

PROFESSIONALISM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider the concept of professionalism in English Language Education (ELE) in Japan, especially with reference to the teachers' licence system. In Japan there have been heated discussions about school education. Among the proposals which have recently been made are the following: class size can now be diminished as befits each individual school, postgraduate professional schools for teachers (with a one-year course) will be established very soon, and a system of renewing teachers' licences will be introduced in the near future. All these changes have been planned in the name of "improving teachers' skills and abilities," in spite of the fact that there may be a strong objection from the standpoint of professionalism: in order to improve teachers' skills and abilities, proper teacher-development programmes, which are based on school-based classroom research projects initiated by teachers themselves, not on governmental (Local Education Authority) initiatives, should first be implemented.

With regard to ELE, also, five drastic changes have already been introduced: (1) in 2006, listening comprehension was introduced into the government-sponsored entrance examination for public and private universities administered by the National Centre for University Entrance Examination; (2) scores from examinations such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) are to be weighted highly when applications for teaching positions are considered by Local Education Authorities (when applicants have already reached the required score in either TOEFL (over 550 points in the paper-based examination) or TOEIC (over 730 points), they do not need to take the English examinations devised by Local Education Authorities); (3) between 2003 and 2007 all teachers of the English language in state-maintained schools must take special training sessions organized by their Local Education Authority (LEA); (4) in

2005 more than 90 per cent of state-maintained primary schools already offered basic ELE, and (5) ELE will be officially introduced into primary education (Years 5 and 6), not as an optional subject but as a required lesson, from around 2009. The underlying principle of all these changes is to produce people who can communicate orally in English.

All these above-mentioned movements in ELE seem to involve very serious problems in terms of professionalism in relation to the current teachers' licence system in Japan, indeed I would go so far as to say that professionalism in Japan is being endangered rather than enhanced. In illustration of this, brief descriptions of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and ELE in Japan below will be followed by a discussion of the concept of professionalism in teacher education in the light of the recent drastic changes in ELE. Some suggestions for improving professionalism will also be proposed.

Initial teacher education in Japan

ITE in Japan is carried out mainly in undergraduate courses in the universities, which means that students are able to obtain a teacher's licence when they complete their course – four years after entry. There are three kinds of licence, in accordance with different stages of education: primary, lower secondary and upper secondary. Except for primary education, a licence is granted on the basis of specific subjects to be taught in school, such as the Mother Tongue (the Japanese language), Maths, Science, Social Studies (Geography, History and Citizenship), Music, Art and Design, Domestic Science, Physical Education and the English language. For primary education, on the other hand, a comprehensive licence is provided; that is, it is not limited to any specific subject. There are about 35 national universities that have a School of Education and that specialise in ITE; however, most universities in Japan offer courses for ITE. Many undergraduate students obtain a teacher's licence when they complete their degree course, even though most of them do not subsequently work as teachers. Thus, in Japan a teacher's licence is regarded as a qualification which one gets “just in case.” (In order actually to be employed as a teacher in a state-maintained school, candidates must also take examinations organized by LEAs, and these examinations are highly competitive.)

There are two weaknesses of ITE in Japan: the short length of the practice-teaching and the lack of relation between theory and practice. In a normal university course, only three to five weeks are allocated to practice-teaching (normally between May and July in the third or fourth year); such practice-teaching resembles a crash course. Moreover, each student does this practice-teaching in only one school. In these senses, ITE in Japan is relatively focused on theory, not on practice. Trainees do have mentors in their school, but, generally speaking, trainees do not have sufficient time to reflect on their own teaching together with these mentors. Indeed, reflective-practice is not explicitly encouraged by most ITE courses in Japan. Overall, it can be concluded that trainees do not have enough time or encouragement in their period of practice-teaching to connect theory with practice.

English language education (ELE) in Japan

ELE officially starts in lower secondary education (from Year 7 (Age 12-13) of compulsory education), although more than 90 per cent of state-maintained primary schools have already implemented ELE, as was mentioned above. In this context, therefore, ITE for ELE is aimed at preparing teachers for lower and upper secondary schools, and there is no equivalent licence for ELE in primary education. In other words, there is no formal or official teacher education for ELE in primary education. Naturally, therefore, teachers in primary schools have difficulties in teaching English. Many of them rely on native speakers (who are called “Assistant Language Teachers”) for every aspect of a lesson if such speakers are available.

Secondly, since English Language is counted as one of the official school subjects in secondary education, authorised textbooks prepared in accordance with the National Curriculum (the Course of Study) by the Ministry of Education are available for use there. However, English Language, which is just one of several possible areas of study in a recently introduced “Integrated Course,” is not regarded as a school subject in primary education, and so there are no guidelines in the National Curriculum, let alone authorised textbooks. Therefore, it must be assumed that ELE in primary education shows great variety, especially with regard to its quality (for confirmation, see MEXT n.d.).

In the lessons for English language in primary education, singing songs and playing games are the most popular activities, being regarded as good techniques for

promoting the pupils' motivation and interest. Especially in ELE in primary education, however, any activity which relates to the English language can be carried out. Therefore, it can be concluded, without too much exaggeration, that the primary schools which are implementing ELE utilize widely different styles of teaching. In lower secondary education Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is now in fashion, while in upper secondary education the Grammar-Translation Method is still prevalent.

Professionalism in ELE in Japan

With specific reference to the situation in the Japanese context, four points related to professionalism in ELE will be discussed below.

Of the five drastic changes to ELE which were mentioned in the Introduction, four have important implications for professionalism in ELE: (1) the use of results of examinations such as TOEFL or TOEIC at the time teachers apply to LEAs; (2) all teachers of the English language in state-maintained schools having to take special training sessions; (3) more than 90 per cent of state-maintained primary schools carrying out ELE in 2005 (see MEXT n.d.), and (4) ELE soon being officially introduced into primary education, not as an optional subject but as a required lesson.

The first of these raises rather tricky issues. In a sense, in order to grasp applicants' skills and abilities in English, it might seem to be a good idea to use their score in an examination with an international reputation. However, from the point of view of professionalism, there are three pitfalls: 1) the score may certify the abilities of the applicants at the time when they take the examination, but it cannot guarantee their abilities in the future. In the present situation, once applicants reach the required score, they tend to stop taking such examinations. In other words, there is no provision for continuing professional development or for continuing monitoring of the teachers' abilities in the English language; 2) It is quite doubtful that it is possible, by the use of such examinations, to assess the English language abilities most proper for teachers of English, for the purposes of these examinations are not necessarily relevant to the abilities that teachers of English are required to have for their lessons. TOEFL and TOEIC seek to measure the abilities of those who want to study in English-speaking countries and candidates' communication abilities for the world of international business, respectively. As is obvious, then, neither examination seeks to measure the

English language abilities needed to teach English in a classroom. In an English class, for example, the ability to use easier/simpler expressions when needed or the ability to paraphrase/reword difficult expressions is often required in order to adjust to the comprehension abilities of the students and to clearly explain the contents of texts. Even if the applicants obtain the score in either examination which is required by their LEAs, this will not always correlate with how successfully they can manage their English lessons; 3) In spite of the fact that practical English language ability is indispensable for teachers of English, the licence itself does not guarantee such an ability. This is why most LEAs rely on the examination score of TOEFL or TOEIC. In this sense, the licence system is not functioning properly. Possession of a teacher's licences only indicates that a candidate has completed the required ITE, especially with reference to teaching. However, skills/abilities in English language as well as teaching are required for the profession of English teaching. In the present system, in other words, possession of a teacher's licence does not indicate that an applicant's professional abilities are adequate. Moreover, a teacher's licence is not a national qualification, even though it is valid all over the country. This is because no national unified examination like the "Skills Test" in England exists, because students are able to obtain their licences only on the basis of the standard which is set by their own university, and also because there is no unified national standard for status as a qualified teacher (that is, a teacher's licence).

The second point concerns the continuing professional development of teachers. In England, for instance, it is understood that, as professionals, teachers have significant responsibilities to maintain their own professional development and that they should strive to improve their teaching skills/abilities on their own. This concept should also be current in Japan, but the above-mentioned special training sessions, provided by the LEAs and intended for all teachers of English, are obligatory, even though the contents of the sessions may not be suitable for each individual teacher. Moreover, generally speaking, the training sessions provided by LEAs are bureaucratic and lecture-based, not workshop-based (see Sato 1996: 136–137, 156). Teachers set their own targets for their sessions, but their target must be within the range of the pre-arranged/organised topics. The sessions vary in intention from being just training sessions dealing with how to cope with the TOEFL or TOEIC examinations to high-quality sessions aimed at improving teachers' skills using a

communicative methodology in their classrooms. Needless to say, in reality, each teacher has his/her own target, and that target should be prioritised for the sake of his/her professional development. Real professional development is dependent on such differentiation.

The third and the fourth points correlate with each other. Most primary schools offer some English lessons, although English is not an official school subject in primary education at the present time. Rather, it is just one of the options for the lessons in the “Integrated Course.” Thus, no National Curriculum exists, nor do any authorised textbooks. This also means that, for primary-school English teaching, no ITE is provided in the universities, nor is any licence provided. Therefore, there is a huge disparity among schools in the quality of their English lessons: while some primary schools have a native speaker of English present every time they have an English lesson, and while some have relatively advanced and skilful teachers teaching English, many other schools struggle with the problem of how to carry out English lessons, finding it difficult to identify effective methods or materials. In this sense, the professionalism of teachers is endangered because teachers in primary schools are now teaching English without having any proper education or equivalent licence. In spite of these facts, English lessons will become obligatory in primary schools quite soon. This change threatens to do serious damage to the concept of professionalism in ELE. Even though there are to be obligatory English lessons in Years 5 and 6, there will not be a National Curriculum to define details of what to teach, and no authorised textbooks are to be published. Moreover, the ITE and the licence system itself are not to be altered, because English is not to be promoted to being a basic school *subject* in primary education.

It is easy to predict a chaotic situation and many contradictions. What real status will English have in primary education? This new situation will cause the professionalism of teachers in ELE to deteriorate because the teachers in primary schools will teach English without either ITE or a licence, even after ELE becomes obligatory. It will be difficult, to say the least, to regard primary school teachers as professionals in such a situation.

Conclusion

As can be understood from the above discussion, addressing the concept of professionalism among ELE teachers in Japan is rather premature. In order for teachers to be recognised as professionals, at least both an ITE and a licence system which secure the professionalism of teachers are required. In Japan, with regard to ITE in general, the length of the practice-teaching period needs to become longer, and, at the same time, the theoretical components should be organised with clear reference to the practical components. The concept of reflective practice should also be emphasized; this is the foundation of the concept of teacher education in European countries and the United States, especially with reference to teachers' professionalism. As for ELE, the status of English in primary education should be clearly defined: otherwise, teachers of ELE in primary education cannot be recognised as professionals, because neither ITE nor a licence system has been introduced. Considering world-wide trends in ELE, including in countries such as China and Korea, the English language should become one of the basic school subjects in primary education in Japan as well. Then, with that concept as the basis, a new ITE and licence system should be developed. Moreover, the concept of professional development needs to be established in teacher-development programmes, especially in those arranged/organised by LEAs. The government itself has been considering the introduction of a renewal system for the teacher's licence, and there is a high possibility that such a renewal system will be introduced very soon. When it is started, national standards must be set, and all the requirements to renew the teacher's licence must be disclosed in advance. In the case of ELE, both language and teaching skills/abilities should be required. At that time, there must be appropriate and proper chances for continuing the professional development of teachers of English on the basis of both national standard requirements and the targets which are set by the individual teachers themselves. Otherwise, teachers cannot be assessed properly.

From this, it can be understood that it is a matter of urgent necessity to establish firmly the concept of professionalism in ELE in Japan.

References

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