

**A Brief Look at English as a Foreign Language Education  
in a Time of Transition:**

**The Present Situation as Professor Okamura Retires from Tottori University**

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Over the last few years there have been a considerable number of changes in the way that English language education in Japan has been approached. For example, although the school week has been reduced to only 5 days, with resultant pressures to reduce the curriculum, English is being inserted into elementary schools in a number of different ways. The emphasis on oral communication skills here mirrors a similar change of emphasis in junior and senior high schools and now at universities as well. This has also resulted in increasing pressure on Japanese teachers of English to meet certain minimum criteria for spoken proficiency in English. All this has been accompanied by the meteoric rise in the use of and importance of the TOEIC test both in the workplace and for university students.

Even the way that EFL is being conceptualized is undergoing change. Internationally, different varieties of English, such as Singlish and the way that English is spoken on the Indian subcontinent, are asserting their “authenticity” in ways that are revising ideas about the traditional “ownership” of English by native-speakers. In Japan, the expectant rise of Japanese English as a similar such variety and even the idea of English being made a second official language are being discussed in earnest.

All in all, the position of English as the primary language of the age of

globalization is becoming ever more entrenched. The importance and relevance of enabling more Japanese to actively participate in this process seems to be one of the biggest motivating factors behind many of these recent trends.

No doubt, there would be enormous advantages for Japan if English were as well-established here as in Singapore, India or Hong Kong. However, these countries have vastly different historical backgrounds which are almost entirely responsible for way that English was introduced there. Other countries which have similar levels of English among the general populace such as Holland, also enjoy native languages that are vastly more similar to English than Japanese is. By comparison, then, the challenge for Japan seems to be disproportionately large, and therefore the approach to be taken seems to require considerable discussion and experimentation. There does not seem to be a blue-print for success anywhere that Japan is able to simply adopt and adapt to local conditions.

Last year at Tottori University we introduced small size oral communication classes with native speakers and Computer Assisted Language Learning classes for all first year students. All students have also been set a minimum target of 300 in TOEIC in order to graduate. In addition, special efforts are being made to ensure that all students are given sufficient opportunity to meet this minimum target.

Internationally, foreign language education is increasingly being made available to students who are not majoring in a foreign language, as a support skill to their specialist studies. The reasoning behind this trend is to offer such students the opportunity to gain effective proficiency in the foreign language for the global communicative needs and requirements they expect to be dealing with in their

specialty-related future careers.

Thus it would appear that there are two competing dimensions for whatever teaching resources are available, that could be referred to in terms of breadth and depth. While broad efforts need to be made to try and to develop the minimum English abilities of all those engaged in formal education, there is also a need to offer additional opportunities to those who wish to deepen their abilities well beyond this minimum.

Hence, it seems to make sense that we not only aim to have all students graduate with a minimum TOEIC score of 300, but that we also provide sufficient opportunity for those students who have already met this requirement to extend their ability in English to meet the more demanding needs that they anticipate they are likely to face in the future. One possible way of helping to do this might be to make classes that are taught in English and available to students in the Faculty of Regional Sciences also available to students from the other Faculties as well. Another consideration might be to have some sort of qualification in English made available from with the University Education Center.

This is indeed a time of transition for both EFL and for Tottori University, and hopefully, we can find a way to provide appropriate opportunities to meet all students' needs in order to maximize the effectiveness of EFL education here. At present, perhaps the way forward that holds most promise is to develop a system which combines a broad approach—that allows all students to meet certain minimum requirements, with an in-depth approach—that allows a core of individuals to excel in English.