

Acceptance and Resistance: Examining shifting ideologies and discourses towards English education in Japan

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Compared to other countries in Asia, Japan was a late adaptor (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006) at implementing English as a foreign language in its public elementary school system. Only in 2020, did Japan's Ministry of Education lower the starting age of *foreign language activities* to Grade 3 and make English an academic subject from Grade 5. This presentation will discuss findings from a multiple case study at three public elementary schools in Japan. Utilizing ethnography of language policy (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2013), which conceptualizes policy implementation as a process, the 4-year fieldwork consisted of document analysis, 76 interviews with stakeholders across the education system, and classroom observations. A critical analysis of discourse to language policy (Blommaert, 2005) revealed that a neoliberal ideology of globalization now frames elementary school English as necessary for sustained socioeconomic development. This new conceptualization replaces an earlier discourse in Japan of elementary school EFL being part of international awareness and understanding. In terms of pedagogy, the earlier multilingual approach to developing positive attitudes towards foreign languages among younger learners has been replaced with a methodology that focuses on developing English proficiency. Interview data with national-level policymakers and advisors revealed that they faced several challenges as they tried to balance competing discourses and articulate important pedagogical concepts while having their voices heard. Some of these struggles were external power relations between the Ministry of Finance and the business community imposing control and influence, while other conflicts were internal political battles within the Ministry of Education for the resource of lesson time. This presentation will discuss these issues and the problems teachers faced as they appropriated the new English policy in classrooms and resisted certain changes to the national curriculum.

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