



Elementary School English Education from the Past up to the Present:
A Comparative Study between Japan and Thailand
การเรียนการสอนวิชาภาษาอังกฤษระดับประถมศึกษาจากอดีตจนถึงปัจจุบัน:
การศึกษาเชิงเปรียบเทียบระหว่างประเทศญี่ปุ่นและไทย

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Abstract

This study compares the English education in the elementary school level between Japan and Thailand in an overview of history, policy and English teaching and learning in the classroom level. The history of the English education in both countries firstly linked to the colonization around 1800s then gradually bind with globalization which forced both countries to put English as a part of their education systems. The policy level of study, Japan expects the learners to participate in English communication actively, positively and to understand the language and culture of Japan and foreign countries. Whereas, Thailand aims the learners to have a positive attitude towards the language use with the content covered in four C's: Communication, Culture, Connections and Community. As well, the English teaching and learning, Japan has a Team Teaching (TT) system. Which is comprised of a Japanese homeroom teacher and a native speaker or an Assistant

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Language Teacher (ALT). They take charge with foreign language activities which focuses on listening and speaking for the 5th and 6th graders. While in Thailand, the Child-Centered and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are set as an ideal language learning class from grade one. It gradually focuses on the skills of listening and speaking up to four skills. Both countries share something in common and have some different issues in terms of English education up on the social context. Meanwhile, both countries are trying and working on how to improve all aspects to raise and keep up the English ability of their students.

Keywords

English Education, Elementary School, Japan, Thailand

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาครั้งนี้เป็นการเปรียบเทียบการศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษในระดับประถมศึกษาระหว่างประเทศญี่ปุ่นและประเทศไทยในภาพรวมของประวัติศาสตร์นโยบายและการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในชั้นเรียน ประวัติความเป็นมาของการศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษในทั้งสองประเทศนั้น แรกสุดได้มีการเชื่อมโยงกับการล่าอาณานิคมในช่วงศตวรรษที่ 1800-1899 แล้วค่อยๆ ผูกโยงเข้ากับยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ที่บังคับให้ทั้งสองประเทศบรรจุภาษาอังกฤษเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของระบบการศึกษา ในระดับนโยบายญี่ปุ่นคาดหวังว่าผู้เรียนจะมีส่วนร่วมในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษอย่างกระตือรือร้น มีทัศนคติเชิงบวกและเข้าใจภาษาและวัฒนธรรมทั้งของประเทศญี่ปุ่นและประเทศอื่นๆ ในขณะที่ประเทศไทยมีจุดมุ่งหมายให้ผู้เรียนมีทัศนคติที่ดีต่อการใช้ภาษา โดยกำหนดเนื้อหาให้ครอบคลุมถึง 4 ด้านคือ ด้านการสื่อสาร ด้านวัฒนธรรม ด้านการเชื่อมต่อสัมพันธ์ และด้านชุมชนการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษของญี่ปุ่นมีระบบการสอนแบบทีม ซึ่งประกอบด้วยครูประจำชั้น ชาวญี่ปุ่นและครูเจ้าของภาษาหรือผู้ช่วยครูสอนภาษาที่รับผิดชอบเกี่ยวกับกิจกรรมภาษาต่างประเทศ ซึ่งเน้นด้านการฟังและการพูดสำหรับนักเรียนระดับประถม 5 และ 6 ขณะที่ในประเทศไทยมีการจัดการเรียนการสอนภาษาที่เน้นเด็กนักเรียนเป็นศูนย์กลาง และการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารและระดับชั้นประถมศึกษาปีที่ 1 ถูกจัดให้เป็นระดับชั้นที่เหมาะสมสำหรับการเริ่มเรียนรู้ภาษา ค่อยๆ มุ่งเน้นไปที่ทักษะการฟังและการพูดตลอดจนครบถึง 4 ทักษะ การศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษของทั้งสองประเทศมีบางอย่างที่เหมือนกันและมีประเด็นที่แตกต่างกันขึ้นอยู่กับบริบททางสังคม ในขณะที่เดียวกันทั้งสองประเทศกำลังพยายามหาแนวทางในการพัฒนาทุกๆ ด้านเพื่อยกระดับและรักษาความสามารถภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนของตน

คำสำคัญ

การศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษ โรงเรียนประถมศึกษา ประเทศญี่ปุ่น ประเทศไทย



Introduction

In terms of the English education system, Japan and Thailand share the same context of studying which is English as a Foreign Language as known as EFL. They also have a similar educational system for example, the year of learning (6-3-3-4), the characterization of the English learning and the ongoing reforms at the national level. In addition, both countries are facing the lack of satisfying accomplishment in the learners' English proficiency which reflects in the TOEFL score that ranks the lowest among Asian countries and so on.

This study sought to investigate the overall common and the difference aspects of English education in elementary school of both countries which based on textbook reviewed, classroom research and group discussions between Japanese teachers and Thai teachers. Those aspects as mentioned are the brief history, policy, and teaching and learning English in elementary school. It discussed background knowledge of English education in the first part, the discussion of all contents in comparison along with the conclusion will be described in the later part. Beside to show the English education point of view of both countries from the past to present, the authors hope that this study would raise the consideration of improving the qualities of English education teaching and learning in both countries.

Brief History of English Education in Japan and Thailand

The Boom Periods VS Nationalism from Meiji Era up to Heisei Era

Meiji Era (1868-1911) According to Fujimoto-Adamson (2006) in this Era, there was a big change of the country towards westernization called 'Meiji Restoration' (Meiji Ishin). Japan emphasized on English as a tool to help Japan catch up with the western countries. In 1871, the Ministry of Education was founded. Many foreigners were invited in Japan to teach their advance knowledge such as in science, technology and architecture. Conversely, after the Japanese Imperial or Meiji Constitution was enacted in 1889 and after the Japan-China and Japan-Russia War, the raise of nationalism occurred. It influenced the popularity of English, also the number of western professors was decreased (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006, 264-269).

Taisho Era (1912-1952) In 1924, the first conference for English language teaching was set which raised awareness about the methodology of teaching English and linguistic analysis. English education topic had been argued among educators and others. As Shimizu (2010, 10) the question of whether English should or should not be a compulsory subject aroused immense controversy. The proposal to abolish English study became a trend among the Japanese people in this era.

Showa Era (1926-1988) Following Taisho era the Anti-English was at its peak on that time. In 1942, all the English lectures in Japanese Universities left Japan. However, at the end of WWII



in 1945, USA occupied the country. It played a major role in the popularity of English education once again. English kept booming during the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. Meanwhile, the Society for the Testing English Proficiency (STEP) was introduced as the first English examination covered four language skills. Also, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) was brought up in 1979. In 1987, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program was introduced. It increased number of English teachers in Japan. Then a communicative approach was put into practice.

Heisei Era (1989-present, the changing era) In 1992, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MEXT) chose two public elementary schools and one junior high school in Osaka City to start the pilot English activities. Not long after that more than 100 schools all over Japan took part. The Course of Studies for Elementary Schools was revised in 1998 and introduced a new field as “Sogo Gakushu” or “The Period for Integrated Studies”. It offered teachers to design the content of the curriculum by themselves. The guideline covered four areas; the international understanding, information and ICT technology, environment studies and social welfare/health. (having three lessons per week from the 3rd to 6th grade) (Kasuya & Kuno, 2010, 1-4)

From the English for the Elites to English for All Thai Citizens

Reign of King Rama III (1824-1851) English was introduced to Thailand by the protestant missionaries. In that reign there was the increase number of westerners. The religion and colonial issues caused the demand of the English knowledge among the high administrators and officials. The Reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868), he was the first who communicate both in oral and written English without an interpreter. Also, he had his family educated in the English language from Christian Missionaries and sent some to study abroad. Reign of King Rama V (1868-1910) ‘Learn English to Communicate’ was the main purpose of English education. It was added in the curriculum and examinations in this period.

Reign of King VI (1910-1925) an Education Act in 1921 stated that English was a mandatory subject for students beyond grade 4. English became an academic language which had two objectives which are to produce progressive thinkers among Thai learners and to provide the young generation of Thais’ sufficient knowledge of English to function in an English speaking classroom. This period of English teaching was based on the Grammar Translation Method (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011, 26-34).

In 1932, Thailand changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy which lead the government to offer equal education to all Thai citizens. A new English syllabus was introduced in secondary schools that focused on reading the text aloud with the correct pronunciation and comprehension (Darasawang, 2007, 188). After the WWII English became the most useful and powerful language for international communication. In Thailand, some private



schools started teaching English from the grade 1. Also, there was the great increase in the need of learning English among students. In 1977, the National Scheme of Education was established. It headed to change of encourage practical communication, life-long learning, and the student centeredness for all Thai learners. Around 1980, a new teaching of language called the Communicative Approach became prominent in the language teaching in Thailand. In 1996, English became mandatory from grade one. The most recent change was part of the 1999 Education Act and Education Curriculum implemented in 2002. It placed English at the forefront of national intellectual development.

The Brief Current Policy on Elementary School English Education

Japan's Course of Study of Foreign Language Activities

MEXT announced in 1998 that English can be introduced in elementary schools from 2002. The lesson called comprehensive learning to introduce the international awareness into students. In 2008, English was introduced in elementary school as a regular class in the fifth and sixth graders and started the program all around Japan in 2011. It has been taught as a 'Foreign Language Activities' once a week or 35 lessons in total for a year. (Ikegashihara, Matsumoto, & Morita, 2009, 17)

According to MEXT, the two main contents of the study are first to help the learners actively and positively participate in communication with the target language especially on listening and speaking. The second is to deepen the experiential understanding of the languages (sounds and rhythms) and culture (the way of living, customs, events, etc.,) between Japan and foreign countries. The activities should engage learners to understand the language and cultural experiences, avoid rote learning, and link with other learning areas. The Japanese homeroom teacher or JTE takes charge in teaching and leading the class with the involvement of the ALT. Teachers should actively use the audio-visual materials to enhance learning as same as let the learners grab some opportunities to communicate in both verbal and non-verbal. Also, the teachers should mainly set the situation and function in ordered to let the student interact and communicate with one another.

Recently, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MEXT) (2016) has declared a new vision for English Education that focus to establish an educational environment which corresponds to globalization from elementary to secondary education. The new English education corresponds to globalization heads to prepare elementary school students in which the third and fourth graders will be required to participate in foreign language activities once to twice a week. Whereas, the fifth and sixth graders will be able to learn English language as the main subject three times a week. These plans will be actively applied in the schools in 2020.



Thailand's Elementary School English Education Core Curriculum

According to the Ministry of Education (2008), Thailand's The Basic Education Core Curriculum for English education objectives are: to have learners acquire a positive attitude towards foreign languages, to have the ability to use foreign languages for communication in various situations and also to seek knowledge forward to a higher level, to have knowledge and understanding of stories and the culture diversities of other countries in the world, and to be able to convey Thainess to the world creatively.

The content of foreign language study covers four main areas: first, Language for communication which cover speaking listening, reading, exchanging data and expressing of feelings. Second, Language and culture that uses foreign language in accordance with the culture of native speakers and Thai culture. Third, Language and relationship with other learning areas. And lastly, Language and relationship with community and the world. The use of foreign languages suggested in various situations in and out of the classroom.

In general, grade 1 to 3 studies English one hour a week per week. While grade 4 to 6 have to study two hours of English classes per week at least. The learners are expected to understand, response and communicate with simple sentences about themselves and matters around them. They are also expected to be able to use foreign language in all four skills to communicate and expected to know a vocabulary of 1050 to 1200 words.

Language Teaching and Learning in Elementary Schools

Foreign Language Activities and Team Teaching (TT)

TT in the point of view language teaching in Japan is defined by Brumby & Wada (1990) as TT is a concerted endeavor made jointly by the Japanese teacher of English (JTE) and the assistant English teacher in an English language classroom in which the students, the JTE, and the ALT are engaged in communicative activities (Brumby & Wada, 1990, VI).

As MEXT declared the course of the study in foreign language teaching in chapter 4. Lesson plan design and Handling the content part, shows that homeroom teachers or teachers of English language should make teaching programs and conduct lessons. Also, it is recommended to have more people involved in lesson by inviting native speakers or people who are proficient in the target language. ALTs are hired directly by the local government or private companies to fulfil the requirement of language teachers nationwide. The typical duties for an ALT are to assist with the classes taught by the JTE, helping in the preparation of teaching materials or joining in the extra-curricular activities with students.



Materials and activities will be discussed next, the textbook for the fifth and sixth graders are called Hi! Friends published by MEXT. The “Hi, Friends!” one and two book series are modified version for the earlier “Eigo Note” book series. Elementary school will receive the student’s copy and the teacher receives a teaching manual which includes guidelines, lesson aims, phrases and points to consider. Moreover, the book includes digital material such as DVDs or software which can be installed on the computer as an interactive digital textbook. It also has an available online yearly lesson programs, lesson plans and worksheets.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Child Center Approaches

According to Richards and Rogers CLT is an approach of language teaching which aims to make communicative competence as the goal and to develop the four language skills which acknowledge the interdependence of the language and communication. Classroom activities are often designed to focus on completing task that are applied through language and negotiate or share the information. The CLT teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process in the classroom. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learners (Richards & Rogers, 2001, 153-175).

In addition, the child-centered approach in the point of view of language pedagogy is the techniques that focus on learners’ needs, styles, and goals. Also this approach allows for student creativity which enhance a students’ sense of competence and self-worth. In other words, it helps to give students a sense of ownership of their learning and add to the intrinsic motivation (Brown, 2007, 52-53).

The combination between the CLT and child-centered approach can be seen as an ideal language teaching and learning style which the government emphasized in the current policy linking with foreign language learning area. Darasawang (2007) pointed out that combining learner-centeredness with the communicative language teaching approach leads to more focus on project-based learning which enables the students to work on their own with less help from the teacher. (Darasawang, 2007, 191)

In Thailand, elementary school teachers use textbook authorized by the government. The teachers provide some worksheets, tape, CD and VDO along with the textbook in the class. The class size in Thailand is quite big, some school has approximately 50 students per class. Language learning and teaching in elementary schools start with focus listening and speaking through activities, the method applied in those activities is called Total Physical Response (TPR). From the 4th grade, students start to learn reading and writing, this level focuses on four skills of language learning.



The Review of English Education in Japan VS Thailand

This part presents comparatively an overview of the English education in Japan and Thailand. The contents will be discussed in the scope of history, policy and classroom unit as below (see Table 1).

Table 1.

The comparison between Japan and Thailand English education in elementary school level

Contents	Japan	Thailand
The beginning	Meiji Era	Reign of King Rama III
Social context VS English education	Colonization English booms VS Nationalism Globalization (e.g., Olympic)	Colonization From royal family to citizens Globalization (e.g., AEC)
Context of study	EFL	EFL
Contents of learning	Foreign language activities from grade 5 (1 lesson/week)	English subject from grade 1 (1 hour/week)
Objectives	To actively and positively participate in communication and understand the language and culture	To have positive attitude, understand culture, use language properly, and can convey Thainess to the world
Method/Approach	Team Teaching (JTE and ALT)	Child-Centered and CLT
Learners	Approx. 30/class well participate and group work	Approx. 50/class very enthusiastic to speak
Materials	Hi, Friends! book 1-2 Digital materials, worksheets	Textbooks, flash cards, tape/CD, VDO, worksheets



As shown in the table above, first, looking back at the history of English education in both countries. They were influenced by colonization which is the main demand to enforce the need of English education around 1800's. In Japan, the need of English according to the fashion of the times such as the arrival of westernization during the Meiji Era and after the occupation of the US or the anti-English period during Taisho to early Showa era. In addition, the topic on English education has been argued for decades. For example, the debate on English education after the WWII, the topic of the question whether English should be mandated or not (Shimizu, 2010, 10), the argument among people who worried about Sogo period thought that elementary school students should learn Japanese reading and writing first rather than English, the question about how international understanding relates to English learning, or the question on critical period in language learning as a second language and so on (Nishida, 2006, 85).

While Thailand, English has always played an important role since it was first introduced. From the beginning English was as a tool to communicate with westerners and kept the country independent at that time. Thereafter, Thailand's social context and political has been changing from times to times. The English language learning has also expanded from the elites to the average citizens. Recently Thailand joined the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community; the third largest economy in Asia and seventh largest in the world) makes the big force of focusing in the development of English education nationwide. Even so, Thais' still have difficulties on communicating with effective English. The way of learning the language in Thailand is preferring to use the rote-learning style which focus more on grammar and exam. So, it needs the developing pragmatic or intercultural competence along with grammar learning.

Next, the policy level, Japan and Thailand both learn English in the EFL context of study which English is not used in a daily life basis outside of the classroom. They start to learn once and one hour (lesson) per week from listening, speaking then reading and writing in the order to learn English. The objectives of both countries are similar in the point of having a positive attitude towards the target language and not just to learn the language itself but also learning the language along with cultural dimension.

The English subject study in Japan is categorized as a 'Foreign Language Activities' for fifth and sixth graders which focuses on listening and speaking. The links of language learning and intercultural competence are the main purposes. There is an interesting point on the policy level to discuss. In Japan, the national government allowed local governments to formulate their own policies for English education since 1992, so each local government such as city, district and schools are widely expanded in their own manners. Each school must design its own curriculum. It causes the gap among elementary schools nationwide. Accordingly, it arises the needed of a clear and unified national policy.



On the other hand, Thailand's core curriculum for English education in elementary school has been a formal subject since grade one. It aims learners to use language in more various situations as same as to convey Thainess to the world. The government supports many projects along side with the core curriculum to develop the English education. The projects mentioned for example are the "Development of English Skills and Improving Teaching and Learning Efficiency of the Teachers" in 2003, "Teaching and Learning English Reform for strengthening the Capacity of National competitiveness" year 2006-2010 or the "English Speaking Year" policy in 2012 (Sermsongswad & Tanipongsamuruk, 2013, 46). The policy and project plans in the support if English education have been pushed out in each government. The problem is the frequent changed that led the confusion for the policy users. In addition, the child-centered in English classroom is still hard to deal for many Thai teachers who still stuck in teacher-centeredness.

Third, the classroom level, in Japan, the English classes are mainly conducted by JTEs and ALTs as TT. So, teachers and learners are able to interact with native speakers. Not only teachers tend to encourage students to be able to communicate in English but also Japanese students are keen to learn and listen to teachers very well. They can work in groups both boys and girls and well participate in classes. In terms of materials, textbooks are mainly used along with worksheets, digital material such as audio-visual, interactive board, English learning software, etc.,

While in Thailand, due to the budget issue, English classes especially in public schools are mainly conducted by Thai teachers with or without extra material such as CD/tape players, flash cards, and worksheets. The class size is big about 50 students per class. Some students in the back rows may have some difficulties on hearing or not being able to participate well in class. Otherwise, the Thai students are quite confident in using the English language in terms of to speak (Khanarat & Nomura, 2008, 97-103).

Conclusion

To sum up, the history of the English education in both countries firstly linked to the colonization around 1800s. The popularity of an English education in Japan depends on the fashion as same as the context of social of the times. While in Thailand, English was spread from the elites to all citizens. English language has been a priority subject among Thais since it was introduced until now. Also, as the lack of satisfaction of their English abilities, the topics on English education are still being an argument among people. However, they head towards the same goal which is to prepare the human resources in a globalized community.

The policy level, Japan expects the learners to participate in English communication actively, positively and to understand the language and culture of Japan and foreign countries.



Whereas, Thailand aims the learners to have a positive attitude towards the language use with the content covered in four C's: Communication, Culture, Connections and Community. Both countries share some commonalities in the policy level such as the EFL context of study, the objectives cover in the positive attitude toward the target language, the learning of cultural area in language class, etc., And the differences such as the subject of study, budgets, some purposes, and so on.

As well, the English teaching and learning, Japan has a Team Teaching (TT) system of a Japanese homeroom teacher and a native speaker or an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). They take charge with foreign language activities which focuses on listening and speaking for the 5th and 6th graders. While in Thailand, the Child-Centered and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are aimed as an ideal language learning class from grade one then focuses on the skills of listening and speaking up to four skills by grade six. In the classroom level, they have some differences in the way of conduct, class size, the chance to interact with native speakers, the learners' attitudes, material budgets, and so on. Meanwhile, they also have some commonalities such as the use of textbooks, worksheets, flashcards, and CDs, playing games, or using songs in the English classroom.

Lastly, to look forward for accomplishment of English ability of the learners, there are at least three solutions from this study. First, the policy level, the policy needs to be unify, clear, and applicable for the users. Second, for teachers it is important to link between language teaching and intercultural competence in the classroom along with the language pedagogy and methodology appropriately. Also, to support the teachers in training such as technological support or on improving teachers' ability as same as the encouragement are needed. Third, the materials should be more in variety and easier to use. In terms of making lessons fun and interesting the teachers should apply the comprehensible input with audio-visual materials. Making lesson authentic and fun is the key for this age group. ICT usage is taking the important role for teachers to support the fun and interesting language classes. Also, the activity needs to engage students to use English language with their peers or teachers link to the real sets and situations.

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