

Foreign Language Education in Japan and the United States

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In the media in Japan you can often see complaints and criticisms of the country's education system. These attacks often center on English teaching. So it might be interesting to compare foreign language teaching in Japan with foreign language teaching in another country, such as the United States. Though European schools probably do a better job of foreign language teaching, Japan's system doesn't look too bad compared to America's. I've taught in public schools in both Japan and the United States, and though there are differences, many things are very similar. Let's take a detailed look at the who, what, when, where, why and how of language teaching in Japan and the United States.

Who

Who are the students? Who are the teachers?

In Japan almost everyone takes English in junior high and high school, but in the United States foreign language teaching is not quite so universal. The standards for graduation are different in every state, schools often offer a choice of three or four languages to study, and students generally have more freedom to choose their courses.

Most American students take a foreign language in high school, but in some states students can graduate without taking a language. They can take art, music or an extra science class instead. If a foreign language is required, it is usually only required for two years. So many students don't take a language class in their last year or two of high school. Though this may happen in Japan at a technical or agricultural school, in my experience it is fairly rare. Likewise in junior high schools English education in Japan is universal, but this is not the case with foreign languages in America.

In Japan most English teachers are Japanese who have learned English as a foreign

language. Likewise in the United States most French and Spanish teachers are Americans who have learned the foreign language at school. Both countries also have large numbers of native speakers teaching the foreign languages, but their ways of using the native teachers are different.

Japan does not have many immigrants, especially from English-speaking countries, so it is difficult to bring native voices into the classroom. Over the last twenty years, the Japanese government and local school systems have used team-teaching programs to give the students a chance to interact with native speakers. Through the JET Program and private companies, native English teachers are brought in to teach in a team with Japanese English teachers. Since these teachers are not long-term residents of Japan, many of them do not have the Japanese language ability or the legal qualifications to teach on their own as regular teachers, so they need the help of a Japanese teacher to teach effectively.

The United States, with its immigrant population, has quite a lot of native speakers of almost any language in the world, so many of these people become teachers in the public schools. They are American citizens and they speak English, too, so it is not hard for them to earn a teaching certificate and work in the schools like any other American. As a result, there is little need for a team-teaching system.

What

What do the students learn? What is the curriculum? What do they do in class?

The most basic difference here is the choice of the language to learn. In Japan nearly everyone studies English, but in the United States students can usually choose between Spanish and French, possibly with other choices such as German, Latin, Japanese or Chinese. The reasons for this are both economic and cultural.

The reason Japanese have to learn English is clear: English is commonly used in international communication in business, academics and the media. Though it may seem more useful to learn the language of a nearby country, perhaps Chinese or Korean, most people learn English because it gives them access to information from all around the world, not only their neighbors. In fact, Chinese and Korean students learn English, too, so when people from different Asian countries meet, they usually

speak English.

In America, the picture is more complicated. Traditionally many people studied French and German for literary or scientific reasons. As English has taken over the primary role in international affairs, these reasons are no longer as important. Since the main goal of language learning now is communication with people from other cultures, Spanish has become the most popular language to study. This is because of the large number of Hispanics in the United States and because Spanish is the first language in Mexico and other neighboring countries.

Given that Japanese study English and Americans study Spanish and other languages, what exactly do they study? The stereotype is that the Japanese learn grammar while Americans learn conversation, and this is partly true. Though Japanese schools offer courses in oral communication, most of their work is on grammar, reading and vocabulary. Japanese English textbooks generally have much harder grammar points than American foreign language texts, and the students also often have to learn long vocabulary lists. Since these topics are covered on college entrance exams, they naturally get more attention in the high school curriculum. The stereotype that Americans learn to communicate, however, is exaggerated. American foreign language texts are usually more communicative than Japanese books, but actual classroom activities are not that different. Since it is difficult to give grades to thirty students on their speaking ability, most teachers rely on vocabulary quizzes, workbook assignments and other written work. The main difference, in my experience, is that foreign language ability is not a factor in college admission in America, so generally language study is not taken as seriously.

When

When do students start to study foreign languages? How often do they have lessons?

Until fifteen or twenty years ago, most junior high schools in the United States did not have foreign language programs, but now most schools offer at least one foreign language. Both countries have recently tried to build foreign language programs in the elementary schools, but both countries have had problems finding qualified teachers and setting a clear curriculum.

As I mentioned earlier, American students also have a tendency to drop foreign languages from their schedules in the later years of high school. As a result, most American students get less foreign language education than Japanese students get. Leaving out the irregular lessons in elementary schools, many Americans graduate high school and even go on to university with only two or three years of foreign language study, but almost all Japanese high school graduates have six years of English lessons.

Class schedules in Japanese high schools tend to be more complicated than those in American schools. Students have different classes each day of the week, and they take more subjects than Americans do. Of course it varies from school to school, but American students typically have six subjects each semester, and they have all six classes every day, always in the same order. In an American Spanish course, grammar, reading, writing and conversation are all combined in one class. In Japan, on the other hand, a student may have a grammar class one day, reading the next, and then oral communication the next. Sometimes they even have two different English classes on the same day. Such a schedule would be very unusual in the United States.

Where

Where do people study foreign languages?

Foreign language study is largely centered in the schools in both countries, but there is one major difference. In Japan, thousands of children and adolescents study English in conversation schools. In addition, many students attend cram schools, not only for English but for all subjects. This system of school-outside-of-school hardly exists in the United States. Tutoring centers like the Japanese cram school have appeared in the last ten years or so, but I have never heard of a conversation school for children in America.

Why

What is the purpose of the program? What are the goals of language study?

It is difficult to know the real purpose of a program in the public schools because the official goals and the practical realities often don't match. In both countries edu-

cators speak of the goals of international understanding and economic competitiveness. However, actually watching a few lessons might give you a different idea. In Japan, the purpose often seems to be simply to pass college entrance exams. In America, on the other hand, some schools tend to see foreign language classes as a treat, a break from the serious business of real study. And of course in both countries, high school language teaching sometimes appears to be designed for the simple purpose of keeping students busy.

In spite of such cynical ideas, I believe most teachers and students are honestly operating with the goal of communication in mind. To reach this goal, perhaps Japanese teachers are more likely to emphasize grammatical knowledge and American teachers are more likely to emphasize conversation practice. However, people in both countries are probably working toward the same end.

How

How do they study? What is the procedure of the lessons? How effective are the two systems? How could they be more effective?

To see the difference in focus between Japanese and American curricula, you only need to look at a few textbooks. The placement and size of different kinds of readings and exercises can tell you how important they are.

A unit in a Japanese high school English text typically begins with a rather long reading, sometimes as long as four or five pages. The key words are translated at the bottom of the page, and there are often comprehension questions. Teachers might explain the meaning of the passage in great detail or have the students translate it into Japanese. Grammar explanations and brief practice exercises come after that. Conversation activities often come from a separate book in a separate course.

In an American text, there is often a reading at the end of the unit, but it is usually much shorter and teachers tend to skip it in class. The focus of a unit in an American textbook is usually the conversation, and it is usually near the beginning of the unit. Then there are explanations of grammar points found in the conversation, followed by practice exercises. Generally an American unit will not have as many grammar points as a Japanese unit because the conversation is fairly short,

maybe ten lines or so.

In spite of these differences, schools are schools. Teachers explain things. They ask questions. They write on the blackboard. Students do written exercises. They study vocabulary. They take tests and quizzes. Public school language education is still public school education whatever country you are in.

Determining which of the two systems is more effective is difficult since the goals are so different. The United States system would never be effective preparing students for Japan's grammar-based university entrance exams. On the other hand, the Japanese system doesn't always reach the American goal of raising students' enthusiasm for the language. However, with the recent changes in the Japanese system and the general interest in English in Japanese society, I would guess that Japanese students, on the whole, end up speaking English better than most American students can speak the foreign languages they study.

To improve the programs, each country should probably try to learn from the other. Japanese schools are already including more oral skills in their courses, but teachers are under pressure to prepare students for grammar and vocabulary tests with limited class time. Still there are ways. Today's young people already benefit from more listening practice and contact with native speakers than previous generations got. If teachers can add more speaking opportunities, such as pair practice, information-gap activities or surveys, they can reinforce the grammar in an interesting way. This kind of practice could then lead to student-generated topics and content, and they can apply the grammar they are learning in real-life situations. When a teacher presents a grammar point, the teacher could ask the students to think of the Japanese equivalent and then to brainstorm situations in real life where they might use that Japanese. Then, with a clear idea of the context, the class can create conversations in English using the new grammar point. Finally they could move to open-ended role-play situations.

America is not likely to move toward more grammar-based teaching, but there is a political movement to hold students to higher standards. Many Americans want to go back to the "good old days," but tight government budgets and changing family structures put pressure on teachers and students alike, making it difficult to try dra-

matic reforms in our school systems. However, American students could learn a lesson in discipline by watching the way Japanese students often cram to pass their exams. Even so, reading the cries in the Japanese media about “yutori kyoiku” and the lack of discipline among today’s youth, I think the two countries’ problems may be quite similar.

Looking at who learns and teaches languages, when, where and how they do it, as well as their overall goals, you can see some clear differences between Japan and the United States. The most obvious are in the focus on grammar and the overall quantity of time spent on English study in Japan. However, there are also many ways in which the two systems are quite similar, largely due to the institutional setting of the public school. Given that common factor, the similarities may always outweigh the differences.

