# The History of English Education in Japan

## - Motivations, Attitudes and Methods


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# Summary

In today's globalised society English is vital to international communication and cooperation and English education therefore holds a central spot in education systems worldwide. In this thesis I look at the history of English education in Japan by analysing motivations for learning (or not learning) English, attitudes to English education and methods that have been utilised in teaching English throughout in Japan. I also introduce one teaching method that has recently caught on among Japanese universities as a suggestion to how English education in Japan might change in the future.

As Japan opened up to the outside world as the Meiji period started in 1868, after an isolation policy that lasted for about 250 years, an English boom swept the nation. In order to get on equal terms with the then technological superior West a massive modernisation process was started. However, in the second half of the Meiji period nationalism started to emerge and as the patriotism grew, the interest for English decreased. These anti-English sentiments kept growing, affecting also education policies, until the end of the Second World War. During the American Occupation of Japan right after the war, the interest for English once again boomed and it has kept increasing, despite various historical events that has shocked the Japanese society.

English education in Japan has often been accused of placing too much focus on word for word translation and memorisation of words and phrases, neglecting the communicative aspects of foreign language learning. The tradition with learning English for the sake of passing entrance exams to higher level of education has, as will be discussed, has been present in the Japanese educational system ever since English language education came on the agenda in the Meiji period and can still be seen in Japanese classrooms today. Despite various calls for and attempts to change the way English is taught in Japan through the history, changing this system has proved to be no easy task. Lately, self-access learning has been catching on in Japan, however, and the creation of centres dedicated to this kind of learning is hoped to help the English education in Japan evolve.

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# Foreword

Having spent around two years in total in Japan, both as an exchange student and as a tourist, one thing that I have found very interesting is that it seems like most Japanese are reluctant to speak English. Trying to ask someone for directions on the street, for example, often results in a 'sorry, no English!' and the person hurrying away from you. This became especially evident to me when my family visited me in Japan and I had to help them with anything from reading menus and ordering food to buying train tickets. When talking with my Japanese friends, many of them told me that even though they had studied English at school for over 6 years, they did not actually know any English by the time they graduated high school. This was due much to the fact that English education at middle and high school only focussed on preparing for entrance exams and not on actually being able to communicate in English. They also pointed out that many teachers did not have a good enough command of English to properly teach English in a more communication oriented way, especially not with regard to pronunciation.

I also found it curious that even though the Japanese government are pushing the image of 'Cool Japan' internationally and with a huge number of tourists visiting Japan every year, the general public in Japan still does not seem to be comfortable with English and that not very much have been done to accommodate foreigners who does not know any Japanese. With big international events like the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics coming up change is apparently in the air. However, I believe there is still quite a long way to go, as I will discuss in my thesis.

As a part of my Master's degree I was also lucky enough to be able to go on the International Project Semester programme (AAS4900), a one semester internship. I spent this internship working as a teacher assistant at Josai International University (JIU), a private university in Chiba prefecture in Japan, where I was assisting Ms. Maria Shiguemi Ichiyama, head of the department for international studies at JIU, in her English language classes and with the rest of her workload. This internship resulted in a report about establishing a self-access learning centre at JIU for JIU and the University of Oslo (UiO). I was also able to interact with many of the students and teachers at JIU, which helped me get a better understanding of the current situation in English language education in Japan. I am very grateful to have gotten this opportunity and the internship at JIU has really been a great experience for me, both in terms of getting work experience and in getting information for my

thesis.

Because of these experiences I decided to analyse the history of English education in Japan in this thesis. I believe that having a look at what has been done will help us figuring out why the current situation is like it is and that it can be a helping factor in improving the educational system and the general Japanese public's English language skills.

I would like to extend a huge thank you to my advisor, professor Tomoko Okazaki Hansen at UiO, for great advice and patient counselling. I would not have been able to finish this thesis without her. I would also like to thank professor Reiko Abe Auestad at UiO for being my advisor when I enrolled in the Master's programme and giving me valuable advice during my internship and when I was in doubt of what topic to choose for this thesis.

# Introduction

Today, the world society is getting more and more globalised, bringing along a need for being able to communicate with people from different places, with different languages and different ways of looking at the world. People and cultures are getting exposed to each other on a more frequent basis and cultures which for many people might have seemed mysterious and exotic are suddenly becoming more accessible due to globalisation. Stressing that 'globalisation' does not mean 'Westernisation' or 'Americanisation', a mistake it seems like many are prone to make, Nakamura defines:

> 'Globalisation means global, transnational interactions of people, shared cultures, information and technology, education, economy and value systems beyond the cultural divide of West and East, Orient and Occident.' (2002:65)

In order for these people of different background to interact with each other a common language, a *lingua franca*, is needed. The language that is most commonly used for this purpose today is English and it can be said that English is the most powerful language in the world, especially with regard to accessing world knowledge and technology. Communication between countries with different languages and sociolinguistic profiles have been made possible by the introduction of English and in regions like East Asia English is spreading for largely pragmatic reasons. Because of this, English language education holds a central spot in school systems worldwide and is often closely connected with government politics (Kam, 2002).

In this thesis I will look at the general history of English education in Japan, focussing on motivations for learning English, general attitudes to English and the West and the methods that have been utilised for teaching English to Japanese through the ages. I will also have a look at the future of English education in Japan by introducing one teaching/learning method that seems to be catching on among Japanese universities today. The chapters will be organised according to the Japanese Imperial Calendar, as the various periods provides a natural background to events and development in Japan and it is interesting to see how especially attitudes to English language education as a whole has changed together with social and political events throughout. Therefore, I will also discuss social, political and/or economical issues, on both micro and macro level, that

occurred in the respective periods which influenced language education and general attitudes to English.

In the last chapter of this thesis I will introduce one teaching method that seems to have been catching on among Japanese universities in the last ten years: *self-access learning* and centres dedicated to this. I was lucky enough to get an internship at Josai International University (JIU) in Chiba prefecture in Japan, where I worked as a teaching assistant in the autumn semester 2014. During this internship I also had the opportunity to work with research for establishing a self-access learning centre at JIU. As will be discussed, there are many challenges to establishing such a centre, however, if successfully run it can be incredibly valuable for the students.

Before starting to speculate about the future of English education in Japan it is useful to have a look at the historical background. From old times Japan, being poor in natural resources, has had to import most of its raw materials. This made communication with foreign cultures and people necessary and Japan has a long history of interacting with and 'absorbing' other cultures as well. Historically, China has been the main source of import and modernisation, and Japan actively adopted Chinese writing and thoughts. However, as Japan opened its borders again after an isolation policy that lasted for over 200 years in 1868, it was to the West, rather than to China, Japan looked in order to modernise itself (Nakamura, 2002).

The first Western nation that Japan had connections with was the Netherlands and before and under the isolation policy, everything Western was associated with the Dutch. There was a small Dutch settlement in Nagasaki and the only Western language that was being studied in Japan was Dutch. However, even though the English-speaking West[1] was not really on the radar in Japan until the Meiji restoration, the first native English speaker came to Japan already in 1600. British William Adams arrived in Japan on a Dutch ship and he got a job as a translator, translating among other things letters from the British King James I into Japanese and the other way around. However, there are no records of him actually teaching English. As the Meiji period came along, the West and the English language came into focus, replacing China and Chinese as the main source of information and inspiration (Imura, 2003).

English has grown to become the main foreign language in Japan today and the interest for learning

1 Great Britain and USA

the language has never been greater. Private schools offering one-on-one conversation practice can be found on next to every street corner, even in smaller towns on the countryside, there are multiple TV and radio shows that aim to teach English to the public and English language kindergartens and activity clubs for kids, as well as cram schools focussing mainly on English, is gaining popularity. English is also considered one of the most important subjects in the national educational policy, as having a population with adequate English language skills are thought of as being vital for Japan in the future. However, despite the interest for English and the focus on English language in the school system, Japanese students are not scoring very high on international surveys like the PISA, and also surveys like the EF English Proficiency Index are indicating that the general public's level of English proficiency is moderate[2].

As we will see, discussion about the English language and English education in Japan has often been closely related to discussions about the Japanese language and Japanese policies. Like in other countries, educational reforms have often been made to support political views, like for example during the Second World War. One of the benefits the Japanese government had already prior to the Meiji restoration in these terms, unlike many other nations at that time, was an already well developed education system. Already during the second half of the Tokugawa period there was a broad development of the school and university systems and '[b]y 1800 all members of the samurai class had long been literate.' (Mason and Caiger, 1997:247). Daughters of the samurai class received education at home, while commoners were generally admitted to local community schools. At these local community schools the children learnt simple mathematics, how to read and write in Japanese and Confucian values like filial piety and loyalty. In addition to this, the tradition of *jukus*, private schools usually specialising in a single branch of learning, also appeared in the Tokugawa period. Mason and Caiger describe the astounding Tokugawa education:

> 'It has been calculated that the literacy rate for the total population, including the samurai, was over thirty percent in the last part of the Tokugawa period. If the calculation is done for males alone the figure rises to about fifty percent. Such a high degree of literacy is quite extraordinary for a premodern society, and the "mass" aspects of Tokugawa education certainly helped shape the country's future after 1868.' (1997:248)

2 EF English Proficiency Index 4th Edition (2013) for Japan: http://www.ef.no/epi/spotlights/asia/japan/ [Accessed 22 May 2015]

When the Meiji period and the restoration started in 1868, the Japanese government therefore already had a solid foundation on which to 'build' and modernise the nation. This also made it easier to introduce English language education in Japanese schools.

What is important to remember when it comes to discussing English education in Japan, however, is that the Japanese and the English language are very different, both in terms of grammar and phonetics. This will make it more difficult for a Japanese learner of English to properly acquire the language than for i.e. a Norwegian learner. Even the writing system is different, adding to what Japanese learners have to learn in order to master the English language. Through conversations with Japanese people I also got the impression that English language learning in Japan is mainly focussed around the kind of English that is needed for exams rather than for communicational purposes. Even though it seems like most students and teachers would prefer a more communicational approach to the English education, the reality of entrance exams that put heavy emphasis on word for word translation and memorisation of grammar and set phrases makes it difficult to make a change.

## 1. Meiji and Taisho

In the middle of the 19th century Japan faced cultural, political and social upheavals following the 'opening' of the country, largely due to pressure from especially the US, after having been 'closed' for over two centuries. Although contact with the outside world had not been completely shut off, as proved by for example the Dutch settlement in Nagasaki, and there were scholars specialising in Western studies (*rangaku*[3]), the technological superiority of the West took the Japanese by surprise. Also being aware of how the British in particular had treated China and the Chinese and being forced to sign treaties relegating them to an inferior status, Japan realised they needed to industrialise and modernise quickly in order to catch up to the Western nations and get a chance to revise the treaties they had signed the Western nations (Mason and Caiger, 1997). One of the ways

3 The literal meaning of r*angaku* (蘭学) is 'Dutch studies'. However, the term came to be synonymous with 'Western studies' in general.

the Meiji government went about this was to openly welcome Westerners, mainly British and Americans, while they also sent selected Japanese to different Western countries to study technology, politics and education. This, obviously, required the Japanese to learn the languages of these countries and especially English was seen as the language of modernisation. Like Fujimoto-Adamson writes: 'Foreign language education in Japan itself was closely related to this project as well since foreign languages were introduced to the university curriculum and subjects themselves were taught in English' (2006:264).

However, it was not only foreign language education that gained interest in the Meiji period. There was also an intense debate about standardisation of the Japanese language. During the Tokugawa period the nation was divided into over 200 domains and people had little opportunity to travel and meet people from other domains. This resulted in a myriad of different dialects and ways of expression, so when the Tokugawa period ended and the Meiji restoration came along with a need to unite and unify the nation's people, standardising the Japanese language was considered to be extremely important. Twine explains:

> 'No standard form of Japanese existed on a nationwide basis, for the Tokugawa policy of regional isolation had resulted in a segmented society in which a network of regional dialects flourished. Dialectal variations aside, the spoken and written forms of the language were markedly dissimilar.' (1988:430)

Although there were discussion around standardising the spoken language as well, with different policies trying to coerce especially children into speaking *hyojungo*, standardised Japanese, the most heated debate was tied to standardising the written language. The existing written language required many years of study to master and was far removed from any spoken version of Japanese. It was therefore important to not only find one variation of spoken Japanese to be considered the standard, but also to replace the archaic elite-bound writing styles that already existed with a colloquial style based on this standard spoken language. Obviously this was far from easy and suggestions varied from dropping the Chinese characters and only use *kana*[4] to start using the latin alphabet. There were even suggestions to use nothing but Chinese characters, while others again actually argued for abolishing Japanese all together and make English the national language (Twine, 1988; Ramsey, 2004). This complicated debate was central in especially academic circles for

4 Kana: Phonetic alphabets (*hiragana* and *katakana*) based on very simplified Chinese characters.

several years and will be discussed in detail here. However, it is good to remember that there was an ongoing discussion about the Japanese language at the same time as the debate on the English education was going on in the Meiji period.

### 1.1 The English boom

The first part of the Meiji period (approximately 1868 – 1881) can be summarised as being an 'English boom'. Wanting to industrialise quickly, which in Japan's case was almost synonymous with Westernising, also brought along a need and want for learning English, seen as the 'language of the West'. To absorb as much technological knowledge as possible the Japanese government sent Japanese students abroad, most of them by the Ministry of education established in 1871. Many of these students, like I will discuss later in this chapter, later came back to Japan, becoming important figures in the development of the Japanese educational system and Japan as a whole. In fact, the Japanese government also sent high-ranking statesmen and specialists on a diplomatic mission to the US and Europe referred to as the *Iwakura mission*[5]. The main goals of this delegation was not only to collect information on how modern industrialised societies worked, but they also wanted to project Japan's image as a modern state (Nish, 1998). Imura (2003) also mentions the five young girls the Ministry of Education sent to study in USA in 1871, one of them the then eight-year-old Tsuda Umeko who later came to establish a women's institute for English studies, as one of the examples of the Meiji government's efforts to acquire knowledge and skills.

In the middle of the discussions regarding the national Japanese language, Mori Arinori, the first Minister of Education in Japan's, suggestion stood out. Having being educated in America he believed that the Japanese language was unfit as the medium of modernisation and argued that English should replace Japanese as the national language in Japan. According to Ramsey, Mori argued that:

> 'English should be adopted as the national language, and he campaigned widely for this proposal. In his eagerness for the English solution, he corresponded with

5 The Iwakura mission was named after Iwakura Tomomi, the head of the delegation, and many of its members were important figures in the recently established Japanese government, together with young specialists within different fields. For a thorough study on the Iwakura mission, see for example Ian Nish's (Ed.) *The Iwakura Mission in America and Europe – A New Assessment*.

> distinguished Western linguists in order to solicit their opinions about how it might be carried out. He went so far as to travel to New Haven, Connecticut, in order to consult with the eminent Yale linguist, William Dwight Whitney.' (2004:93)

Naturally, this suggestion did not receive a lot of support and even the Western linguists he consulted doubted it would be possible. (Imura, 2003; Ramsey, 2004)

However, the Japanese quest for knowledge and modernisation was not limited to sending students and delegations abroad. Quite a number of foreigners, mainly British and Americans, were invited to teach subjects like science, medicine and technology. Being specialists in their fields, the vast majority of these teachers had little or no knowledge of Japanese, making the language of instruction English. Most material used was naturally also in English, as very little of it had been translated into Japanese. This was true to the extent of English becoming the medium of instruction for all subjects at the university which is currently Tokyo University. English also became a requirement at Middle school for six periods a week, at first only for boys, but later for the girls as well. For a while even Elementary schools offered optional English instruction (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006; Koike and Tanaka, 1995).

### 1.2 Nationalism and Resistance to English

However, the rapid Westernisation that characterized the first period of the Meiji period slowed down as nationalism emerged with the Japanese victory in the Sino-Japanese war (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904-05). Goto-Shibata claims that:

> 'The external threat that Japan might be colonized by some powers had disappeared. She had been victorious in the wars against China and Russia, and had become a colonial power in her own right. Many in the Japanese elite began to think that both their country and they as individuals ought to be treated with certain respect and courtesy by the external world.' (2006:69)

This nationalism was fuelled by the adoption of the Japanese Constitution in 1889 and successful

renegotiations of treaties with Western nations made at the time of the Meiji restoration. An official ideology known as *kokutai*, emphasising the 'distinctive characteristics of Japan'[6] came into play and was deliberately propagated in almost all sectors (Mason and Caiger, 1997). Ironically, critics argue that the Japanese view of especially certain Asian ethnic groups came about as a result of learning English, thus also adopting native English speakers' view of the world. However, as Kubota (1998) points out, these views were very much present even long before the Meiji restoration. Therefore, rather than the Japanese attitude of looking down upon Asians being created as a result of Westernisation and learning English, it was being reinforced.

This sense of pride and superiority also became evident in the education. The students who had been sent abroad to study, as well as graduates from Japanese universities teaching in English, returned to become teachers. Being Japanese nationals teaching in Japan, the language of teaching naturally became Japanese. In addition to this a lot of the course material that was used had been translated into Japanese by this time. This, combined with the political movement stressing a return to the old and traditional *Japanese* led to a change in the status of English. Japanese replaced English as the preferred medium of higher education and the Ministry of Education started to emphasise the teaching of Japanese culture and language also in middle schools. The then Minister of Education, Inoue, even launched a campaign of 'education in Japan in Japanese' (Imura, 2003; Iino, 2002; Koike and Tanaka, 1995). This change in attitude to English, Westernisation and education in the latter half of the Meiji period has been described by Fujimoto-Adamson:

> 'Education from this point stressed a return to learning the value of Japanese and its linguistic origin of Chinese [...] This turn-around in the status of English was relatively quick, a result of both the practical consideration of returning Japanese lecturers from abroad wishing to teach Western knowledge through Japanese, and of the perhaps more politically-driven government initiative to regard the Japanese language as the language of instruction for nationalist purposes.' (2006:267)

This 'backlash' to the initial English boom in around and right after the Meiji Restoration continued into the Taisho period.

6 Mason and Caiger explains the meaning of the term *kokutai* as something like 'the distinctive character of Japan's institutions and processes of government'. (1997:294)

### 1.3 The Taisho Period

The Taisho period, lasting only 13 years, did not see the big changes or happenings with regard to English education. The anti-English feelings that appeared in the last half of the Meiji period were still strong, as was the nationalism and Occidentialism[7]. Another characteristic of the nationalism and imperialism in Japan in this period was a tendency of regarding the rest of Asia as an extension of Japan. Politics and culture was still very much linked to the *kokutai* ideology (Goto-Shibasaki, 2006). In fact, there was actually 'a growing movement advocating the abolition of teaching English' (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006:270).

In spite of this, the first conference for English Language Teaching in Japan was held in 1924. Prior to this, meetings where teaching methods were compared and discussed started a cooperation between the Ministry of Education and English teachers to determine overall policies. English was also 'widely adopted as a screening process for elite education' (Iino 2002:82). More books and publications on learning English were published during the Taisho period, the majority catering to examination preparation. I will have a further look on teaching methods shortly, however, it is worth noting that even though the status of English diminished, it became a requirement for higher education, learnt mainly to read texts and pass examinations rather than for communication.

### 1.4 Grammar-Translation Methods and Juken-Eigo

From old times Japan has adopted thoughts and culture from outside of its own boarders, most notably from China, and made it its own. Nakamura writes that:

> 'Historically, Japan modernised herself in the name of "*Wakon Kansai*" which literally means "Japanese spirit combined with with Chinese learning" by learning Chinese culture and the Confucian work ethic without losing her own cultural identity' (2002:66).

7 Occidentialism is Eastern-centred views of the West and Europe, like Orientalism is Western-centred conceptions of the Orient.

The Japanese writing system is largely based on Classical Chinese, so when the Japanese were starting to come in contact with the West the Chinese characters they had adopted from Chinese were fully exploited in translating text into Japanese. Naturally, especially during the first period of the Meiji period and the race for modernisation, there was need for coining a lot of new expressions and technical terms. The method they chose was to translate the roots of each new word into Classical Chinese. This direct translation method had earlier been used for translating Chinese texts into Japanese and was now used again for English.

Towards the end of the Meiji period two streams in foreign language education became evident that are still present in the current Japan. On one side was the government politics, wanting to import modern methodologies and putting emphasis on the communicative aspect of learning English, as seen especially right after the Meiji restoration. On the other side we have English education for the sake of preparing for entrance examinations of secondary schools and universities, called 'juken-eigo'. Listening and speaking were seldom practised in the classrooms, while a huge emphasis was put on translating Japanese sentences into English and English sentences into Japanese (Koike, 2013). As the juken-eigo practice emerged a new body of literature focusing on studying for the purpose of passing these entrance examinations also gained popularity. These publications tended to focus on the grammar-translation method; analysing and translating English sentences directly into Japanese, as this was what was needed to pass the entrance examinations.

The two streams of English education continued and became even more evident during the Taisho period. More publications catering to entrance examination appeared on the market and rather than the main goal of learners being to be able to communicate in English, memorising English grammar and vocabulary with little attention being paid to use and pronunciation was in focus. On the other side, the government invited an English linguist and specialist in language education, Harold E. Palmer, as a consultant to the Ministry of Education. Palmer developed a method of teaching referred to as 'Oral and Direct Methods' and established the English Teaching Research Institute. However, despite Palmer's efforts to spread his Oral methods in Japan, the ever growing nationalism and tendency of viewing English as the 'enemy language' combined with the fact that the Oral methods required a higher command of the English language than most Japanese English teachers could handle meant that these methods were not properly implemented until after WWII (Koike and Tanaka, 1995; Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006; Iino, 2002; Koike, 2013).

# 2. Showa

Lasting over 60 years, the Showa period (1926-1988) spanned over different wars, most notably WWII, and saw a significant amount of political, social and technological changes. The first radio broadcasting had started in 1925 and the radio quickly gained popularity. This made it possible to reach a larger number of people and easier to spread information as well as propaganda. The strong nationalism and imperialism that could be seen towards the end of the Meiji period and the Taisho period grew stronger in the beginning of the Showa period. Uniting the Japanese people and forging a common national identity was of great importance to the Japanese government to justify its imperialistic actions. Radio was used diligently and soldiers, often young Japanese men from all over the nation, were sent on a trip around the country before they were sent out to fight for Japan to imprint a sense of unity and 'Japanese-ness' in them. Shimazu argues that:

> '[T]he journey through Japan was an integral aspect of the consolidation of self-identity of the soldiers as consciously “Japanese” soldiers. Crucially, they were travelling through culturally and psychologically “familiar” territory, before facing the unknown and dangerous outside world.' (2006:56)

An effective military take-over of the government in the mid-1930s also fuelled nationalistic sentiments in Japan and there were strict rules against anti-patriotic expressions. In schools teachers were required to follow the education policy made by the nationalistic government and when the Second World War came along many teachers were deployed there was also a shortage of teachers. As is common in times of war, public education was neglected.

When the war ended and Japan was occupied by USA, however, things changed. The constitution came into force in 1947 and the American-lead government reformed the entire educational system in Japan: six years of elementary school, three years of middle school, three years of high school and four years of university[8]. Elementary and middle school were obligatory and in the 1947 educational reforms English was once again an important subject. Also, in 1952, the first Fulbright

8 This is still the system for formal education in Japan. There are also exceptions to this system, especially in university. For example is pharmaceutical studies 6 years and studies like medicine would also obviously be longer. If the student goes on to graduate school, this normally adds two years.

English teachers from USA arrived in Japan (Butler and Iino, 2005; Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006).

While a peace treaty with the Allied Powers was signed in 1951 and the American occupation ended in 1952, the signing of a security treaty between Japan and the United States meant a continuation of the presence of the American military in Japan. Not having to concern itself with military protection Japan could put all its efforts into developing its own economy. Thanks to this Japan experienced an amazing economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s. More Japanese citizens got the means and opportunities to go abroad and the interest for learning English was on a rise. This continued to be the case until the end of the Showa period.

### 2.1 Leading up to WWII

The first part of the Showa period, from its start in 1926 up to WWII, can be argued to be the peak of nationalistic sentiment and the anti-English attitudes in Japan. English was seen as the 'enemy language' to such a degree that a paper encouraging the total abolition of English education written by a professor of Japanese literature at Tokyo University, Fujimura, was published in 1927. This paper was arguing that Japan should stop looking to the West and uncritically copying their ideas and that learning foreign languages was burdening the Japanese students. Following this, the first reduction of English lessons at school happened in 1931 (Imura, 2003).

In 1942, in the middle of World War II and the Pacific War, all lecturers from Great Britain and the US in Japanese universities were dismissed and sent out of Japan. At the same time English lessons at especially Middle school were once again heavily reduced, disappearing completely from the girls' Middle school curriculum. There was also a shortage in teachers at the schools, as a significant number of men were drafted for the war (Koike, 2013). English education in Japan hit an 'all time low'. As Fujimoto-Adamson writes:

> 'Teachers were required to follow the more nationalistic government education policy and English was seen as a negative, foreign influence in society. Nationalistic sentiment was at a high and Japanese identity was re-conceptualized as being unique in character and spirit.' (2006:272)

It is worth noting, however, the interesting fact that the Naval Academy kept teaching English to its students all through this period, 'as if to prepare them for reconstruction of a new Japan (Koike and Tanaka 1995:17)'. According to Koike (2013) admiral Inoue Shigeyoshi at the Naval Academy was especially stressing the importance of English, claiming that being able to properly communicate with the Americans would be vital to rebuild Japan after the war.

### 2.2 A New Start

As mentioned before; before and during the Second World War, English education in Japan had been neglected and severely reduced. English had even been completely dropped from the curriculum for girls' middle schools despite having been a vital part of education in the Meiji period. However, as the war came to an end with Japan's surrender in 1945, the need for and interest in English education could once again be seen in Japan. This was largely influenced by the U.S. occupation and the U.S. military government. The Japanese educational system was drastically reorganised and in the 1947 educational reforms English was formally reintroduced as a subject (Iino, 2002; Butler and Iino, 2005).

Even after the peace treaty with the Allied powers was concluded in 1951 and Japan was granted independence from the U.S. in 1952 English education continued as under the occupation. Greater focus was put on oral comprehension and speaking, however, the two streams of foreign language eduction that appeared in the Meiji period once again became evident. The government was eager to import new methods in English education and the audio-lingual approach to teaching and learning advocated by Palmer prior to the war was to be implemented in all schools. However, in reality the 'juken-eigo' of memorising vocabulary and grammar in order to pass entrance exams dominated in the classrooms. Butler and Iino summarises it like this:

> 'In 1954 more than half of the junior high graduates […] went on to high school, and by 1956 English was adopted as a subject for the entrance examinations to almost all high schools in Japan. Although English was not a required subject by law, it became a de facto requirement for students in order to enter high school because of the

> entrance examination system.' (2005:28).

Leading business leaders called for improving the level of 'practical English' in 1956, arguing that the Japanese workforce would be better equipped to meet the international business society if company recruits were better able to communicate in English. However, despite this there were no great changes made in the English curriculum at public universities and other schools[9], not even after the Ministry of Education established the Council for improvement of English Teaching tasked with reviewing the directions of English language teaching in Japan. This council made several proposals on how to improve the English education, but the situation did not improve much (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006; Koike and Tanaka, 1995).

### 2.3 A New English Boom

The Tokyo Olympics in 1964 spearheaded a new English boom in Japan. In addition to this, increased social mobility and the growing economy allowed a huge number of Japanese going abroad in the 1970s, sparking a new interest in learning foreign languages. However, even though there was a massive interest for learning English and travelling, the issue of English education was far from resolved. In the mid-70s there was a debate on English education between the two intellectuals Hiraizumi Wataru and Watanabe Shoichi. Hiraizumi argued that only the top 5% of students would ever need English and therefore English should be a subject taught only to elite students. Disregarding the majority of students in Japan and the growing interest for learning English, these arguments were more or less arguments for the abolition of English education in general. On the other hand, Watanabe argued that juken-eigo was useful in training students intelligence (Imura, 2003). However, as Fujimoto-Adamson concludes:

> 'Although this counter-argument to Hiraizumi was necessary to avoid the creation of an English-speaking elite, the rationale supporting it still failed to consider the ever-growing needs of the population.' (2006:276)

9 In the private sector, however, the call for more practical English knowledge was answered, in large parts by the introduction of nationwide English proficiency tests assessing all four language skills (i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing).

When the number of English lessons in Middle school was then reduced from four to 3 class hours a week in 1981, not only English teachers, but also the public criticised the decision. This reduction was a part of a government policy of reducing class hours of several subjects to give some free time to students and teachers. The free time was supposed to help develop the students more holistically by no longer focusing purely on studying (Imura, 2003; Koike and Tanaka, 1995).

However, before the government reduced English class hours in what could be considered the humble start of the *yutori*[10] education policy, the TOEIC test[11] was introduced in 1979, providing an important means to compare Japanese students' English abilities with students from other countries. Many teachers became interested in the communicative approach towards English language teaching and the 'Association of Research for English Teaching in the Classroom' was established to research into classroom practices around the same time. In order to improve foreign language education in Japan the government also started the JET programme[12] in 1987, benefiting Japanese Middle and High school students.

### 2.4 The Audio-Lingual Approach and the Communicative Approach

The English linguist Harold E. Palmer that was invited by the Japanese government as a consultant prior to the war developed an oral method, often referred to as the 'Audio-Lingual Approach', for use in English language education. Supposed to be 'English education for foreigners', this method was created based on his understanding of how babies acquire and start learning languages, putting more emphasis on the listening and speaking aspects of language learning rather than reading and writing. However, due to the growing nationalism and anti-English sentiments in Japan at the time, followed by the Second World War, Palmer had gone back to Britain before his ideas were properly implemented in the post-War period.

The Audio-Lingual method that Palmer developed for English education in Japan was based on students learning the language by first hearing it and then repeating it. This would naturally lead to an understanding of and fluency in English, he believed, and the key point was to hold the classes

10 The *yutori* education policy will be discussed in the next chapter.
11 'Test of English for International Communication', an U.S. business English test
12 'Japan Exchange and Teaching' programme, a government initiative for youth from English speaking countries to come to teach English at Japanese Middle and High schools.

entirely in English without any use of Japanese. There were three steps to this oral method: 'understanding', 'merging' and 'integrated application'. At first, Japanese foreign language teachers were sceptical to the idea, claiming that this 'foreigner method' could only be taught by foreigners. However, as materials like text books became available, the teachers supporting this oral method increased (Imura, 2003).

In the 1950s and 1960s the oral method became widespread among Middle schools, but it did not catch on to the same degree among High school teachers and students. Because university entrance exams were focusing on translation, grammar and reading, English language lessons in High schools were still centred around grammar-translation methods and juken-eigo. In addition to this most Japanese teachers lacked the competence necessary to flawlessly execute Palmer's audio-lingual approach, and if the classes were to be held with no usage of Japanese at all, there was a risk of students not actually understanding what was going on.

While the audio-lingual approach bases itself on listening and repeating, the communicative approach, as the name suggests, put most of the focus on communication and cooperation. Students learn through working in groups and pairs, discussing, forming opinions and sharing them with others. The goal is to give them the skills and confidence necessary to hold everyday conversations and effortlessly being able to communicate with foreigners. This communicative approach did, just like the audio-lingual approach, however, require the teachers to have very good demand of the English language, which the majority did not have (Koike, 2013).

As we will also see in the next chapter, even though the government-implemented policies and curriculum focused on methods like the audio-lingual and communicative approach, promoting understanding and being able to communicate in English, the actual situation inside the classrooms were different. Because an important part of High school and university entrance exams was based on translation, grammar and reading English, juken-eigo was still the teaching method of choice at most schools. Even though the teachers and students would actually like to follow more oral methods, passing the entrance exams was considered more important.

# 3. Heisei

The current period, Heisei, has seen revolutionary changes in technology and in ways of thinking on line with what happened during the Meiji restoration. However, it has also so far been an era where natural disasters and social crises have shaken the Japanese society. The economic bubble that emerged at the end of the Showa period burst, the religious sect Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas in the Tokyo metro in 1995, the same year of the disastrous Kobe earthquake and the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami were all events that received worldwide attention.

At the same time big international sports events like the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano and the upcoming 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo has helped create more positive attention to Japan globally. The government has also put down a lot of effort into the marketing of 'Cool Japan' and advertising Japan as a tourist location that effectively mixes its well kept traditional culture with advanced, progressive technology. The JET programme introduced in the last years of the Showa period attracts young foreigners to Japan every year and has not only been a part of creating a positive image of Japan worldwide, but has also helped spark even more interest for English language education and the global world.

In addition to this the introduction of the internet, mobile phones and lately smartphones have made the world more accessible to the public and revolutionised the way we interact with each other. This has been true for the Japanese youth of the Heisei period in particular. Young Japanese are rarely seen without a phone in their hand and in the last years especially the chatting-app LINE has been immensely popular in Japan, giving room for new social problems like bullying and ostracism through SNS[13].

However, even though the interest for English language education has grown steadily through the Heisei period, there are still issues that needs to be addressed. Problems in the English education that we have seen through the periods are still evident in today's Japan and were accentuated by the economic downfall in the 1990s.

13 SNS: Social Networking Services

### 3.1 Economic Crisis

Japan entered the Heisei period in 1989 on an economic high. However, it was not to last. The 1990s have often been called 'the Lost Decade', where the Japanese society saw big crises. The economic bubble era that is considered to have started in 1986 brought along optimism and a feeling of being invincible. Banks would give people loans without thorough background checks and land and real-estate was seen as secure investments and the prices rocketed. Like most other bubbles the Japanese bubble was a result of low inflation, strong growth and uncontrolled expansion of money supply and credit. Thus, when the bubble inevitably burst in the beginning of the 1990s with the collapse of stock and land prices, it sent shock-waves throughout the country. The financial sector was brought to its knees and a time of despair, financial uncertainty and distrust of the system and the people in charge emerged. Kingston describes the 1990s in Japan as:

> 'a period when the economy imploded, the asset bubble collapsed, banks teetered on the edge of insolvency, unemployment skyrocketed, suicides increased and the leaders of Japan, Inc.[14] were tarnished by exposés of pervasive corruption. […] What was lost in the Lost Decade? Mountains of money, a sense of security, stable families, and the credibility of the nation's leadership.' (2004:1)

The financial sector regained stability through bailouts of banks and other similar financial institutions using the tax-payers' money, however, this lead to a loss of credibility among the public in the government leaders and bankers. The government's failure to act immediately after the 1995 Kobe earthquake exposed how the government was unprepared for a natural disaster, despite all of Japan should be trained to cope with a disaster like this, and did little to enforce its credibility with the public. Other tragedies like the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995 and nuclear accident in Tokaimura in 1999 also shocked the Japanese society, creating a sense of vulnerability (Kingston, 2004).

However, even though there was a lot of insecurity and loss of faith in the government in the 1990s, this was also a decade of huge technological development and increased globalisation. The

14 Japan, Inc. was a nickname for the corporate world in Japan that came about in the 1980s with the economic bubble. This was due to the close cooperation between the government and the business sector.

introduction of internet and development of mobile phone technology has changed the global society and made the world more accessible. It became easier to acquire knowledge and as the Japanese government made changes to the curriculum more children were continuing on to high school and university, despite only the first 9 years of schooling being obligatory.

Even though the Japanese education system was internationally acclaimed for its solid curricular contents and instructional quality in the 1990s, the Japanese themselves looked at it differently. Media, politicians, the public and even scholars considered the country to be in an 'educational crisis'. Problems like bullying, student suicides and killings, violence and 'classroom collapse', where the teachers lose control of the classrooms, were regularly reported on in the media. Questions were raised about psychological group harassment and the high-pressure atmosphere of the school system and there was a heated debate within the nation. The conservative side argued that the decline in discipline and moral values they meant was prevalent amongst the youth of Japan was a result of the more Western approach to education that been evident since the Occupation. The answer to this 'plague' was to teach ethics in school, put more emphasis on traditional Japanese culture and encourage respect for national symbols like the flag. The progressives, on the other hand, argued that the solution to this crisis was a bigger focus on individuality and self-fulfilment. In addition to this, there had been an ongoing discussion about government censorship of history textbooks in schools since the mid-1980s. Both within Japan and overseas the lack of acknowledgement of Japan's war history and victimisation of its Asian neighbours was being heavily criticised. However, despite an increasing number of Japanese acknowledging the wartime records from the pre-war period and the Second World War, a highly selective discourse still dominated Japanese history text books (Kingston, 2004: Takayama, 2007: Rose, 2006).

### 3.2 *Yutori* Education

In an attempt to take Japan away from the 'cramming school' practice and rather focus on building the students' ability to learn and think independently the so-called *yutori*[15] education was introduced in the 1990s. The school week was reduced from 6 to 5 days, the curriculum was slimmed down and there was a greater choice of subjects. This relaxation of the educational system was intended to 'develop in children a richness of mind (*yutaka na kokoro*)'(Rose, 2006:133) and was a response to

15 *Yutori* roughly means 'relaxation, latitude, more room for growth'.

the 'educational crisis' discussed earlier in this chapter believed to take place in Japanese schools. This educational system was supposed to give the students a sense of belonging and what it means to be Japanese. At the same, time the greater choice of subjects and more relaxed teaching was going to encourage the students in developing their individuality and creativity.

However, the more relaxed education of the *yutori* reform has been heavily criticised. Especially in big international league tables like PISA[16] the Japanese students' average performance dropped and again the nation's educational system was believed to be in dire needs of saving. Different books criticising the *yutori* education was published and there was a general consensus in Japan that the *yutori* students were lazy and did not have the same intellectual capacity as the generations before them due to a lower quality education. But, as Takayama (2007) argues, much of this 'crisis' within the Japanese educational system was blown out of portions or artificially created in order match certain political views and win the public's support. Still, there have been implemented educational reforms intended to 'save' the educational system from the *yutori* education and there are currently talks about re-introducing the 6-day school week[17]. This is also hoped to even out the gap between private schools that had not fully embraced the *yutori* education and public schools following the government's policies.

### 3.3 The 2003 Action Plan

Following the increasing globalisation and need for English the MEXT[18] issued an action plan in 2003 in order to improve the English level of Japanese students. The main purpose of this plan was to 'cultivate Japanese who can use English'. Various measures, like specifying the level of English to be attained at each point and steps to improve student's motivation to learn English, were to be implemented. The Action Plan was also intended to give greater autonomy to teachers and local governments, giving them opportunity to become active participants rather than passive consumers of language education policies. In addition to this a number of 'Super English High Schools' were to be created, where emphasis was not only put on English language education, but also other subjects like mathematics and science were to be taught in English. All English language teachers in the

16 PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment
17 http://www.japantoday.com/category/lifestyle/view/japan-considers-6-day-school-week-teachers-not-enthusiastic [Accessed 14 May 2015]
18 MEXT: Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology

country should receive intensive training in teaching methodology and the initial trend towards English-medium instruction that could be seen in the beginning og the Meiji period was once again evident in the government policies (Butler and Iino, 2004: Imura, 2003: Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006).

It is worth noting, however, that even though English is an obligatory subject in middle schools, the high school legislation states that any foreign language can be studied as a second language. In theory this gives opportunity for the high schools to choose which languages to offer their students, but in reality English is the only option, due to the fact that most university entrance exams put heavy emphasis on English (Ikegashira, et al. 2009).

### 3.4 ALTs and Oral Communication

The government initiated JET programme was started in 1987 and its purpose was to deepen mutual understanding and helping teaching English to the general public. This was hoped to boost the Japanese people's English skills and interest for English. A number of young native English speakers travelled to Japan and in 1990 the programme was expanded to include French and German, making it possible for native speakers of these languages as well to work as language teachers in Japan (Koike and Tanaka, 1995). The General Information Handbook for the JET programme states that the programme was created:

> 'with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations. It aims to promote internationalisation in Japan's local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange at the community level.' (2015:173)

The main job of the youths participating in the JET programme is to be assistants to the Japanese teachers of foreign language in especially middle and high schools, and they are usually referred to as 'Assisting Language Teachers (ALTs)'. The ALTs are providing Japanese students with a valuable opportunity to interact with and learn from native speakers. This also helps create interest around learning foreign languages, especially English. The programme has been very popular and it is currently the largest exchange programme of its kind in the world; in 2014 there was 4,476 ALTs in

Japan from 40 different countries participating in the JET programme (General Information Handbook for the JET programme, 2015: Koike and Tanaka, 1995). The total number of ALTs in Japan exceeds that of the number of participants in the JET programme, however, as there are several private companies operating with slightly different requirements hiring and providing ALTs as well[19].

The introduction of the JET programme and ALTs in the beginning of the Heisei period was also followed by national changes in the curriculum for English language education, and for the first time lessons in 'Oral Communication' became obligatory. This combination of a curriculum focusing on oral communication and getting native speakers into schools and classes shows that the Japanese government wanted to develop the student's speaking abilities to keep up with the international globalisation. As internet and mobile phones gained popularity, the need for being able to act and communicate on the international arena became more and more evident and state-run English language education in Japan continued under slogans like 'international understanding' and 'globalisation' (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). Iino summarises:

> 'According to the guidelines, the purpose of English education is to give students a practical command of written and spoken English and to promote understanding of the cultural and social backgrounds of English-speaking peoples.' (2002:87)

However, even though teachers are expected to adopt the oral communicative approach in the official curriculum, the truth is that the juken-eigo and grammar-translation methods still prevails in Japanese classrooms today. Very few teachers have the necessary communicative competence to teach a more oral method and in a Japanese school that is traditionally rather teacher-centred, implementing methods that anticipates student discussions and so on has proved to be a challenging task. O'Donnell describes a typical English lesson: '[e]mphasising translation over grammar study, the *yakudoku*[20] classroom is teacher-centred on the word for word translation of English text into Japanese.' (2005:302). He also sites a Japanese teacher of English who is torn between wanting to focus on the communicative aspect of the language and preparing his students for the entrance exams, proving that the teachers themselves are not comfortable with the situation. Despite the JET programme and introduction of ALTs having made it easier for the students to interact with native

19 Some of the larger private ALT providers include companies like Interac and Borderlink.
20 *Yakudoku*: Oral translation, reading and translating.

speakers, providing a better environment for utilising an oral communicative approach and improve the English skills of the Japanese, there is still a long way to go (Kam, 2002: O'Donnell, 2005).

### 3.5 The Current Situation

There is no doubt that the interest for learning the English language is very high in today's Japanese society. Not only is the government implementing policies that are supposed to improve English education in schools, but so-called *juku*s[21] as well as private language schools are enormously popular. People of all ages and social statuses are interested in studying English, from 'international' English focussed kindergartens to universities offering evening classes for senior citizens. Advertisements for private *ei-kaiwa*[22] schools can be found in every train and almost where ever you go in Japan and many companies offer English courses for their employees. Still, there are quite a lot of challenges connected to English education in Japan, as the current situation is far from ideal.

In an attempt to improve the level of English skill among Japanese students the government opened for introducing English as a subject in elementary school, after a heated discussion. Today most Japanese elementary schools offer some kind of English education. One challenge that is posed by the opportunity to introduce English language education in elementary school without having any clear requirements to the teaching is that every school will have a different focus and emphasis on English. Some elementary schools might try to offer English language lessons as often as once a week, utilising ALTs and language experts, while other schools might only have an English language introduction session once every semester i.e. by inviting foreign exchange students from nearby universities to come visit one day. The wide range of possibilities for which shape English language education takes in elementary schools makes it difficult for the teachers once the students enter middle school where there is a set national curriculum[23]. While some students might already know the Latin alphabet and have some basic knowledge about the English language, other students might not have had a lot of experience with it at all. Teaching classes where the point of departure is possibly this different is certainly not an easy task for the teachers (Ikegashira, et al. 2009).

21 *Juku*: Cramming schools, often designed to help students prepare for entrance exams.
22 *Ei-kaiwa:* English conversation. These schools usually offer one-on-one lessons with a native speaker.
23 Even though this might very well be the case in private schools as well, it is in the public schools this problem is most evident, as private schools are more free to set their own curriculum.

When it comes to university, most university entrance exams by far has an English language part that plays a central role in getting accepted. These entrance exams have received a massive amount of criticism for only testing the students' ability to memorise, rather than what they actually know. The focus is on reading and writing, with little attention being given to the oral and aural aspects of English. Understandably, testing oral and listening skills require quite some preparation and logistics, but in recent years at least a listening part has been incorporated into the national entrance exams for university (Butler and Iino, 2005). Still, the heavy emphasis on especially reading skills in the entrance exams leads to a teacher-centred classroom and juken eigo prevails, even if teachers might want to teach a more communicational English and the fact that the juken eigo might destroy the students' motivation for learning English. As Iino describes:

> 'Many students start studying English in junior high school with eager anticipation. Unfortunately, due to the emphasis on memorization and learning about English, rather than using English for the purpose of communication, many lose interest.' (2002:88)

English thus becomes a 'necessary evil' in order to pass exams and get into university, even though many students are actually interested in learning the language.

Although there are no formal requirements for foreign language education at university level, most universities do require their students to take two foreign languages, with English being the most popular. The number of credits students will be required to take varies from university to university and is also dependent on the student's major[24]. Every university and professor is free to decide the method of instruction and lesson content themselves and as most universities has study abroad programs many students also have the opportunity to go overseas to practice their English (Iino, 2002).

Through conversations with Japanese university students and teachers I have learnt that many are dissatisfied with the current educational system in Japan, especially with regards to foreign language education. Both students and teachers wish for the teaching to be communication-focussed, but the reality of entrance exams and often limited abilities of the teachers makes it

24 A student majoring in i.e. foreign languages or international relations will naturally be required to take more foreign language credits than a student majoring in i.e. economics.

difficult to replace the grammar-translation method and memorisation that dominates in English lessons today. One example of this is a girl who just graduated from university and currently works as a cabin attendant. Living outside of Japan and using English every day, she told me that she is still not confident in her English. She was especially embarrassed of her pronunciation and told me that she wished her English education had been more focussed on communication and oral English. Other Japanese has also also pointed out the fact that they do not dare to speak or express themselves in English unless they know it is absolutely correct, both grammatically and with phonetically. This reluctance to make mistakes in front of others, I believe can be seen as a 'cultural trait' of Japan and the Japanese and ties in with the difficulty of changing traditions and 'the way it has always been done' that can be found in all societies when it comes to the challenges of reforming English education in Japan.

Trying to predict the future is futile, but one thing is for sure: the world society is only getting more and more globalised and internationalised and English is going to continue to be the most important *lingua franca*[25] for at least some time ahead. In order to keep up with the rest of the world Japan has realised that proficiency in the English language is crucial. English education in Japan has to evolve in order to achieve this, however, there are still many issues that needs to be addressed and it not easy to decide what the best solution would be. Therefore, I will have a look at one method in foreign language education that seems to have been catching on in Japan in the recent years in the next chapter.

## 4. SALC

In this chapter I will introduce one foreign language teaching/learning method that has caught on among an increasing number of Japanese universities the last ten years; self-access learning centres (SALC). As all individuals think and acquire knowledge differently there is no such thing as a single universal teaching or learning method that will fit everyone. This might be especially true when it comes to learning and teaching languages and one student's preferred method might not be helpful for another. Tackling this problem is one of the biggest challenges teachers encounter in the

25 Lingua Franca: A language that is used as a 'bridge language' among people who speak various different languages.

classrooms. This is where the principle of self-access, or autonomous, learning comes into play and many schools and learning institutions have embraced this kind of learning and teaching strategy, establishing special centres dedicated to self-access learning.

As of now, the self-access learning centres that have been and are being established in Japan are almost exclusively to be found at universities. This might be due to the bigger 'freedom' students enjoy in university, but also because it is easier to take responsibility as you get older. The juken-eigo that dominates Japanese middle and high school classrooms also makes it difficult to establish SALCs on the levels under university. However, if the self-access learning methods really catches on among Japanese universities, we could perhaps see SALCs being established at middle and high schools as well in the future.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that this is but one suggestion on how to improve the English knowledge in Japan. As will be discussed later in this chapter there are many challenges when it comes to establishing a SALC and making it both attractive and useful for the learners.

### 4.1 Self-Access Learning

Self-access learning is founded on the principle of *autonomy* and *independent learning*. Being able to take control over one's own learning process or being able to get qualified advice and guidance on what kinds of methods are available and how to apply these methods will in most cases help speeding up the progress and make learning and studying more fun and interesting. This will also encourage learners to develop strategies they themselves find useful.

However, before exploring self-access learning closer, it is useful to first have a quick look at the concepts of autonomy and independent learning. These concepts are very hard to define and Gardner and Miller give the following reasons for this:

> 'First, different writers have defined the concepts in different ways. Second, they are areas of ongoing debate and therefore definitions are continuing to mature as more discussion takes place. Third, these concepts have developed independently

> in different geographical areas and therefore they have been defined using different (but often similar) terminology.' (1999:5)

Especially the third reason might be of relevance when talking about a traditionally more teacher-centred educational culture like we can see in Japan versus a traditionally more individualistic educational culture in the West. While someone from the West might consider autonomy being giving all responsibility and initiative to the learner, giving them opportunity to take full control over their own learning, independent learning in Japan might still have a central spot for an advisor guiding the students through the material. No matter what, however, they key point is to give the learners' the opportunity to take control of their own learning, preferably with the possibility of asking for guidance or advice from a teacher of counsellor. Another thing that is important with regards to independent learning is for the learner to be able to decide what aspects of the language to focus upon and also to choose *when* they want to study. The responsibility of the institution and the advisor that is guiding these learners will therefore be to help these learners reach the goals they have set for themselves by providing a variety of activities and materials for language acquisition. To encourage the learners to develop and find strategies they find useful for learning it is important that it is the learners who set the goals (Gardner and Miller, 1999).

However, letting the learners set the goals themselves is not necessarily as easy as it sounds. The concept of self-access and independent learning is alien to many and it might be difficult for many learners to accept more responsibility for their learning than they are already accustomed to. It is easy to make the assumption that what the students actually want is to allowed to individually decide how to and what to study and take control of their own learning process. The truth is that the exact opposite is often the case. Chamot describes the experience of a teacher trying to introduce autonomy in learning during an English as a second language lesson:

> 'The fifteen-year-old students looked at her in puzzled silence for a moment, then one brave girl implored, “Miss, *please* don't make us think! We don't want to choose. Just tell us what to do and we will do it.”" (2014:foreword)

The fact that many students might be unwilling to consider and decide on which learning methods works the best for them personally is important to keep in mind when trying to promote self-

autonomous learning. Rather than expecting the students to readily accept full autonomy immediately, scaffolding them gradually into taking more control over their own learning has been found to be the most effective way (Croker and Ashurova, 2012). In order to achieve this, many learning institutions and schools have created SALCs specialising in and helping the students with learning independently. One example of this is a more learner-centred approach to English education in Malaysia that has resulted in 'the provision of self-access centres since 1990, spreading to primary schools. In these self-access centres, independent learning is encouraged, and learning a language like English becomes less threatening.' (Kam, 2006:10).

### 4.2 SALC in Japan

In a country where education has traditionally been teacher-centred like in Japan many learners might be unfamiliar with the concept of self-access learning. It can be difficult for the students to get accustomed to taking control of their own learning, especially with having to focus on preparing for the entrance exams at middle and high school. When they then enter university, finally free from the pressure of the entrance exams, it is difficult for them to change their view of English language learning. This makes it quite challenging to convince these students to visit and utilise a SALC. Croker and Ashurova claim that:

> 'For many first-year Japanese university students, attending a self-access learning centre (SALC) can be daunting. From their experience, English has often been a language that has been taught inside the classroom under the direct supervision and control of the teacher. The freedom of a SALC may easily bewilder these students. That freedom challenges their assumptions about learning by asking them to accept that a language is primarily learned and not taught, that this learning can occur outside the classroom and beyond the teacher's gaze, and that it can be a collaborative, self-directed endavour.' (2012:237)

Although it is perhaps a little patronising, this testifies of the difficulty of introducing self-access learning to Japanese university students and encourage them to utilise a SALC. However, it is not an impossible task. A number of Japanese universities have already established their own self-

access learning centres and other universities are in the progress of establishing. There are many different ways to run a SALC and every centre has its own unique collection of materials and approach to self-autonomous learning. To prove this point, I will take a brief look at the respective SALCs at two different Japanese universities. Both these centres have grown into prosperous SALCs with full-time staff and proper facilities, but the approach they have chosen to take to self-access learning and SALC is very different.

One of these SALCs, at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), a small private university in Chiba prefecture, has chosen a 'materials-focussed' approach to self-access learning and SALC. In addition to focussing on having a wide range of materials available to the students KUIS is also putting heavy emphasis on the SALC being a place students find fun and inviting. It is believed that the SALC should be voluntary and that effective materials design is important to help the development of learner autonomy. The university is producing most of their materials, including podcasts and videos, themselves to make sure their materials are tailored to their students' needs and that the copyrights law is not violated[26]. As a result,

> 'The SALC contains over 10,000 materials such as books, DVDs, CDs, magazines, and computer-based activities. It also provides equipment, facilities and services to facilitate language study and practice such as multi-purpose rooms, audio-visual equipment, computers, and an advisory service. The SALC also runs activities such as workshops, competitions, and events.' (Kershaw, et al. 2010:152)

In order to promote the SALC all new students are given a tour of the centre and teachers encourage them to visit and utilise it. There are also announcements sent through e-mail and information about the centre can be found around the whole campus. Being a university that specialises in languages and culture, the KUIS SALC is intended to be an English-only environment that provides the students with opportunities to develop their language skills as well as their learner autonomy. Full-time staff are working in the SALC with creating new materials, giving advise and helping students find and use the materials available to them. Modules in 'English for Specific Purposes (ESP)' are also offered, allowing students to study business English directed towards certain lines of work.

26 The Japanese copyright law is very strict and it can be challenging to find material that does not violate it.

Each student is assigned an advisor for the module they are taking, who will help the student analyse what they need and their learning objectives as well as provide assistance in finding resources. This way, the ESP modules are aiming to promote self-access learning while at the same time providing individual support based on the student's needs and objectives (Knight, 2010: Mynard & McLoughlin, 2014).

While KUIS is counting on their materials and word of mouth to attract students to their SALC, Nanzan University, a prestigious private university in Aichi prefecture, has developed a 'push-pull' strategy to scaffold the students into utilising the self-access learning facilities at the school. This strategy is implemented already when the students enter the university, as teachers 'push' by for example assigning homework that requires a visit to the SALC and events designed to 'pull' students in are being held regularly. To make sure that English is the focus of this centre, the 'push-pull' strategy is being complemented with rules against speaking in Japanese and a focus on people rather than having a lot of materials. This means that most activities would involve human interactions where the students would bring their own materials, if needed, like interviews, rather than activities like reading newspapers or watching English DVDs (Croker and Ashurova, 2012).

The result of this 'materials-light' approach was the creation of a social environment that became the main reason for most students to continue visiting the SALC, even if their initial purpose had been to complete the homework assigned to them by their teacher or to improve their English skills. In addition to this, a stamp system was implemented within the SALC. This was not only to hold the students' accountable for the work they did while visiting the centre, but also one of the 'pull' strategies. The students receive a stamp card with the opportunity to earn one stamp for each 30 minutes they spend in the SALC, starting from the 'bronze level'. Finishing a stamp card allows them to move up to the silver, gold and then member-levels and the colour of the stamps also vary depending on the activity that has been done, adding an extra motivational factor (Croker and Ashurova, 2012).

### 4.3 Challenges in Establishing and Running a Successful SALC

Self-access learning is considered one of the possible ways to improve English language education

in Japan. However, even though a form of learning where every student is free to adapt the methods to what suits them personally might seem like a perfect solution, there are also a number of challenges in establishing and running a successful SALC. One of them is, as mentioned earlier, the issue with copyright laws. The copyright laws in Japan are very strict and since SALCs, albeit being a part of the school, is considered a public space separate from the classrooms, materials and activities for the centre follow stricter rules than normal classroom teaching (Kershaw, et al. 2010).

In order to establish a SALC a deal of funding is needed to get hold of materials and possibly hiring staff to help in the centre. Especially when a SALC newly opens the availability of materials can be a major constraint, especially if the budget is limited as well. Most centres build up their materials collection gradually as the centre and budget grows. Having access to proper facilities is also crucial to run a successful SALC, no matter what approach the institution chooses to have to self-access learning. A SALC with a focus on materials will need space to store these materials properly and to give the students room for utilising them. However, even with a 'materials-light', communication-focussed approach having enough space is important. Creating opportunities for the students to interact with each other by for example decorating the SALC like a café might be very efficient in improving their language skills, but it does require quite a lot of space (Croker and Ashurova, 2012).

The perhaps biggest challenge when it comes to establishing and running a successful SALC, however, is to attract the students to it and make them use it. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, there have been created various strategies to achieve this and each centre needs to adapt and develop a method that suits their conditions. As a main rule it is important to create an environment which makes the students feel welcome as well as having projects and activities that are able to catch the interest of the students. Particularly when it comes to students who might be struggling with or who are not very interested in foreign language learning to begin with, a friendly, 'safe' atmosphere would help make the visit a positive experience. Advertising the SALC is also important to make students aware of its existence and will help attracting students who are not necessarily language majors. A 'push-pull' strategy like the one Nanzan University has developed combined with the stamp-reward system might seem like a perfect way to scaffold the students into visiting and taking advantage of the SALC. However, this requires the cooperation of teachers, resources and available staff, making it hard to implement in a newly started centre.

It is difficult to predict in which way the English education in Japan is going and whether self-access learning centres will be the 'new big thing'. What is certain, however, is that self-access learning done right can be an amazing resource and motivational factor for students and teachers of all ages.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the English language education in Japan has gone through highs and lows since the Meiji restoration. While there was immense interest for English in the beginning of the Meiji period, anti-English sentiments appeared for various reasons and English was considered the 'enemy language' until the end of the Second World War. As the war ended, however, a new English boom could be found and it is still going strong in the current Japan. One thing that has been more or less consistent when it comes to English education in Japan, however, is the discrepancy between the government's education policies and what is actually going on inside the classrooms.

The Meiji period started off with an English boom initiated by the need for modernisation and everything Western was considered positively. The Japanese government sent delegations and students to America and Europe and invited specialists from the US and UK to teach subjects like technology and science at Japanese universities. Because these lecturers did not have any knowledge of the Japanese language, all instruction ans all classes were naturally conducted in English. This closely tied in with the quest for modernisation and at some universities English even became the official medium of instruction. The Ministry of Education was established in the beginning of the Meiji period and soon foreign language education was introduced in the middle school curriculum at national level. The first Minister of Education, Mori Arinori, even went as far as to advocate, rather unrealistically, the abolition of Japanese in favour of English as the national language (Imura, 2003: Koike, 2013).

However, about mid-way into the Meiji period the situation started to change. Japan had been able to modernise itself in an amazing speed and was already more or less on par with the West. In

addition to this the students who had been sent abroad to study and acquire advanced technical knowledge were returning to Japan. Obviously, being Japanese, they were able to teach in Japanese, eliminating the need for teaching the subjects in English. Combined with more literature having been translated and adopted into Japanese, the status of the English language changed from being seen as the gate-key to knowledge and Western culture to that of a normal school subject. At the same time nationalism started to grow in Japan, creating a negative image of the English language and the West. Japan, having succeeded to such a degree with catching up with the technological advances of the West, started to consider itself as the 'saviour of Asia' and patriotism developed with a focus on what was traditionally *Japanese*. These anti-English sentiments continued to grow through the Taisho period and the first part of the Showa period. English did, however, continue to be seen as way to measure academic knowledge and remained an important part of university entrance exams (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006).

When the Second World War ended English was again gaining popularity, much due to the American Occupation. After having been dropped from the national curriculum for middle schools, English was reintroduced in 1947 and even though the Occupation ended in 1952, the interest for English language education kept increasing. As Japan had signed a security treaty with the US, they could devote all focus on rebuilding the country economically after the war, not having to worry about enforcing their military. This resulted not only in an incredible economic growth for Japan, but also in recognition from the rest of the world. The economic miracle also allowed for more Japanese to go abroad as they got the means and methods to do so, helping fuelling the interest for English language education. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics helped spark the interest for foreign language learning as well and there were many discussions about English education in schools. However, even though there was a growing interest for English among the public and companies called for a more 'practical' approach to learning English to better be able to communicate with global business partners, actual education in schools was focussed on teaching the students the English that was needed to pass entrance exams (Iino, 2002: Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006).

The economical miracle continued into the Heisei period, but it did not last for long. The economic bubble burst in the beginning of the 1990s and sent shock-waves through the whole nation, as land and stock prices collapsed. Stability was regained by using the tax-payers' money to bailout banks and other similar financial institutions, however, this also resulted in the government leaders and

bankers losing credibility among the public. At the same time, more students were continuing on to high school and university after finishing the obligatory nine first years of education. The JET programme and ALTs gained popularity and English language education was considered especially important. Different educational reforms were introduced, and perhaps the most discussed one was the *yutori* education. This reform was hoped to be the solution to problems like student suicides and bullying that had emerged in the educational system by relaxing the curriculum, but as students' performances weakened, it became clear that the *yutori* education had the opposite effect. As a result the 2003 Action Plan was implemented, with the goal of 'cultivating Japanese who can use English'. Japanese schools were supposed to teach a more communication oriented English and the plan outlined various measures to boost especially the English language education in Japan. However, as high school and university entrance exams are still putting heavy emphasis on word for word translation and memorising English, little change has actually happened inside the classrooms (Imura, 2003: Kingston, 2004).

We have seen that the discussion about English language education in Japan has also often been connected with discussions about the Japanese language and politics in Japan. This was seen not just in the debate on standardising the Japanese language in the start of the Meiji period, where there were arguments to abolish Japanese in favour of English, but also in the anti-English sentiments during the latter half of the Meiji period throughout the Second World War. This has become especially evident in education reforms, where English has usually held a central position.

Even though the Japanese educational system has been internationally acclaimed for its high level curriculum and instructional stability, with over 70% of high school students continuing on to university in 2012[27], there are still problems that need to be addressed. Bullying, student suicides and violence are all proofs that the educational system is still not optimal for the students, despite various educational reforms aimed at handling these issues have been implemented. Kingston relentlessly claims that:

> 'The problems of Japan's intellectually impoverishing eduction system are deeply embedded in existing social structures; they have been generally impervious to

27 MEXT Information Pamphlet on 'Higher Education in Japan' (2012): http://www.mext.go.jp/english/highered/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2012/06/19/1302653_1.pdf [Accessed 22 May 2015]

> reform because the process has been co-opted by those who stand to lose most from an overhaul of the system. The numbing process of socialization that passes for education in Japan seems programmed to churn out disciplined workers and listless and apathetic citizens.' (2004:268)

This description of the education system is perhaps exaggerated, but it is quite obvious that Japan is struggling, especially when it comes to the English education. The juken-eigo with its grammar-translation method has been prevailing in Japanese classrooms since the Meiji period, putting a bigger focus on passing written entrance exams than on practical use and communication.

A phrase that is often used to describe the situation in Japan today is 'English Allergy'. This phrase is referring to the general Japanese population's reluctance to speak English and their insisting on not knowing English at all, even after having studied it for several years at school. It seems like an attitude of 'Japanese cannot speak English, so there is no use in trying' is common. Because many Japanese stay most of their life in Japan, working office jobs and living lives where they do not necessarily meet or have to interact with people from other countries, many also seem to believe that they will never have any use for English language skills. An increasing number of Japanese have, however, started to realise necessity of being able to communicate on an international level, and even normal office workers might end up having to meet and work with people from outside of Japan. Still, the 'English Allergy' is very much an issue in contemporary Japan.

One part of the problem might be a culturally inherent reluctance to express oneself without being completely sure that the grammar and pronunciation is correct. This fear of making mistakes and 'losing face' in front of others make many Japanese hesitant of expressing themselves in English before they are fluent, something which in most cases is actually an obstacle in developing their English skills. No matter how long and seriously they have been studying English, very many Japanese will claim that they do not know or even understand the language. Without trying and making mistakes it is very hard to learn, something which is particularly true when it comes to learning languages. As this is something that seems to be deeply ingrained in the Japanese society it not easy to turn it around, and it is something that needs to be taken into consideration when teaching Japanese learners. What I believe is the best way to cope with this obstacle of not being willing to make mistakes is to make sure that the learning environment is friendly and that it makes

the learner feel safe. A well-run SALC can help create such an environment, making the learning process more fun for the learners and at the same time help boosting the skill level.

Introducing English language education already in elementary school might also help improving the level of English skills in Japan. Although many elementary schools started introducing English language education earlier, foreign language became a regular class for fifth and sixth grade from 2011. As is the case in high school, 'foreign language' basically means English, as the absolute majority of schools offers only English as a foreign language. At that same time as foreign language education was introduced in elementary school, however, the amount of obligatory Japanese language education was also increased. This was supposed to make sure the Japanese level of the students did not suffer, as many critics of foreign language education feared, and to let the students know that Japanese was important too[28] (Ikegashira, et al. 2009).

What is absolutely certain about English education in Japan, is that it needs to be changed and more focussed on communication in order for Japan to keep up with the rest of the world. This is because, as Nakamura points out:

> 'In a new paradigm of globalisation in a new cross-cultural century, we need a more flexible and more eclectic attitude towards other people and other cultures for the purpose of multicultural coexistence.' (2002:66)

28 http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/mar/08/japan-launches-primary-english-push [Accessed 22 May 2015]

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