries, including Iceland, have already introduced English education in the early grades of elementary school. In fact, Japan is the only country that has recently started offering English education at the elementary school level, as most other Asian countries have already introduced English language classes at this level: for example, Thailand did so in 1996, South Korea in 1997, and China in 2001 (Yeon & Hyo, 2008).

According to Katsuyama, Nishigaki and Wang (2008), early English instruction has positive effects on students' listening skills and general preference towards English, as well as their scores on English tests in Japan. Thus, this change could be a key in lighting the way forward.

The fact is that there is a need for reforms in multiple areas in order to meet the goal of developing students' communication skills identified in the 'English Education Reform plan responding to the Rapid Globalization' for 2020. As discussed in Chapter 2, the most challenging areas are the teaching method used and the lack of internationalization within classrooms. Moreover, the comparison made with the Icelandic curriculum provides the author with ideas for further improvement of the Japanese curriculum and guidance as to what sort of reforms should be sought.

## 4.2 Further improvement

Bearing these proposed reforms in mind, it is essential that Japanese policymakers within the government reconsider the Japanese national curriculum. Table 1, below, presents a summary of the differences between the two curricula, Japanese and Icelandic, from three different perspectives: teaching methods, internationalization, and overall focus, such as volume, length, and details.

	Japanese curriculum	Icelandic curriculum
Teaching method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No particular teaching method is mentioned</li> <li>• Theme-based study/Audio material-based learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The use of a variety of teaching methods is suggested</li> <li>• Emphasis on teaching, listening, and speaking, using a diverse range of different materials</li> </ul>
Internationalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More focused on “intercultural study”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggests organizing cooperation with pupils in other countries</li> </ul>
Overall, such as volume, length, and details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3.5 pages long</li> <li>• Lacks details and clear explanation of how to meet the objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15 pages long</li> <li>• Provides detailed information for both teachers/schools and parents/students</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Comparison of the Japanese and Icelandic national curricula for teaching foreign languages in terms of teaching methods, internationalization, and overall.**

Table 1 shows that the Japanese curriculum is not as detailed or specific as that of Iceland, not only from the two perspectives of teaching method and internationalization but also from the overall view. The curriculum should provide a clear outline for both teachers and students; this is important, as “the intended curriculum is the official policy set by the government, which outlines the learning and teaching objectives, the instructional content, recommended teaching methods and organizational plan for instruction.” (Lefever, 2009) As further improvements, two suggestions could be added to the reform: a change in methodology and an emphasis on internationalization within the Japanese curriculum.

#### **4.2.1 Changing of Methodology to Communicative Approach**

For the past half-century, English education in Japan relied on the grammar translation method. In the contemporary situation, which emphasizes the development of communication skills, this method is no longer suitable. The Icelandic national curriculum clearly defines the teaching methodology that teachers should adopt; Japan should follow this good example. “As an alternative to the grammar-translation method, the author recommends methods such as the communicative approach, which identifies the goal of language education as being able to communicate in the target language” (Sandra, 1997). A detailed description of how teachers can implement this method within the classroom is required. This language-teaching method places strong emphasis on using the language being taught as a tool to communicate with others: “Activities of communicative approach include real communication, carrying out meaningful tasks, using language, which is meaningful to the learner” (Nunan, 1989). The current Japanese curriculum only mentions “theme-based activity”; however, no other communicative approach activities are included.

To elaborate, over the last few decades, educators have invented and developed many different teaching methodologies and approaches. However, in the 1970s, they began to consider if those methods were effective outside of the classroom in terms of communication. They discovered that being able to communicate required communicative competence more than linguistic competence (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). In order to allow students to gain communicative competence, the

“communicative approach” was developed; it is specialized in the development of communicative ability in language teaching. Yoshida (1998) notes that “language is meaningless if it learns separately from the actual communication situation that it is used. The language is therefore to communicate, or it should be learned as a tool for communication.” Thus, the aim of this approach is for students to learn languages through actual communication; it also takes into account the fact that the situations in which communication takes place change. For this reason, teachers may occasionally have a “fuzzy” understanding of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Therefore, it is important to not simply rely on using an appropriate methodology but also to set up learning environments in classrooms that allow for the methods to function. In classes, teachers employ communicative activities such as role-play, interviews, group work, information gap, opinion sharing, problem-solving skills and so on. According to Banciu and Jireghie (2012), communicative approaches help learners to develop an actual understanding of a language, rather than focusing on grammatical structures or acquiring native-like pronunciation.

In fact, it is claimed that using the communicative approach instead of the grammar-translation method in elementary schools in Japan resulted in improvements in students’ performances in oral exams. What is interesting is that improvements in writing examinations also followed. Moreover, pupils taught using the communicative approach demonstrated more motivation in terms of continuing to participate in communication activities such as engaging with other students and teachers using the target language (Kurahachi, 1993).

For these reasons, this methodology would be appropriate for conditions in the contemporary Japanese classroom and could assist students to develop their communication skills in English in an efficient manner. However, changing the methodology might not be enough; it would also be necessary to change the Japanese people’s way of thinking about learning and using English. In order to improve students’ *communication* skills, including listening and speaking skills, while also producing the necessary mindset for reading and writing, the teaching approaches and methodology used in Japan need to change.

#### **4.2.2 Creating the Internationalizing mindset**

By further emphasizing internationalization in the classroom, it is to be expected that students will find more value in the skills they acquire. According to Knight (1999), internationalization is defined as the process of creating an international/intercultural environment in teaching and studying. This is done in order to support the international/intercultural interactions of the individuals involved. Internationalization can help students realize how a language is used in real-life situations and how they can use it on their own. Since Japanese students have very few opportunities to use English, both within and outside their classrooms, their learning environments are not sufficient for them to develop their communication skills. English classes should provide more opportunities for students to use what they have learned in the classroom in their daily lives. In this manner, they could acquire the skill of “knowing when and how to say what to whom” (Larsen-Freeman, 2013).

It is important that pupils are motivated to learn and use the target language. Motivation can be classified as instrumental, when students seek to benefit from learning the language, and as integrative, when students become interested in the society in which the target language is used (Gardner & Lambert 1972). It is therefore important to emphasize internationalization within the classroom in order to promote these kinds of motivation in students.

Yamamoto (2011) provides an example of a writing activity in which students would write letters, in English, to students in other countries, particularly those in Australia and India. They would then receive replies in English from their counterparts abroad. Teachers would then assist their students to understand the letters that they had received. This type of activity would be considered as an example of the internationalization of a classroom, since it created an environment that connected students with individuals from other nations. In fact, over 90 percent of the Japanese students stated that they were motivated to continue learning English after this activity.

However, a letter exchange activity is not the only approach to “internationalizing the classroom,” as there are other ways to do so, including reaching out to other schools or students in other countries. Examples of such approaches include short exchange programs, inviting foreign guests to speak about their cultures and lifestyles, Skype interactions with students in other countries, and exchanging video letters. Approaches to internationalization could thus vary from school to school and classroom to classrooms (Yamamoto, 2011).

This would surely help to fill the gap between what students want to learn and what they are learning. It would also not only assist students to use what they have learned in the classroom but also motivate them to seek out real-life situations in which they could have fun using English.

Considering these reasons, I believe that a shift in methodology from the grammar-translation method to the communicative approach and internationalizing classrooms are key to changing English education in Japan. These new approaches could not only help pupils to develop the skills and knowledge that they require to obtain good results in English proficiency tests but also to accomplish what they wish to do with English in the future.

## 5 Discussion

The comparison made between the teaching methodologies and approaches to internalization in the Japanese and Icelandic curricula highlights some areas of the Japanese educational system that require improvement. However, the fact that the educational reforms that the Japanese government has planned in order to fulfill its 2020 goals have a strong focus on developing communication skills had to be included in this discussion. Thus, the author believes that the following two changes would be suitable in the new Japanese educational curriculum for teaching English: adopting the communicative approach and including internationalization efforts in the national curriculum.

First, in order to improve students' communication skills, the communicative approach should be included in the Japanese curriculum. A more detailed description of which activities and techniques are to be used within the set teaching method is required. By comparing the existing curriculum with more detailed ones, such as that of Iceland, one can obtain insights concerning which details are lacking and where the areas of improvement lie.

Second, internationalization should also be included in the Japanese curriculum; it should stress how important it is for students to engage with foreign individuals from the elementary school level. In order to provide opportunities for students to communicate internationally, the curriculum has to change and place emphasis on the internationalization of English classrooms. The Icelandic national curriculum demonstrates an emphasis on internationalization, i.e. by recommending cooperation with students from other cultures.

Although the task of internationalizing the English classroom might prove difficult, it is important to remember that "internationalization" also functions to motivate children to continue studying the foreign language (Yamamoto, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary that MEXT starts seeking new ways of introducing "internationalization" into classrooms.

## 6 Conclusion

English education in Japan faces the problem of the lack of a detailed strategy for improving students' English ability. Given the upcoming 2020 Olympic Games and the rapid globalization that Japan is witnessing, this is the time to change this situation. There have been many discussions concerning the situation that Japan is facing. Examining the current Japanese national curriculum, a task that has rarely been undertaken in recent research papers, provided the author with clues concerning what it lacks. As the author found the teaching method and internationalization to be the most pressing areas of improvement, the comparison made of the two curricula led to the identification of a great number of English proficiency tests that could potentially be adopted to assist the Japanese government to meet its goal for 2020.

Put simply, the comparison showed that the Japanese curriculum is lacking in detail, particularly in terms of teaching method and internationalization. There should be more variety in teaching methods, and it should be much more thoroughly described in the curriculum; the same can be said for "internationalization". The Icelandic national curriculum, on the other hand, with its detailed guidelines and objectives, provides an example of how a curriculum should guide teachers and schools.

The communicative approach has a strong focus on gaining actual communication skills and setting up situations in which students can meaningfully communicate with others using the target language under conditions that facilitate "internationalization". Therefore, the author concludes that adopting the communicative approach and emphasizing "internationalization" in the Japanese national curriculum would prove the most efficient ways of developing students' communication skills in English.

In order to make these changes, it would be necessary to change the content of the curriculum in order to describe how students can meet its objectives and goals, with clear examples being provided. It is the author's vision that presenting a new curriculum that could be efficiently implemented by 2020 should become the main objective of Japan's Ministry of Education.

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