

# Language Education in Japan: The need for Transformative Changes

Dexter Da Silva and Makoto Namiki

## Abstract

This is a dialogic report between Dexter Da Silva (DDS), a veteran educator in Japan, and Makoto Namiki (MN), who completed the Graduate School in Peace Studies at Keisen University in March 2023. The discussion is based on MN's graduate school thesis and the current research projects she's working on.

For a few decades, at least, there has been the recognition that a change in language education in Japan is needed. The current global and local societal situation makes that need even more urgent, and the change even more drastic.

The dialogue revolves around four points; 1) the purpose of education - *educare* or *educere*; 2) the current Japanese English educational situation; 3) Why English is almost the only foreign language offered at schools in Japan, and 4) the future of English education in Japan (especially the relationship between teachers and AI). These four points are key for the transformation of language education in Japan.

キーワード：日本の言語教育、トランスフォーマティブ変革、エデュカーレとエデュケール、リンガフランカとしての英語、AI（人工知能）

*Key words* : Language education in Japan, transformative change, *educare* / *educere*, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Artificial Intelligence (AI)

## Introduction

This article is a discussion between Dexter Da Silva (DDS), a veteran educator in Japan, mainly, but not only, at Keisen with an Educational Psychology background, who has taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Australia, Laos, and Japan, and Makoto Namiki (MN), a young language education researcher, with an undergraduate degree from Keisen in English Communication, licensed and

experienced as a high school English teacher in Japan, with a Masters in Peace Studies from Keisen University Graduate School. The discussion is based on MN's graduate school thesis and the current research projects she's working on.

The main reason we decided to write this dialogic paper is that there has been a drastic need for change in language education in Japan for a few decades at least (Clark, 2003). MN's experience as a high school pupil, university student, trained English and high school teacher, Japanese language volunteer teacher in New Zealand, and study abroad advisor, all of which informed her autoethnographic graduate thesis, places her perfectly as an experienced and educated voice for change. The current generative AI challenges education in general faces are really an opportunity for introducing small changes to address the crises within the education system - shortage of teachers, overworked teachers, frustrated, demotivated students, dismal achievement in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) - in order to create transformative and sustainable change.

### **Transformative and sustainable change**

There are many barriers to change in Japan, both top-down and bottom-up. Conservative policy makers and leaders at the top are extremely resistant to change, the pure definition of conservatism. Often, they have strong support from the dramatic post-war success that Japan has achieved over the past seven decades. This success based on personal sacrifice for the social good, a core value of collectivist societies, is real and admired by Japanese and non-Japanese alike. It is also based on the various interconnected factors within Japanese society and culture. Japanese policy-making in various areas of society has been characterised as reactive, that is only making policy changes in response to external pressure. Miyaoka (1997), however, argues that a deeper analysis shows that external pressure effects change in Japan only when there is domestic support and the pressure is clearly linked to domestic stakeholders. Without the domestic support by stakeholders, leaders or decision makers, even when they realise that change is needed, often react with a fatalist attitude of "we can't do that in Japan" or "that wouldn't work in Japan."

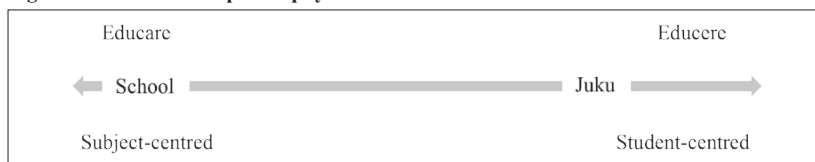
So, in order to create transformative and sustainable change, one needs to think small and cultural-specific. Small changes can lead to transformative change, if those

involved in the everyday application of the changes (bottom-up) are integrally involved and committed. Teachers at Japanese schools are also extremely overworked and though they know well the existing problems, they have also experienced top-down change that hasn't worked for a wide variety of reasons. *Yutori kyoiku* is one recent example often mentioned. Change needs to be small so that individual teachers can see how they can include them easily into their existing procedures and they can visualise the benefits. It also needs to be a part of the whole school's commitment and vision, fitting in with the existing curriculum and mission, in order to be successful. Finally, success needs to be visible and measurable in order for it to be sustainable. The dialogue in this paper focuses on big ideas that can lead to small, context-bound changes with the aim of transformation and sustainability in the Japanese education system.

### Educare and educere

DDS: Of course, as Foreign Language Education is a very important, though small, part of the general education system, it would be amiss to ignore general education philosophy and policy in Japan completely. However, we have our limits and will here briefly consider only one basic philosophical issue, the purpose of education. Bass and Good (2004) discuss the two opposing core meanings of the Latin root of the word 'education', 'educare' meaning to 'train' and 'educere' meaning to 'lead' or 'draw out'. Of course, there are many diverse educational philosophies ranging from behaviourism and constructivism to perennialism and humanism. But for the purposes of this paper we would like to think of educational philosophies around the world as falling on a continuum of 'educare' / 'subject-centred' on the left side and 'educere' / 'student-centred' on the right (see Figure 1). And I'd like to ask Makoto to comment on this, and from her wide and varied perspective to place Japanese

**Figure 1** Educational philosophy of educare and educere



educational philosophy and practice somewhere along this continuum.

MN: My own experiences and general opinions are that school education in Japan is often subject-centred. One of the reasons is that it is a (big) group education. It is more about completing the required sections by the end of the school year as a subject rather than the progress of each student individually. When I was a teacher myself, I would have liked to have been more focused on facing the needs of each individual student. However, lacking in skills and struggling to finish the textbooks so as not to be behind the rest of the class, regretfully, those classes were completely subject-centred. As I discussed with you before, I used to think that educational opportunities outside of school, like cram schools, were only for those who needed them.

However, if you choose an individual cram school, for example, the teacher is able to adapt to you. I increasingly feel that such education is more student-centred. This is because the teacher can provide an education that is more suited to the needs of that student. At the same time, although I don't think we can discuss it this time, I believe that cram school is an option only, and essentially school education should be enough educationally to go on by itself. I think there are some students who cannot or do not want to attend cram school for various reasons, for example, financially or because they have other things they want to do.

DDS: Thank you, Makoto. So, it seems that the juku system provides some important balance between educare and educere. But that it's not enough. I'd like to continue by asking you: What are three things that you'd like to focus on in this dialogic paper?

MN: I would like to focus on 1) Current Japanese English educational situation (through your teaching experiences in Japan and my project in Keisen), 2) Why we learn mainly only English as a Foreign Language in Japan, and 3) Future English education (especially the relationship between teachers and AI).

DDS: OK, Makoto, those are three things we can start with. Two of them are big

things, and one - why English is the dominant foreign language in Japan - is smaller. So perhaps we can start with that.

### **Why English?**

DDS: Crystal (1997) asked this same question from a theoretical perspective. I suspect your thinking corresponds to his. However, Honey (1997), in the same year, supplied a kind of practical or pragmatic answer, *Language is Power*, meaning the English language is the most powerful language (then and even more so now), and standard English, British and American, are the most powerful varieties, and so it's natural that people, students, their parents, teachers, policy makers, focus on the most powerful versions of foreign languages to be taught in schools and universities. Japan also has a very deep and complex relationship with the US. English is automatically taken to mean American English. What is your reaction to this?

MN: After reading an article by Eldridge (2019), I was a bit scared of the power of English because I had the typical idea that foreign language meant English in Japan. The article, or the author of it, suggested that languages other than English be studied in school as foreign languages. He suggested the idea of rotating foreign language teachers between schools and it was very interesting and new for me. I did not think about why I learnt only English as a foreign language at school. I had no idea of learning other languages, such as French, German or other languages. I was also very surprised that foreign language classes became compulsory in junior high school in 2002, only 22 years ago. However, my parents (60s) had English classes when they were students and of course, it was (only) English.

DDS: That's interesting. Your parents' education adds a personal historical element to this discussion. It was about that time that I started teaching in Japan. Then, in the 1980s, I thought it wasn't a new policy. From your research, can you tell us briefly a bit of this history of EFL in Japan? From the students' perspective, do you think students have a clear idea about why they are learning English, and why they're expected to become proficient at a fairly high level?

MN: Exactly! Because it has been a long time since it was systemized, I found it is very difficult for us to think about why we learn English as a foreign language at school. According to Mizuno (2009), in the early Meiji period, the goal was set to “learn about Britain and America and make the country prosperous...” and he also added “students were supposed to learn to use English as a ‘tool (introductory pipe)’ to inject the knowledge and technology accumulated by Britain and America.” (Mizuno, 2009, p. 2) Basically, the importance of learning English has long been recognized in Japan since the Meiji Era. I also found that the importance of learning from Britain and America had already appeared at that time. As a policy, I learned at school that de-Asianization and Europeanization (脱亜入欧), was promoted. Many English learners in Japan still have this feeling strongly, I think. The power of America is especially strong in Japan, not only related to language or culture but also in many other areas, such as politics and security. When I was a teacher at a high school, some of my students called English ‘America-go’ which meant the American language.

DDS: Interesting, Makoto. This makes sense to me now. When I first came to Japan, even in Tokyo, most people assumed that foreigners = American. Times and attitudes have changed, especially in Tokyo, but the focus on ‘native-speaker’ English is still strong. In your research, you focused on English as a Lingua Franca. Can you briefly explain why you believe that this is the correct approach for our current times?

### **English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)**

MN: It is true that because of English, we can communicate with people all over the world. English is a very important language for me, and for you, I guess. That is why I feel it is disappointing that we are too focused on American (and British) English, when there should be many different kinds of English all over the world. I do not speak English like you - I mean my pronunciation, choice of words, speed... everything is different, of course. But we can communicate in English. Jenkins (2015) comments that ELF speakers, who use English for cross-cultural communication, are now arguably the largest group of English users in the world, given the worldwide use of English (Jenkins, 2015, p. 10). We are a part of this

group. Also, she defines ELF as “... English as it is used as a contact language among speakers from different first languages” (Jenkins, 2015, p. 44).

Then, I have a question that I would like to ask your opinions on. As you know, in 2014, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) announced that:

schools aim to grow students who can control their English abilities as globalised people and build students’ English skills at the top level in Asian countries (emphasis added) with this globalised time in the reform of foreign language (English) education proposals. Further, English education has started in all primary, junior high and high schools and in junior and high school Japanese English teachers are required to do their lessons in English. (MEXT, 2014, translated and emphasised by the writer).

What do you think about this, especially the part that I underlined? When I read this for the first time, I had big questions. What is the English skill at the top level in Asian countries? What for? How to measure (I do not think there is any benefit to measure students’ English skills, though)?

DDS: Thanks for this question, Makoto. My simple answer is that it is ridiculous to frame education, especially English Education, in a competitive way. Education should be based on competence. Foreign language education should be based on a variety of competencies, perhaps especially communicative competence. At Keisen, we adopted the approach of the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. European ideas of Multilingualism and Multiculturalism are pioneering and very different from traditional and current ideas of Language, Culture and Education in Japan. Keisen was one of the early adopters in Japan because we believed that those fundamental language education ideas must change. Keisen adapted, for the Japanese high school to university transition context, CEFR’s Can Do Statements for its placement test. One of the key concepts of the CEFR is viewing the language user or learner as a social agent. There are two

important ideas here - 1) social i.e. within the learner's social situation and context, and 2) agent - meaning active participant - the learner must actively consider their language use in a variety of contexts. Competition within this approach does not make any sense. Aiming to "build students' English skills at the top level in Asian countries" focuses on measuring language ability in some relative way, comparing with other countries in Asia. The focus should be on students' ability / competence in a critical way - the students' own assessment / confidence in their ability to achieve absolute tasks with clear criteria.

### **Current educational situation in Japan**

DDS: Perhaps we can move on to the question of the current situation in Japan. Of course, the situation is not the same everywhere in Japan. There are great differences between huge cities like Tokyo and Osaka and the more rural or regional areas in Japan. I recently read some research by a Japanese female teacher / researcher like yourself, Makoto. She was writing about the unique challenges facing young people in areas like Kagoshima, if they wish to become bilingual or multilingual. Even though the curriculum is the same, the specific context of each community and school is different and important. You can focus on Tokyo if you like, but I want to ask you what are the three most critical aspects of the current situation in Japan that needs a shake-up, or some form of change.

MN: Thank you for your question. One point that I now believe needs to change, including reflection on my own time as a teacher, is the meaning of English language education. In other words, what is English education for? Is it for entrance exams and future employment, to show Japan's national strength (especially as one of America's 'friends'), or to provide an opportunity for many Japanese students (if they wish) to become globally active?

Through my master thesis research, I asked university students what they thought or felt of English education in Japan (Namiki, 2023). I did not say anything about the university entrance exam but many of them said something like, 'English education in Japan is often aimed at preparing students for university entrance exams, so if education continues in this way, English will not be usable in everyday life.' The



problem, I think, is that students think that they are not good at English because they just don't get good test scores, even if they study hard.

You mentioned Keisen's English education with a Can-do statement. Recently, well, the system itself was established more than ten years ago, but English education in Japan tries to use this CEFR Can-do statement as well. It is important to use this system more, I guess. This is because, using a Can-do statement, students are able to visualise for themselves what they can do with their English, as mentioned above, which helps them to improve themselves and their motivation to learn. The MEXT also repeatedly raises the perspective of what I can do with English (MEXT, 2014, translated by the writer). The topic about 'educere', means to lead something out (Nakagaki, 2017) is again, I guess it is important for the current Japanese educational situation (not only English education) but still weak. Also, it has a kind of similar perspective with Can-do, because teachers can bring out what each student is good at and can do through the classes, and guide them to the next step. I know this can be one of the goals of many teachers but what do you think?

DDS: You are exactly right, Makoto. Many students within the current system develop a 'learned helplessness' attitude towards English. A definition of this learned helplessness is "the expectation, based on previous experiences with a lack of control, that all one's efforts will lead to failure." (Woolfolk et al., 2008, p. 717). They have tried and tried and failed and failed to meet the criteria for passing very difficult English entrance exams. The exams have improved drastically during my three decades teaching here in terms of usefulness of the English content, but they are too difficult for most students, and beyond their needs or wants.

Each student's strengths, weaknesses, needs and wants should be recognised as the starting point of learning. This is a core principle of a current movement called Positive Education which is basically the application of Positive Psychology to Education (Moore, 2020). I think this can be reframed as a goal of ELF teachers in Japan. But it needs to be seen as something that is not imposed from outside but something that is necessary for individual student achievement and something that teachers feel is possible.

### AI (Language / English) education

MN: As the last topic of this dialogue, I would like to ask your opinion about AI education. When I was a student, I did not imagine learning languages using AI. However, I remember when I was a undergraduate student, you recommended us to study English using online tools. At that time, online tools, the AI of that time, were not as developed as recently and your suggestion was really new for me and my friends. That reminds me that you had some interests between language learning and AI from very early times. Is this right?

DDS: Yes, Makoto. Thank you for remembering and mentioning this. I have always thought of learning as change. Not inputting new information, or copying from others, but a change in an individual's knowledge, skills, thinking, behaviour, ideas. For that change to be sustainable, each student needs to be deeply aware of what is changing. This is what one of my heroes in Educational Psychology, John Hattie, calls 'Visible Learning'. AI is a powerful tool for helping students learn, by making their learning 'visible'. The best use of AI is when it is used to empower students to learn enabling them to become very self-directed, which seems to me to be the ultimate goal of education.

The definition of AI has been constantly changing. What was new twenty years ago and sometimes called Elearning is so commonplace now that it's not referred to as AI. Current "AI" is basically Generative AI or GAI. Or what is also called Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which is much closer to human intelligence including critical thinking and creativity.

MN: Also, I thought that the paper you introduced - The Future of AI in Education: 13 things we can do to minimize the damage (Hamilton et al., 2023) was very interesting. The authors pointed out four possible AI using scenarios - 1. AI banned, 2. People work with AI, 3. Transhumanism (AI is in people's head), and 4. Universal Basic Income (AI takes people's work).

DDS: After reading each scenario, which scenario do you think is the most likely in

the Japanese (English) educational context, including positive and negative opinions?

MN: I am not sure what will actually happen, but my personal hope is that Scenario 2; Humans and AI work together is ideal. The authors mentioned that an AI teacher does not label its students and also, they can ask the same question over and over again until they are satisfied with the answer (Hamilton et. al., 2023, p. 28). I guess this is one of the benefits of an AI teacher. Through my research, I learned and also felt as a student that labelling is happening in Japanese educational situations. For example, when we take up school rules, if teachers categorised students in this way - students who follow rules calmly are good, those who do not follow them are bad, and this way of thinking would bring bad relationships between teachers and students. The students who are categorised as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ will not understand the differences between them, just the behaviour of following rules. This situation does not happen with an AI teacher. Although, of course, AI is not always right and the ability not to be controlled by it is necessary. Also, students know their teachers are busy and if they ask questions many times, some students might feel that they make their teachers busier and hesitate to ask questions.

Using AI is a benefit in (language) study, as it allows us to focus on areas we don’t understand and ask questions until we are satisfied with the results. As an example, I asked ChatGPT to correct my diary in a sample and asked questions about grammar (see Figure 2 to Figure 4). They explained very clearly and it took my questions and presented a new text that made use of my writing but corrected my mistakes. This is great, isn’t it? As you know, it takes only a few seconds for each answer to be provided. If the same thing is done at school, in a class with almost 30 students per class, the teacher would definitely not have enough time or energy to do the same.

DDS: Exactly. The best use of ChatGPT for student learning would be in a kind of “Flipped Classroom” where the students do the real learning outside the classroom at their own pace and asking their own questions.

MN: The research I conducted myself for my master thesis confirmed that many Japanese students really do feel embarrassed to make mistakes in English in front of

Figure 2 Asking Chat GPT to correct the English text

I met one of my friends today. We go to a restaurant where we wanted to go.

文章の内容を確認しました。以下に文法や単語の修正点を示します。

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**Original:**  
I met one of my friends today. We go to a restaurant where we wanted to go.

**Revised:**  
I met one of my friends today. We went to a restaurant we had been wanting to visit.

Figure 3 Asking Chat GPT to question and explain the English text it showed

Why go became went?

「go」を「went」に変更した理由を説明します。

元の文: 「We go to a restaurant where we wanted to go.」

この文の「go」は現在形ですが、文脈からは過去の出来事を述べていることがわかります。先ほどの文、「I met one of my friends today.」の動詞「met」は過去形です。したがって、次の文も過去形にする必要があります。

**Revised:**  
"We went to a restaurant we had been wanting to visit."

ここで「went」を使うことで、文全体が過去の出来事を一貫して表現しています。

Figure 4 Ask additional questions to Chat GPT

we had been wanting to visit は 元の文章のように where we wanted to go では間違いですか？

「where we wanted to go」も間違いではありませんが、より自然な英語にするために「we had been wanting to visit」を提案しました。以下のように修正すると、元の文を活かしつつ正しい表現になります。

**Revised:**  
I met one of my friends today. We went to a restaurant where we wanted to go.

their classmates. An AI teacher does not say something like, you made a mistake or you ask the same question many times. However, the AI teacher also does not say positive opinions such as your English is getting better or spelling is less wrong than before. For students' motivation, praise is necessary and humans can better give appropriate praise to the students knowing their efforts and emotions. So, this is where humans should come in.

DDS: In the classroom, teachers can introduce new content, their personal experiences with learning, motivational stories, give personal Face-to-Face interactions, structure real communicative interactions with the students in groups, move around the class checking in on students and provide feedback or questions that ChatGPT may not give.

MN: I believe that learning English with an AI teacher could be individual learning. As I mentioned before, it is a good opportunity for learners who do not want to be noticed for their mistakes. However, some experiences of group working or learning or cooperative learning are not enough with an AI teacher. Then, the skills of inclusiveness, such as leadership, working with other people, the way of saying their opinions, and how to support other people will not be grown enough through education. At the same time, we can learn from the experiences of disagreements and difficulties in working together. But I actually feel I did not learn or get these skills at all through my school education. Perhaps, this is my problem or my personality, but I am not good at taking leadership or saying my opinion in a group. I did not have so many chances to do something in a group while I was a student, except for some events such as school trips. While you are teaching in Japan, do you feel students in Japan are not good at or often hesitate to do some work in a group? Have you ever felt that the number of such students has increased over the years?

DDS: Yes, Makoto, this point is very important. Leadership or teamwork skills can best be done in class with a teacher. And you're right, Japanese students need much more practice or training with group and team work. Collaborative learning or cooperative learning doesn't just happen naturally and usually takes more time than

teacher-centred learning. This is exactly where AI or ‘flipped classroom’ learning can help teachers to complete the syllabus in the time allotted by having students learn what they can at home on their own, and spend class time more productively on group work.

### **Future English Education in Japan**

DDS: So, we’ve looked at some important elements of the current situation in English Education in Japan and some of the challenges facing teachers and students. From your research, Makoto, you’ve identified some ideas or approaches that could be used to address these challenges. What final suggestions or recommendations would you make?

MN: I think it is important to recommend ELF first, given the current state of foreign language (English) education in Japan, because ELF focuses on ease of understanding and communication, rather than using the language like a native speaker. In Japanese primary, junior high, and high schools, foreign language generally means English classes, but if that is the case, I think it is ideal to first connect through English to what the foreign language is for, what the students can do with those skills, and more.

Furthermore, English is not the first language for Japanese people, and teachers whose first language is generally Japanese would often teach English. I believe this is a good environment for ELF and for students learning English. This is because the teacher’s use of a foreign language is a model for the students. In addition, the majority of Assistant Language Teachers who teach through the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme currently come from the United States and the United Kingdom (The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme), but by inviting more teachers as English teachers from around the world. Then, English could become a bridge between students and the global community.

You also asked me what I think about the situation regarding languages other than English. In the current situation, if students cannot find any benefits of learning a foreign language other than English (e.g., for entrance exams), they may not take it, and it may only increase the burden on them. If the idea that English is for a stable

future can be removed, students should be able to choose other languages as well, and this is where the use of AI may be significant.

### Reflections

MN: Through this dialogue with you, I thought that the most important thing is again what the students learn from the lessons and how they can use it for their own benefit. However, at the same time, this is the most difficult part. To make this work, I believe that an education environment in which students can study actively is necessary, and a shift to student-centred teaching is required. In English language teaching, it would be necessary to have structured activities, such as ELF, that promote mutual understanding. English language education that sticks to American or British English or only seeks the correct answers will not be able to keep up with globalisation. I am still learning how AI learning can be included there, but I expect that positive changes will appear.

DDS: Great, Makoto, I'm happy to hear that. Actually, I believe this kind of dialogic communication is an important element that's usually missing from research in Education. Real reflection or reflective practice, a core element of teacher education, should be dialogic. It should not be solely individual surface reflection. It should involve questioning your assumptions, finding how others think about shared experiences and practices, and learning from those reflections. Reflections do not necessarily lead to conclusions or answers, but should be a stimulus or springboard for further, deeper learning.

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