

Education Policy and Politics of Education——Globalization and ELT Policy in Japan

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Abstract: In order to be more competitive in global job market, many countries, such as Japan, have adjusted the education policies for preparing capable talents for globalization. English Language Teaching (ELT) policy in Japan is used as an example of contemporary education policy to illustrate the influence of globalization in education field within a country. The aim of this essay is using the ELT policy in Japan as an example to critically analyze how globalization has influenced the development of current education policy. Positivism has been used to guide the policy-making process.

Keywords: Education policy; Globalization; ELT policy; Japan

1. Introduction

Much has been said that globalization has brought significant influence on education (Altbach, 2004). As a result,^[1] the Japanese government makes huge changes in the nation's English education policy. As a strong economic entity, Japan should play a crucial role in global trade market. The education policy has effectively improved the English proficiency of Japanese.

2. Globalization and Knowledge-based economy

Many scholars illustrate their understanding of globalization. According to Scott (2000) says globalization is a confusing phenomenon that not only transcends but also ignores national boundaries. Under the influence of globalization,^[2] frequent international communication is becoming more common. However, most Japanese students study English only for the paper-based exam rather than for the purpose of communication. Thus, higher requirements from global job markets become the first main reason for MEXT to implement new ELT policy.

Additionally, Knowledge-based Economy (KBE) has become a prominent social development in 21st century. Cooke and Leydesdorff (2006) define the term "knowledge-based economy" as schemes that contain technological courses and intellectual property is regarded as a new form of capital in KBE. According to Cooke and Leydesdorff (2006),^[3] the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is considered as a production of KBE. Japan joined OECD in 1964. Thus, in order to prepare more competitive talents for the global job market in knowledge-based economy, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) implemented a series of international education policies in Japan (Aspinall, 2012).

3. The social context and role of English in Japan

Located in Asia Pacific area, Japan's main economic type is to import and export. This economic type decides that Japan cannot be excluded from the economic globalization (Johansson and Nonaka, 1983). As a result of that, the majority of Japanese students still have inconsistent abilities of writing and communicating with other people in English.

From an international perspective, globalization changes the status of English language. According to Nunan (2003), English at least has become a global language in global economy and academic context. Thus,^[4] in order to prepare Japanese students capable for worldwide job market and suitable for being a global citizen,^[10] Japanese MEXT decided to make the change, "a five-year policy called a Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'".

4. The content of '2003 Action Plan' and its preliminary outcome and critiques

In order to reform Japan's ELT practice, "a five-year policy called a Strategic Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" ("The 2003 Action Plan" here after) has been established. A set of goals, such as "Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities" has been scheduled to achieve by 2008. Meanwhile, Japanese students' ability of communication is evaluated through a test named the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) (Mext.go.jp, 2015). As for college graduates, they are supposed to use English in their work, which is the first level of STEP.

After the implementation of the 2003 Action Plan, students gradually form the awareness of communicating in English rather than just take it as a foreign language. Since 2003,^[5] there are gradually more schools that offer activities for practicing in English. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement of the 2003 Action Plan. Firstly, the old teaching methodology: grammar-translation is

still dominant,^[6] which slows the achieving of communication in English. Secondly, several ideas from West are questioned as ‘too innovative’ or ‘not professional’. On the other hand, in the ALTs, all the English-speaking assistants are required to learn Japanese and understand their culture (Aspinall, 2012), which also suggests the protection and provision of Japanese local culture and national identity.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, the definition of globalization and its economic influence and the Knowledge-based economy has been discussed. In the second part, discussion mainly focuses on the social and historical background of Japan. After that, the English Language Teaching policy in Japan,^[7] ‘the 2003 Action Plan’ has been elaborated. There are also some effects of the 2003 Action Plan and the advantages, disadvantages and innovative parts are demonstrated. After that, some further issues about globalization and its influence on education policy and policy making are discussed. The paradigm of the 2003 Action Plan is also analyzed, such as positivism.

To sum up, countries,^[8] such as Japan, make adjustments to cope with globalization. Meanwhile, globalizing trends should undergo a process of ‘localization’, which means the combination of global trend and local context. After the implementation of this 2003 Action Plan,^[9] the English proficiency of Japanese has improved and further adjustment or amendments have been added to this action. Japanese style of ELT and many innovative actions have been adopted by many other Asian countries and also make the convergence of globalization (Liddicoat, 2007).

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