9S-08-2025-01-09―ｋｊｋｊｋｊｋｊｋｊProblems in English Education ｋｊｋｊｋｊｋｊｋｊｋｊｋｊｋｊｋｊJapan

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Japan's English education system faces significant challenges despite students studying the language for approximately ten years from junior high school through university. One of the most striking indicators of these challenges is Japan's ranking in the global English Proficiency Index, which places 80th out of 111 countries and 14th out of 24 Asian nations. This underperformance raises important questions about the effectiveness of Japan's approach to English education.

I think that several key issues contribute to this situation. First, the focus on entrance examination preparation has led to overemphasizing grammar and reading comprehension at the expense of practical communication skills. This examination-oriented approach often results in students losing interest in English once their tests are completed, as they view it merely as a subject to be studied rather than a tool for communication. The shortage of qualified English teachers presents another significant challenge. According to the Ministry of Education's 2021 report, only 40.8% of junior high school teachers and 74.9% of high school teachers meet the government's English proficiency standards. Moreover, only about 10% of English teachers have experience studying abroad for more than a year, limiting their ability to provide authentic language exposure to students. The teaching methodology itself poses additional problems. Japanese English education heavily relies on translation-based instruction, where students are taught to understand English through Japanese rather than thinking directly in English. This approach, combined with limited speaking opportunities in class and insufficient exposure to native pronunciation, often results in students developing "katakana English" - a heavily Japanese-accented version of English that can be difficult for native speakers to understand.

Comparing Japan's approach with other countries reveals striking differences. In European countries like the Netherlands, English education begins as early as age 4-5, with schools having the freedom to develop their own teaching methods and materials. This results in more engaging and practical language learning experiences. Similarly, Asian neighbors like South Korea and China place greater emphasis on practical communication skills, implementing more frequent English classes and focusing on activities like debates and presentations. The time allocated to English learning in Japan also falls significantly short of what experts consider necessary. While acquiring English proficiency typically requires 2,000-3,000 hours of study, Japan's curriculum only provides about 350 hours in elementary and junior high school combined, with additional hours in high school still falling well below the recommended total.

To address these challenges, several solutions have been proposed. These include introducing English education at an earlier age to help students develop better pronunciation and listening skills, increasing opportunities for practical communication in classrooms, and making better use of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). Additionally, encouraging supplementary English learning outside of school through language schools or self-study programs could help compensate for the insufficient classroom hours.

In conclusion, while Japan's English education system faces numerous challenges, understanding these issues is the first step toward improvement. By learning from successful models in other countries and implementing more practical, communication-focused approaches, Japan can work toward developing a more effective English education system that better prepares students for global communication.

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