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## JAPAN'S NEW ENGLISH EDUCATION REFORM PLAN: ADVANCE (OR STEP BACK) TO 1904

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### Overview

On September 7, 2013, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) selected Tokyo as the host of the 2020 Summer Olympic Games. An opportunity to organize the world's largest international sporting event has renewed Japan's determination to improve their underperformance in English. The heightened interest in English was not lost on the Ministry of Education, which rolled out a reform plan just three months later, overhauling the current curriculum for middle and high schools. Though the government has been proposing initiatives in English education since 1986, this one stands out as truly innovative and groundbreaking. However, these reform efforts have neglected one important part of the curriculum for decades: the "Five Sentence Patterns" (*Gobunkei*), a syntactic analysis made by a British grammarian in 1904 that has since fallen into disuse everywhere. Except for Japan. This paper is an inquiry into why the teaching establishment, from bureaucrats to teachers, espouses this century-old construct.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

In January 2000, Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō announced an ambitious action plan for teaching English in *The Frontier Within: Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium*. It proposed that, "[even] if we stop short of making [English] an official second language, we should give it the status of a second working language," and stated that all children should acquire "a working

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<sup>1</sup> Author's Note: The author of this paper owes an immense debt of gratitude to Jim Unger, Masaki Shibata, Mizuki Mazzotta, Mark A. Katz, Willie P. Kandler, Clarence McCoy, and the staff of the office of Interlibrary Loan at Georgia State University (Sheryl Williams, Mary Ann Barfield, Brenda Mitchell, Melissa Perez, and Jena Powell). I also wish to thank the individuals at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) who assisted me in locating important government papers, although most of them may not be pleased with my final conclusion.

knowledge of English” so that “by the time they take their place in society as adults” they can speak it routinely side by side with Japanese. The report also called for the bilingual publication of government announcements and websites. To achieve this goal, the report suggested hiring more “foreign teachers of English,” allowing language schools to “handle [the job of teaching] English classes,” and improving the “training and objective assessment of English teachers.”<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Obuchi’s ambition to transform Japan into a bilingual country met with criticism from right-wing organizations determined to defend the “purity” of the Japanese language, as well as from leading scholars in the fields of language education and linguistics, and, though it had arisen in response to the critical lack of progress in improving the nation’s proficiency in English, it came to naught. However, the fundamental idea behind the proposal, one that had been mooted since the Meiji Restoration, endured: almost fourteen years later, in December 2013, it took the form of another challenging educational scheme, called *English Education Reform Plan Corresponding [sic] to Globalization*, to be fully implemented in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Not only does it make English classes mandatory in the fifth and sixth grades, it also requires that, in a radically immersive departure from the current classroom practice, the language of instruction be exclusively in English in all middle and high school English classes.

At first, opposition to early English education by the Ministry of Education and the Central Council for Education led to it nearly being shelved, but overwhelming support from the National Parent Teacher Association assured that, in the end, it would become official policy.<sup>4</sup> As

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<sup>2</sup> “The Frontier Within: Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium,” *Japan’s Goals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Kantei, January 2000 (accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/21century/report/htmls/>).

<sup>3</sup> “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization,” MEXT, January 23, 2014 (accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/1343591.htm>); the translator of this report should have rendered what is “corresponding to” here as “in response to.”

<sup>4</sup> Manabu Satō, “Gengo riterasii kyōiku no seesaku to ideorogii” [Policy and Ideology of Language Literacy Education], in Yukio Ōtsu, ed., *Kiki ni tatu Nihon no Ego kyōiku* [Crisis in Japan’s English Education] (Tokyo: Keiō Gizyuku Daigaku Syuppankai, 2009): 240–277.

innovative and revolutionary as these plans may seem, what has not changed for generations is a now superannuated syntactic analysis of English, the so-called "Five Sentence Patterns," found in the *Educational Curriculum Guidelines* (Gakusyū Sidō Yōryō), a legally binding set of standards issued by the Ministry of Education. In this paper, I will discuss the inadequacy of this long-outdated grammatical framework, first propounded by the British grammarian C. T. Onions, and explore the reason why the policy makers as well as educators remain committed to it.

*Advanced English Syntax* (1904)

In English linguistics, the nineteenth century was a transitional period, one in which scholars became aware of the inability of traditional grammars to describe the language scientifically. The necessity of examining the structures of English afresh spawned the writing of a series of seminal works, such as Rasmus Rask's *Engelsk formlære, udarbejdet efter en ny plan* (English Grammar Written According To a New Plan) in 1832 and Henry Sweet's *A New English Grammar: Logical And Historical* in 1891. This was also the period in which the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the most comprehensive descriptive dictionary of a single language, was compiled.

One of the late products of this era was Onions' *An Advanced English Syntax* (1904), a work designed to provide a complete analysis of English sentence patterns. In his introduction, the author listed five predicate patterns: (1) a verb alone; (2) a verb, followed by a predicate adjective, a predicate noun, or a predicate pronoun; (3) a verb, followed by an object; (4) a verb, followed by two objects, one indirect and the other direct, in this order; and (5) a verb, followed by an object and a predicate adjective or a predicate noun. Within less than a century, some of Onions' technical terms had become obsolete and some of his sentence analyses had been revised. For instance, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, one of the two most authoritative modern guides to the descriptive grammar of English, added to the elements of SUBJECT, VERB, OBJECT and COMPLIMENT (= predicate adjective or noun), a fifth, ADVERBIAL, expanding as a consequence the predicate types from five to seven.<sup>5</sup> The other volume, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, used phrase-structure trees,

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<sup>5</sup> Randolph Quirk, Sydney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik, *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (London: Longman, 1985): 49–59.

not simple linear representations to depict sentence structures.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, the five forms of predicates are no longer staples of instruction in today's classrooms, regardless of whether English is taught as a native language or a second language – except in Japan.

Japanese educators first learned of Onions' five predicate types through the 1917 work of the linguist Hosoe Ikki. They have gained such currency over the years that, under the designation "The Five Sentence Patterns" (*Gobunkei*), nearly all English grammar textbooks introduce and treat them as standard forms, and high school or college entrance exam preparation books, almost without exception, begin with their presentation.<sup>7</sup> Through its inclusion of them in its *Educational Curriculum Guidelines*, specifying what materials are to be taught in primary and secondary schools, the Japanese Ministry of Education has sanctioned the acceptance of the *Gobunkei*. The first *Educational Curriculum Guidelines* was published in 1947 and, seven revisions later,<sup>8</sup> the most recent version was issued in 2011; since the beginning, Onions' framework has appeared prominently in the section entitled "Sentence Structures." Although predicate adjectives and nouns are now referred to as COMPLEMENT, the sentence types are practically identical to what Onions put forth more than 100 years ago:

- (1) Subject + Verb (SV)
- (2) Subject + Verb + Complement (SVC)
- (3) Subject + Verb + Object (SVO)
- (4) Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object (SVOO)
- (5) Subject + Verb + Object + Complement (SVOC)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K Pullum, *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Miyawaki Masataka, "On the Origins of the 'Five Sentence-Patterns': Beyond C. T. Onions, An Advanced English Syntax (1904)," *Studies in the Humanities: Journal of the Senshu University Research Society* (March 2012), 437.

<sup>8</sup> Seven revisions from the following years: 1951, 1958, 1968, 1977, 1989, 1998, and 2008.

<sup>9</sup> "Section 9: Foreign Languages," *Current Curriculum Guidelines*, MEXT, March 2009, (accessed October 20, 2015, [http://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/1298356.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/1298356.htm)).

**Inadequacies of the “The Five Sentence Patterns”**

Japanese high school English teachers have long taught their students that knowing the “Five Sentence Patterns” is key to the understanding of English syntax; yet, in fact, the inadequacies of the “Patterns” are both manifest and manifold. As Ikegami Yoshihiko discusses at length, chief among them is the marginal status accorded to prepositional phrases. Consider the following sentences:<sup>10</sup>

- (1) a. He went to the station.
- b. He reached the station.
- (2) a. He looked at the girl.
- b. He saw the girl.

Although the two sentences in each pair are not equivalent in meaning or in usage, they denote roughly the same preposition, but by different means: the prepositional phrase *to the station* in (1a) is as crucial to the completion of the meaning of *went* as the noun phrase *the station* is to that of *reach* in (1b); and the phrase *at the girl* in (2a) is as necessary to the completion of the meaning of *looked* as *the girl* is to that of *saw* in (2b). However, since a prepositional phrase is not an object or a complement (i.e., predicate noun or predicate adjective), the “Five Sentence Patterns” places *to the station* and *at the girl* outside the scope of analysis, classifying the first sentence of each pair as an example of the Subject + Verb (SV) pattern. In effect, this scheme lumps them in with those that are genuinely SV types not only in form but also in substance, such as *Day dawns* or *He died*.<sup>11</sup>

Also, compare the two sentences in (3), the predicates of which consist of a verb followed by a prepositional phrase:<sup>12</sup>

- (3) a. I live in Tokyo.
- b. He died in Paris.

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<sup>10</sup> Yoshihiko Ikegami, *Eibunpō o Kangaeru* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1995), 26–27.

<sup>11</sup> C. T. Onions, *An Advanced English Syntax* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd, 1904), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Hidehiko Itō, “Rethinking of the Five Sentence Patterns,” *Nature-People-Society: Science and the Humanities* 46 (2009), 122–123.

As is the case with (1) and (2) above, the currently used classification format ignores the prepositional phrases altogether and categorize both (3a) and (3b) as Subject + Verb (SV). However, in the former, the prepositional phrase following the verb *live* (in the sense of “to have a home in a particular place”) is obligatory, while the one following the verb *die* in the latter is not:

- (4) a. \*I live.  
b. He died.

These are only a few of the examples that demonstrate the fallacy of the “Five Sentence Patterns,” that is, their unfounded bias against prepositional phrases. In other words, if a predicate constituent of a sentence is a noun phrase or an adjective phrase, it is recognized as an object (O) or a complement (C); but if it is in the form of a prepositional phrase, then it is seen as an irrelevance, regardless of the thematic role assigned to it.

Finally, pigeonholing all sentences into five compartments may fail to encourage learners to recognize important internal differences among identically formed sentences. To summarize the argument presented by Ikegami, consider the sentences below:<sup>13</sup>

- (5) a. A cat bit a rat.  
b. John crossed the bridge.  
c. John had blue eyes.

All these sentences belong to the type Subject + Verb + Object (SVO), but that is the extent of the similarity between them. The divergent internal structure of each sentence reveals itself when one attempts to convert it into passive (6) or progressive (7):

- (6) a. A rat was bitten by a cat.  
b. ?The bridge was crossed by John.  
    [Well-formed only if the event was memorable.]  
c. \*Blue eyes were had by John.
- (7) a. A cat was biting a rat.  
b. John was crossing the bridge.  
c. \*John was having blue eyes.

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<sup>13</sup> Ikegami, *Eibunpō o Kangaeru*, 38–56.

Clearly, parsing the meaningful string of words that is a sentence in such a cookie-cutter manner is far from sufficient to master these differences; yet, instructors rarely teach word usage and collocation that would encourage students to evaluate sentences beyond their superficial resemblance.

### **The “Five Sentence Patterns” Continues to Thrive**

#### *History of English Teaching in Japan*

The weight given to the “Five Sentence Patterns” in the English curriculum may seem disproportionate, but there are two factors that have facilitated its continued dominance: government language policy, and the lack of proficiency of English language teachers. To understand the current government policy, a brief survey of the history of Japanese English education is necessary. Before the nineteenth century, foreign language study consisted almost exclusively of the mastering of Chinese classics, but the government was awakened to the utility of a knowledge of English after a series of turn-of-the-century violations of Japan’s national sovereignty, in particular, the Nagasaki Harbor Incident in 1808, in which Japanese coastal defenses proved to be no match for a British ship that had audaciously trespassed into the harbor by the ruse of flying a Dutch flag.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the formal teaching of English (along with its attendant Arabic numerals and horizontal way of writing) became part of Japan’s modernization efforts. For a nation whose immediate and vital concern was to westernize itself rapidly in order to avoid the fate of its fellow Asian nations who had fallen or were falling victim to colonization, it was natural that the study of English (among other European languages) would become chiefly a means with which to obtain the knowledge of law, military tactics, science and technology, and that the cultivation of everyday conversational skills would not be stressed. Although students attained some degree of success in “learning *in* English and *through* English,” under the exigent circumstances of national insecurity, teaching methods therefore gravitated heavily toward grammar and translation.<sup>14</sup> This led in turn as Nitobé Inazō, an agricultural scientist and philosopher, observed in a 1923 article, to a propensity in Japanese schools to treat English and other modern languages the same way Americans and British treat Greek and Latin; 90 years later, one can still

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<sup>14</sup> Sir H. Vere Redman, “English Teaching in Japan,” *Oversea Education: A Journal of Educational Experiment and Research in Tropical and Subtropical Areas* (1930), 79.

feel an undercurrent of this inclination. The problem is, as Nitobé put it succinctly, “the languages we study are not yet dead.”<sup>15</sup>

Nowadays, despite advances in transportation and communication, relative geographical and psychological isolation has kept Japan a virtual monolingual nation. An uninformed visitor, upon witnessing the familiar presence of English in public places, might be deceived into believing that it has been adopted as the second official language. However, such “public English” is “not used by people to communicate, to carry out any of their life’s business. It is purely emblematic.”<sup>16</sup> Its primary function is “decorative,” that is, to create an attractive image that leaves a sophisticated impression, something both visually pleasing and superficial, and therefore it does not matter if it is not read at all, much less understood.<sup>17</sup> This explains why “public English” is so frequently rife with flaws, ranging from innocent deviations, like incorrect spellings and grammatical errors, to downright absurdities, the utterly nonsensical or enigmatic, zen kōan-like, expressions that are often the objects of mockery in English-language blogs and publications. Few teachers and students, however, would be discomfited by the ridicule (if they knew it) since “all English is just as peripheral to the real business of life”;<sup>18</sup> even the best instructors are hard put to motivate children who feel no real need to use English for communication.

#### *Educational Curriculum Guidelines and Textbook Authorization*

Since the Meiji Restoration, language education in Japan has been both highly centralized and standardized at the national level. For instance, school textbooks, although written by private publishers, must be approved by Textbook Approval Research Council of the Ministry of Education prior to publication: the Council first examines the contents of a submitted draft and makes revision recommendations in accordance with the Textbook Examination Standards; if the revised manuscript is judged satisfactory, it is then formally accepted for publication. There are two requirements that any

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<sup>15</sup> Inazō Nitobé, “The Teaching and Use of Foreign Languages in Japan,” *The Sewanee Review* 31/3 (1923), 338.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Hyde, “Japan’s Emblematic English,” *English Today* 18/3 (2002), 15.

<sup>17</sup> John Dougill, “English as a Decorative Language,” *English Today* 3/4 (1987), 33–35.

<sup>18</sup> Hyde, “Japan’s Emblematic English,” 16.

textbook manuscript must satisfy: it must be in conformity with the aims and objectives as set forth in the Basic Act on Education (Act No. 120 of 22 December 2006) and with the *Educational Curriculum Guidelines*. Understandably, publishers wishing to win a seal of government approval must ensure that they adhere to the *Guidelines* – among them the “Five Sentence Patterns.”

The *Educational Curriculum Guidelines* is not just a manual – it has the force of law. There was a 20-year-long debate over its legal status, a dispute finally ending on January 18, 1990 when the Supreme Court ruled that it is legally binding.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, one should not look upon the *Guidelines* as “sacred and inviolable,” for it has already undergone seven revisions within less than 70 years, usually necessitated by changes in linguistic theory and pedagogy, as well as in social and political environments. In linguistics, there have been significant advances over the years, and the majority of theoretical frameworks – including Onions’ – judged valid at the time of the original *Guidelines* in 1947 have now become historical relics. In defense of the Education Ministry, however, Koike Ikuo and Tanaka Harumi have argued that the government cannot innovate at the same pace that change occurs: the Ministry must discuss everything thoroughly and plan everything meticulously, then conduct experimental studies and public opinion surveys. Even when all has gone according to schedule, any new *Guidelines* may have to wait several years before it is actually implemented.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, it is still puzzling that educators have not questioned the soundness of teaching something now considered archaic. Supporters of the “Five Sentence Patterns” claim that they are still taught because they raise awareness of differences in word order.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, William Rutherford found that Japanese speakers learning English do show a higher degree of consciousness of how English word order signals grammatical

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<sup>19</sup> See reference in Japanese: “Supreme Court of Japan,” Courts, August 1, 2013 (accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.courts.go.jp/hanrei/pdf/20130801131248.pdf>).

<sup>20</sup> Ikuo Koike and Harumi Tanaka, “English in Foreign Language Education Policy in Japan: Toward the Twenty-First Century,” *World Englishes* 14/1 (1995), 22–24.

<sup>21</sup> Japanese is a SOV language. Etsuo Nitto, “On The Semantic Role of Obligatory Constituent in a Sentence,” *Tōyō Daigaku Kiyō* 46 (2010), 381.

relations between sentence constituents than speakers of Arabic, Chinese, and Spanish. However, Rutherford concluded that Japanese learners' greater attentiveness to English word arrangements is a product of the tendency of their native language to "utilize word order to signal...grammatical relationships." In other words, it is a result of "typological transfer" (i.e., transfer of skills to use one's native language to a second language), not prior training based on Onions' study.<sup>22</sup> So, is there a more plausible reason for the privilege that the "Five Sentence Patterns" has continued to enjoy? The answer may lie in the level of fluency in English among school teachers themselves.

*Proficiency in English among Japanese School Teachers*

Eleven years after the end of World War II, William Cullen Bryant II, a Columbia University professor (and descendent of the nineteenth-century poet with the same name), published a report about his observations of English language education in 20 middle and high schools in Japan. His paper, nearly 60 years old but still fresh, is a reminder of the consequences when instructors lack the ability to speak a foreign language. He noted that most of the Japanese teachers had neither heard spoken English, nor received sufficient training in teaching it. It is not surprising, therefore, that they were unable to "maintain an English language atmosphere" in the classroom.<sup>23</sup>

Though finding native speakers is far easier now than in the past, the resources for additional and improved language teacher trainings are still wanting. This is obvious when one looks at the statistics released by the Ministry of Education in 2006: among the 17,627 teachers, from 3,779 high schools, who took the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), only 48.2% scored higher than 550 on the paper-based test (PBT) or 213 on the computer-based test (CBT).<sup>24</sup> Similarly dismal figures, showing that the

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<sup>22</sup> William Rutherford, "Language Typology and Language Transfer," in Susan M. Gass and Larry Selinker, eds., *Language Transfer in Language Learning* (Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, 1983), 366–367.

<sup>23</sup> William Cullen Bryant II, "English Language Teaching in Japanese Schools," *PMLA* 71/4 (1956), 33.

<sup>24</sup> See reference in Japanese: "English Education Improvement Implementation Status Survey," WARP (Web Archiving Project), October 21, 2009 (accessed October 20, 2015, [http://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/286184/www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/houdou/19/03/07030811/003.htm](http://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/286184/www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/19/03/07030811/003.htm)).

average scores of middle school and high school teachers in the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) were 560 and 620, respectively, prompted a well-known management consultant to cynically comment that they should be learning English, not teaching it.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, standardized English test results are not the only gauge of proficiency, but there have been reported a host of embarrassing and humiliating episodes involving a poor showing of Japanese teachers of English.<sup>26</sup>

In Ikegami's view, it is natural that teachers with limited English proficiency would favor grammar-centered lesson plans assigning students the simple task of classifying sentences or rewriting them.<sup>27</sup> Such a strategy of adapting to, or compensating for, a weakness would explain why the teaching of the five sentence categories has been a fixture for more than half a century. Bryant II observed that one of the most widely used practices in English classes was to rearrange words in a sentence "by numbering their grammatical elements to fit Japanese structural patterns, following the traditional approach to Chinese classics."<sup>28</sup> For example, in the sentence *This is a book*, the words *this*, *is*, *book* were assigned the numerals 1, 3, and 2, respectively.

Although this system of reading English as if it were Japanese has long been abandoned, the mechanical processing of sentences has not. Teachers continue to compartmentalize a variety of sentences into just a handful of categories, and to drill and quiz about the subject, verb and object in each: they need not explain structural, semantic, and stylistic differences among sentences belonging in the same category. Without such explanation, however, one cannot hope to learn, for instance, why some SVO-sentences cannot be passivized or why some verbs are awkward if used in the progressive form. Grammar-heavy teaching was given the priority in the post-Meiji Restoration era because the nation needed it, but

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<sup>25</sup> See reference in Japanese: "Japan's English Teacher TOIEC Average of 560 Points," *News-PostSeven*, February 16, 2011 (accessed October 20, 2015, [http://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20110216\\_12823.html](http://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20110216_12823.html)).

<sup>26</sup> Yukio Ōtsu, *Kiki ni tatu Nihon no Eego kyōiku* [Crisis in Japan's English Education] (Tokyo: Keio Gizyuku Daigaku Syuppankai, 2009), 58–61; Takayoshi Terashima, *Eego kyōiku ga horobiru toki* (Tokyo: Akasi Syoten, 2009), 76–77.

<sup>27</sup> Ikegami, *Eibunpō o Kangaeru*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Bryant II, "English Language Teaching," 34.

today it is preferred simply because teachers are reluctant to venture beyond the range of their competence. Their anxiety is evident in a study conducted by Charles Browne and Minoru Wada: 63% of the teachers surveyed were English majors in college, the most popular field of study among English-teachers-to-be in Japan, but 92% of them felt they were not “adequately prepared for their duties as English teachers.”<sup>29</sup>

Avid supporters of mandatory English lessons in elementary schools do not seem at all concerned about instructors being out of their depth. One of them even goes so far as to say the new action plan does not necessarily call for a high degree of proficiency; all that is needed are fun-loving schoolteachers who can, with games and songs and the like, show children the joy of communicating in a foreign language.<sup>30</sup> Such an approach may be appropriate in the embryonic stage of learning, especially when there is a wide linguistic divide between the native and the target language, but it will become progressively problematic as students advance to English-only classes in middle and high schools, where highly complex grammatical concepts must be taught without using Japanese. Saitō Masafumi has criticized, with a passion seldom encountered in scholarly writing, the unrealism and implausibility of the new action plan, challenging its advocates to hold all-English demonstrations to prove its efficacy.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Linguistic Distance*

Why do the communicative skills of Japanese teachers remain so low? While a myriad of publishers and private educational institutions claim year after year to have found the best method for building communication skills, researchers in pedagogy have come to a consensus that six years of formal teaching, encompassing the memorization of a scant 2,700 words, cannot equip the average Japanese person with the level of

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<sup>29</sup> Charles M. Browne and Minoru Wada, "Current Issues in High School English Teaching in Japan: An Exploratory Survey," *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 11/1 (1998), 101–102.

<sup>30</sup> Ōtsu, *Kiki ni tatu Nihon*, 40–41.

<sup>31</sup> Saitō Masahumi, “Nihon no Eego kyōikukai ni gakumon no ryōsiki o torimodose [Bring Back the Common Sense of Academia to the English Education of Japan]” in Yukio Ōtsu, ed., *Kiki ni tatu Nihon no Eego kyōiku* [Crisis in Japan's English Education] (Tokyo: Keiō Gizyuku Daigaku Syuppankai, 2009), 92.

articulateness envisioned by prime minister Obuchi in 2000, that is, with the capacity to speak English “routinely alongside Japanese”; nor can it “[nurture] the ability [of students] to understand abstract contents for a wide range of topics and the ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons” that the drafters of the *English Education Reform Plan Corresponding [sic] to Globalization* hope for now, fourteen years later.

The difficulty is in part due to the linguistic distance between English and Japanese, and in part due to the number of classroom hours (or instructional hours). It is well-established that Japanese is one of the most distant languages from English.<sup>32</sup> This dissimilarity between the two languages is reflected in how long it takes for English speakers to become fluent in Japanese. A recent study in second language acquisition found that while native speakers of English with “average aptitude” can reach the level of “Advanced-High” proficiency in Romance and Scandinavian languages after 720 classroom hours, they can only progress to the level of “Intermediate-High” level in Japanese after the same number of classroom hours; double the amount of hours, and they still cannot go beyond the “Advanced-Low to Advanced-Mid” stage.<sup>33</sup> The impact of language distance on learning has been known for decades.

Robert Lado, a pioneer in contrastive linguistics, noted as early as 1957 that the absence of similarities in the sound system, morpho-syntactic structure, vocabulary, or script type of the learner’s native language and that of the target language will cause “linguistic distortions,” hampering effective acquisition of the latter.<sup>34</sup> More recently, in a 1981 survey, Educational Testing Service researchers discovered that nearly seven out of eight questions (which they call “items”) on the TOEFL are “sensitive to

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<sup>32</sup> Barry Chiswick and Paul W. Miller, “Linguistic Distance: A Quantitative Measure of the Distance Between English and Other Languages,” IZA Discussion Paper 1246 (Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit Bonn, Germany, 2004); Lucinda Hart-Gonzalez and Stephanie Lindemann, “Linguistic Distance as a Determinant of Bilateral Trade,” Mimeograph (School of Language Studies, Foreign Services Institute, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Rifkin, “Oral Proficiency Learning Outcomes and Curricular Design,” *Foreign Language Annals* 36/4 (2003), 586.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Lado, *Linguistics across Cultures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 1–2.

examinees' native languages,"<sup>35</sup> and that examinees from language groups with a linguistic affinity with English have a relative advantage. A confirmation of the validity of Lado's theory also comes from a psycholinguistic study showing that the "foreign language effect," that is, the "temporary decline of thinking ability during foreign language processing," becomes greater as the dissimilarity between a native and a foreign language becomes larger.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Instructional Hours*

Given the linguistic handicap, both genetic and typological, that Japanese speakers suffer under, it would be logical for policy makers to increase the number of English instructional hours in order to offset such disadvantage. Yet, the hours allotted to English teaching in Japan trail those set aside in many other countries (the majority of which have official languages with a close affinity with English). *Education at a Glance 2013*, an OECD report on how education systems in the world operate, states:

[In Japan, instruction] in modern foreign languages accounts for 10% or less of instruction time; in Belgium (Flemish Community), Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Norway, Portugal and Slovenia, it accounts for between 15% and 19% of compulsory instruction time; and in Denmark and Luxembourg, instruction in modern foreign languages exceeds 20% of compulsory instruction time.<sup>37</sup>

The wide linguistic gap, combined with the paucity of classroom hours, means that, under the current Japanese system, one would have to make extraordinary and tireless efforts to "acquire a working knowledge of English" before leaving high school. Even after an additional four years of

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<sup>35</sup> Donald L. Alderman and Paul W. Holland, "Item Performance Across Native Language Groups on the Test of English as a Foreign Language." *TOEFL Research Reports* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1981), 118.

<sup>36</sup> Yohtaro Takano and Akiko Noda, "Interlanguage Dissimilarity Enhances the Decline of Thinking Ability during Foreign Language Processing," *Language Learning* 45/4 (1995).

<sup>37</sup> "Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators," OECD Publishing, June 25, 2013 (accessed October 20, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2013-en>).

elective English classes in college, it would not be easy, without constant practice and dogged persistence, to maintain the modicum of fluency one might have attained.

Certainly, there are many English instructors in Japan who have become fluent. Without exception, however, they are not products of the public educational system; rather, they are individuals who have taken private lessons or lived in English-speaking countries, and have then worked continuously to keep up their skills. The Ministry of Education should follow the lead of the rising number of aspiring teachers choosing to pursue a master's degree in English pedagogy, by making post-graduate studies obligatory for anyone wishing to be certified to teach English, during which they will be afforded additional formal training in language lessons as well as in the art of teaching.

It also goes without saying that successful foreign language acquisition depends more on need and desire than on even the best teaching method. Many members of Al-Qaeda learn to speak English to attract more recruits in the West; on the other hand, most Japanese baseball players in Major League Baseball remain monolingual thanks to their constant dependence on their personal interpreters. Contrast the latter case with that of the current president of the Ladies Professional Golf Association of Japan, who, with only a high-school diploma, intrepidly took up residence by herself in the United States at the age of 27; at first, she relied on her friends and manager to translate for her, but, tired of a self-imposed linguistic and social isolation, she decided to wean herself off this dependence by placing herself in Japanese-free settings that forced her to interact with other English speakers. Eventually, her oral communication skills reached a level where she was comfortable enough to have not only day-to-day conversations, but also intellectual discussions on a variety of topics, including an Orthodox rabbi who had invited her to a Shabbat dinner.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Circumstances Affecting Teaching in the Workplace*

Unfortunately, English teachers in Japan, most of them fully aware of their weaknesses, and desirous of overcoming them and achieving a

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<sup>38</sup> Hiromi Kobayashi, "How to Live – It's Important," *Toyokrizai*, October 7, 2008 (accessed October 20, 2015, <http://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/2133>). The author of this article was also invited to the occasion.

breakthrough, are not provided with the means or opportunities necessary to do so. Their work environment is not at all conducive to self-improvement, as the 2013 OECD *Teaching and Learning International Survey* (TALIS), published on June 25, 2014, shows: their weekly total working hours (53.9, versus an OECD average of 38.3) and hours spent engaging in extracurricular activities (7.7, versus an OECD average of 2.1) are both the longest of all the participating countries.<sup>39</sup> To make matters worse, they are burdened with 40-student classes, on average, a situation that is not likely to change anytime soon, since a former Education Minister, Machimura Nobutaka, stated during a 2001 diet session that he was not convinced that “there exists any empirical study proving that [a smaller class size] is better,” and since some researchers claim, without citing any statistics to back up their assertion, that larger classes are preferable in Japan because students “feel more comfortable when they are buried within a group.”<sup>40</sup>

More depressing is the reality that, once teachers enter the workforce, they are given little chance to enhance and build upon their instructional skills. For instance, they do not have the freedom of going overseas during summer break to participate in training programs, even when they are willing to pay out of pocket.<sup>41</sup> During a break, there are no classes to teach, but the blunt fact is that teachers are not liberated from an assortment of other duties outside the regular program of courses: they have to advise students on college planning, coach athletic teams, supervise school clubs, take turns working as a pool lifeguard, visit homes of truant students for counseling, attend mandatory seminars sponsored by the local board of education – and the list goes on. An extended absence from these obligations would not be possible without finding someone willing to shoulder them pro bono, and without causing feelings of jealousy and resentment among colleagues not travelling abroad.

Although three government-sponsored overseas English training programs (lasting two, six and twelve months) were inaugurated in 1979,

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<sup>39</sup> “TALIS 2013 Results: An International Perspective on Teaching and Learning,” OECD Publishing, June 25, 2014 (accessed October 20, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264196261-en>).

<sup>40</sup> Yasuteru Ōtani, *Nihonzin ni totte Eego to wa nani ka?* (Tokyo: Taisyūkan Syoten, 2007), 51; Minoru Ike, “A Historical Review of English in Japan,” *World Englishes* 14/1 (1995): 3–11.

<sup>41</sup> Terashima, *Eego kyōiku*, 140.

the last two were discontinued in 2010 and 2008, respectively, and the surviving two-month program is capped at just 30 teachers, foolishly few when compared with the 4,000 untrained language assistants (see below) brought every year to Japan.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, one cannot hope to accomplish much in two short months. The Ministry of Education may press on with the English-only lessons regardless, but so long as those who teach are unable to convey ideas clearly and accurately in English, their teaching plans will not be developed around the acquisition of communicative skills, but rather the perfunctory learning of sentence patterns.

*Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program*

In 1987, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program was inaugurated under the auspices of Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro. Originally having 848 participants from four countries (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand), it has grown to 4,476 participants representing 42 countries in 2014.

From the outset, however, the Japanese have had a different understanding of the foremost purpose of the effort to attract thousands of young English speakers as Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) than have foreigners, owing to Japan's ingrained tendency to engage in "inward-facing and outward-facing" diplomacy. The fact that the government has a dual stance is revealed by the difference in stress between the program's English and Japanese titles. While the English title, *Japan Exchange and Teaching Program*, suggests the primacy of cultural sharing, or at least an equal weighting given to the advancement of mutual understanding and to the improvement of education, the official Japanese title, *Gogaku sidootoo o okonau gaikokuzin seenen syooti zigyoo*, meaning "Project to invite foreign youths to be engaged in language teaching (and other tasks)," clearly places schooling at the forefront.

There is actually a third, less lofty, objective, and unrelated to either foreign language education or cross-cultural friendship: the slashing of Japan's trade surplus. In 1985, after Japan's trade surplus with the United States reached \$50 billion, pressure from America was mounting to open Japan's markets to foreign products and transform Japan from a closed

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<sup>42</sup> See reference in Japanese: "Training for Middle and High School English Teachers," MEXT, May 3, 2011 (accessed October 20, 2015, [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/082/shiryo/attach/1302510.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/082/shiryo/attach/1302510.htm)).

society – down to the local level – to one more accessible and non-Japanese. It was at this political and economic juncture that the idea of a new language teaching initiative was hatched by the government and presented as a “gift” to the American delegation during a 1986 summit meeting.<sup>43</sup> Though no one has officially admitted that the JET Program was conceived in order to reduce tensions over Japan’s trade surpluses, one of the senior government officials involved in the program implementation inadvertently touched on this hidden motive during an interview by David McConnell, author of *Importing Diversity: Inside Japan’s JET Program*:

During the year of the trade conflict between Japan and the United States – and I didn’t get a vacation at all that summer – I was thinking about how to deal with the demands that we buy more things such as computers and cars. I realized that trade friction was not going to be solved by manipulating material things, and besides, I wanted to demonstrate the fact that not all Japanese are economic animals who gobble up real estate. There was no one in Japan who intentionally planned all this economic conflict, especially out in the countryside. I wanted to show things like that, simple truth in Japan.

In order to do all this, I decided local governments must open their doors and let people come and see the truth directly – not just any people but those with a college degree and under the age of thirty-five, since people start to lose flexibility after that age. I thought this would be a much better way of solving the trade conflict than using money or manipulating goods. I thought that seeing how Japanese live and think in all variety, seeing Japan the way it really is, would improve the communication between younger generation in Japan and America.<sup>44</sup>

Regardless of the philosophical foundations of the program – linguistic, cultural or economic – so long as the official title given to the participants is

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<sup>43</sup> David L. McConnell, *Importing Diversity: Inside Japan's JET Program* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>44</sup> McConnell, *Importing Diversity*, 5.

“Assistant Language Teacher,” they should be considered primarily as professional educators. Yet, the JET Program does not seem to put a priority on finding trained personnel, as it has never made a teaching certificate (or a knowledge of Japanese, for that matter) a prerequisite for selection:

There are no requirements for course of study (major) at university or college for the ALT position. For example, it is not a requirement for the ALT position to have a Bachelor's Degree in Education or English... In general, ALTs are not required to have Japanese language skills to participate in the JET Program.<sup>45</sup>

McConnell, who also interviewed current JET participants, discovered that only 13% of those he surveyed had “a deep interest in teaching and ESL or had some experience in these fields” and that the majority of them just wanted to “see the world and perhaps take the time off from school before making decision about career plans.”<sup>46</sup> It should therefore surprise no one that there have been few signs of progress, and certainly none commensurate with the program’s annual cost of \$500 million.<sup>47</sup> Some of those in charge of the project have evaded questions about its ineffectiveness by spinning what was originally supposed to be its secondary purpose – the cultural enlightenment of English-speaking foreigners who, upon returning home, would extol the country that had given them a chance to experience a school life there (while paying them a generous salary) – as its *raison d’être*. One of the advisors to the Education Ministry took another tack in justification by comparing the role of an ALT to that of a friendly neighborhood green grocer visiting a math class to

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<sup>45</sup> “JET Program: Eligibility Criteria,” Consulate General of Japan in Houston (accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.houston.us.emb-japan.go.jp/en/culture/page10b.htm>).

<sup>46</sup> McConnell, *Importing Diversity*, 61–62.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. I am quite familiar with this attitude in JET aspirants, and can attest to a recent case. One day, while I was in my office, putting the finishing touches on this paper, a student came by for advisement. He told me that he hoped to go to Japan on the JET Program “to take some time off after graduation,” and wanted to get assurance from me that “Japanese wouldn’t be necessary, right?”

show pupils how to do addition and subtraction.<sup>48</sup> On the JET Program's website, the first three eligibility requirements listed are not about academics at all. The applicants must:

- a) Be interested in Japan and have a desire to deepen their knowledge of Japan after arrival. Be motivated to participate in and initiate international exchange activities in the local community;
- b) Be both mentally and physically healthy;
- c) Have the ability to adapt to living and working conditions in Japan, which could be significantly different from those experienced in the applicant's home country.

Predictably, the undertaking has attracted many men and women who are "interested in little more than enjoying themselves at the expense of the Japanese tax payers."<sup>49</sup> Is it any wonder that the educational establishment finds itself in the predicament of having inadequately prepared teachers assisted by inexperienced and unqualified (and perhaps unmotivated) native-speakers?

### Conclusion

Nothing is as indicative of the current state of English education in Japan as the prominent position occupied in the curriculum by C. T. Onions' "Five Sentence Patterns," an obsolete syntactic analysis put forward more than a century ago. Introduced to Japanese educators in 1917, and made an element of the Education Ministry's *Educational Curriculum Guidelines (Gakusyū Sidō Yōryō)* thirty years later, this remnant of nineteenth-century descriptive grammar continues to hold sway over teachers, students, and textbook publishers alike, despite studies having proven its inadequacy. Delving into the reasons why its tenets are still accepted, I have concluded that the policy-making inertia of the government

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<sup>48</sup> Tetsuya Yasukochi, "The Controversy Broke Out! English Education in Elementary Schools is Going Nowhere!?" *Toyokeizai*, June 18, 2014 (accessed October 20, 2015, <http://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/39987?page=3>).

<sup>49</sup> Justin McCurry, "Japan's 'Secret Language Weapon,'" *Guardian Weekly*, July 31, 2007; Ōtani, *Nihonjin ni totte Eego*, 231–232; Yūichirō Yamada, *Eego kyōiku wa naze matigau no ka?* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2005), 182–187.

and the insufficient linguistic competency of teachers are to blame for the enduring regard it has as an authoritative text.

The “Five Sentence Patterns” is inadequate because it reductively classifies sentences in accordance with a superficial identification of four grammatical elements (subject, verb, object, and compliment), without even touching upon thematic roles, word co-occurrence restrictions, and differences in nuance as well as connotation, an understanding of which is indispensable for any student wishing to write and speak English reasonably well. Yet, all too often, instructors do little more than hewing to the dogma of the “Patterns.” Even in oral communication classes, which were introduced in 1994, it turned out that most classroom hours are spent on “teacher-fronted, drill-oriented activities,” hours when students are supposed to be interacting with each other by making personalized and situationally adapted utterances in the target language.<sup>50</sup>

Japanese instructors are reluctant to make the transition toward more communication-oriented teaching because many do not yet possess a command of English sufficient to pull it off. To shift the emphasis from monotony and superficiality to functionality and pragmatism, would entail helping teachers to become better speakers of English, so that they in turn could help their students to be better speakers, too – a goal strongly supported by both parents and business leaders, who are always on the lookout for valuable bilingual workers. Their less-than-satisfactory degree of competence is the product of two factors: the distance separating English phonology, syntax, and vocabulary from Japanese, and too few classroom hours coupled with too little teacher training. Whereas the “genetic makeup” of a language cannot be changed, how much time spent on studying it certainly can. The Education Ministry, as a first step, should provide teachers with an unsurpassable opportunity to study in English, by offering to send them abroad for an extended period of time, at public expense. In some universities in Finland, a country with the most successful education system in the world, such study abroad stays, called “foreign sojourns” there, are mandatory.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Browne and Wada, “Current Issues in High School,” 107–109.

<sup>51</sup> David Marsh, Tarja Nikula, Sauli Takala, Ulla Rohiola, and Tero Koivisto, “Language Teacher Training and Bilingual Education in Finland,” *Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages TNP 1* (European Language Council, 1996–1999).

Above all, the government needs to make the successful completion of a master's program a prerequisite for a teaching certificate for anyone wanting to be an English instructor, in order to be ready and able to take up their duties by the time they graduate. At the same time, it should redirect most of the funding for the costly, yet ineffective JET Program to the earnest, focused and continuous professional development of indigenous teachers. Lacking such systematic support for a long-termed and flexible commitment to the nurture of both pre-service and in-service educators, the crucial goals of the *English Education Reform Plan Corresponding [sic] to Globalization* cannot be met and will remain grounded in 1904.