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Reflections and Interpretations: My Analysis of 'An Interview With Dr. Kensaku Yoshida'

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Abstract

In an issue of *The Language Teacher* (Ferguson, 2023), Dr. Kensaku Yoshida critically assesses the current state and challenges of English education in Japan and illuminates the reform direction he spearheads, which is insightful and informative. However, considering Japan's English learning environment, there are certain assertions that demand scrutiny from alternative perspectives or in greater depth. This essay explores 1) the need for explicit grammar study, 2) the appropriateness of the 'CEFR' in Japanese English education, 3) concerns about using private exams for entrance tests, 4) issues in elementary English education, and 5) doubts on the English Language Education Survey. I firmly believe that fostering active dialogue among English educators and researchers on these issues can significantly improve English teaching methods, promoting innovative strategies for optimal English education.

Introduction

In an issue of *The Language Teacher* (TLT), readers are presented with a comprehensive interview featuring Dr. Kensaku Yoshida, a well-respected figure in the sphere of English education in Japan (Ferguson, 2023). Dr. Yoshida expertly guides us through the complicated topic of English teaching in Japan. His clear insights highlight how English teaching has changed over time, the problems we face now, and what changes should come next. Even though I deeply respect Dr. Yoshida's work, I feel it is my duty to express some doubts about certain parts of his ideas. The aim of my criticism is to help make English education better in Japan, and this is why I am sharing my concerns with the readers of *TLT*. This process of questioning and examining ideas is of great importance. When we look at these ideas closely and seriously from a scholarly viewpoint, it helps us to have more balanced and healthy discussions about the topic. These discussions can then lead to improvements in how English should be taught in Japan. So, while it might seem like I am just being critical, my intention is to encourage more thoughtful dialogue that will help us all improve our teaching practices.

Grammar Teaching

In the discussion, Dr. Yoshida acknowledged the importance of understanding grammar when learning a new language. However, he strongly emphasized the idea that the ability to communicate effectively is even more crucial. This concept suggests a shift away from traditional teaching methods that focus primarily on grammar rules. I remember him stating at the JALT conference in 2022 that the teaching of grammar should ideally be embedded within communicative interaction, making use of feedback like recasting. Essentially, Dr. Yoshida appears to be advocating for an approach that minimizes direct grammar instruction. Instead, he favors a method where students learn grammar rules implicitly through communication, expecting them to naturally pick up these rules. However, I believe we need to critically examine how effective and efficient this indirect method of teaching grammar can be, particularly in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in Japan, where English is not commonly used in everyday life and opportunities for exposure to the language are limited. Several previous studies have underscored the efficacy of direct teaching methodologies. Notably, these studies emphasize the importance of following direct instruction with intentional and extensive practice to consolidate learning. This approach has been supported by notable research, including Anderson (2016) and Suzuki (Suzuki, 2023).

Drawing from my own diverse experience as a learner, teacher, and researcher of EFL, I suggest we consider Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2007, 2015) as a potential guiding principle for English language learning in Japan. This theory involves two main ideas: declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to the understanding of rules that can be consciously explained, which is very much like the explicit knowledge we gain from direct teaching. In contrast, procedural knowledge refers to the skill of using learned rules in practical applications. These types of knowledge are quite different from just passively gaining knowledge without truly understanding or knowing how to use it. According to Skill Acquisition Theory, the learning process begins with acquiring declarative knowledge. This knowledge is then transformed into procedural knowledge through repeated practice. Eventually, with enough practice, learners reach a stage where they have automatized knowledge, providing the ability to use English seamlessly in communication (DeKeyser, 2007, 2015). In my view, it is important that Dr. Yoshida also takes this theory into consideration when discussing English education. I believe it could provide valuable insights into the teaching and learning of English in the Japanese context.

CEFR and Can-Do Statements

Dr. Yoshida leads a committee of specialists convened by The Ministry of Education (MEXT) to establish criteria that would encourage students to use English. The committee chose to implement the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) designed to specify what learners can achieve at various levels of English proficiency. The CEFR seemed like an ideal means of promoting English communication among the students. Nevertheless, considering the generally low English proficiency of Japanese learners, the committee decided to adapt a Japanese version of the CEFR criteria, replete with subdivisions, tailored specifically to the Japanese EFL environment. However, the validity and reliability of this can be disputed. The original CEFR was designed as a broad guide for assessing second language proficiency among individuals of varied backgrounds and mother tongues, with differing educational experiences. It is important to note that the CEFR is not a scientifically validated index, an assertion which is supported by Hato (2018).

In drafting the new Course of Study, Dr. Yoshida's committee revamped the curriculum. They shifted from a structure-based approach to a communication-centric model, incorporating the Can-Do statements of the CEFR, which enumerate what a language learner can achieve. However, it is worth noting that the CEFR's Can-Do statements adhere to principles of multilingualism, which do not align neatly with the specifics of the English learning environment in Japan. Therefore, I argue that the adoption of these Can-Do statements and the CEFR should be reconsidered from the outset. I suggest that there should be an initiative to develop measures that are more deeply rooted in Japan's English learning context and cultural background. Such a tailored approach would ensure that the educational goals are more pertinent and effective for learners of English in Japan.

Private Testing Organization

Dr. Yoshida proposes the idea of using private testing organizations, such as EIKEN, TOEFL, GTEC, and Cambridge, to evaluate speaking and writing skills in university entrance exams. The expectation is that this will have a positive impact on high school students, encouraging them to work on improving their English skills. I do agree that testing can often motivate students to learn more effectively. However, I also concur with Watanabe's viewpoint (2004) that changing the way we test students is not enough by itself to bring about a meaningful change in education. There are several other factors that need to be addressed as well. These include improving the skills and knowledge of teachers, ensuring students understand the tests they are taking, and creating a classroom environment conducive to language learning. Watanabe further argues that in order to achieve desirable educational results, we need to consider a broad range of interconnected factors, including the context in which tests are used as well as societal, cultural, and psychological aspects. In addition, using tests created by private companies raises questions about fairness and impartiality. For instance, students who cannot afford to take these tests often may be at a disadvantage. There is also the issue of using different types of tests for the same purpose, like university entrance exams.

Dr. Yoshida maintains that these private testing companies make sure their tests align with the CEFR criteria. However, it is important to keep in mind that the validity of the CEFR criteria in the context of teaching EFL in Japan is not fully established. Moreover, there is a legitimate concern that different test formats may not accurately assess the same abilities in test-takers, as highlighted by Fujiwara (2019). So, while I appreciate Dr. Yoshida's intentions, there are still some considerations which should be made. After conducting comprehensive research, we should develop a framework for assessments that are both culturally relevant and academically sound

for Japanese EFL students. This approach will enable us to more accurately measure their English language abilities. Moreover, collaborating with testing experts and teachers can lead to the creation of customized assessment tools. These tools would be more closely aligned with the educational goals and learning styles specific to Japanese EFL learners, effectively addressing potential mismatches with the CEFR criteria and the varying test formats used by private companies.

Elementary School Teachers

In his discussion, Dr. Yoshida brings up the fact that elementary school teachers tend to prefer having students do presentations instead of engaging in conversational activities. This, he suggests, is because they find it easier to assess students in this way. He proposes that this tendency is due to teachers' limited English skills and their focus on perfect grammar and vocabulary. To combat this, he believes shifting focus towards communication skills could make a difference. While Dr. Yoshida's argument has some merit, I think it does not fully take into account a crucial point, namely that many elementary school teachers do not have professional training or a teaching license for teaching English. I believe this lack of training is the root cause of their struggles with assessing language proficiency accurately and conducting activities that center around conversation. If we were to move towards a teaching style that emphasizes communication, as Dr. Yoshida suggests, without giving teachers the necessary professional development, it could actually make the problem worse. While Dr. Yoshida's idea to focus on communication skills is worth considering, I believe it is equally important to look at strategies for improving teachers' English skills and their teaching abilities. If enhancing teachers' English skills and providing them with specialized training proves challenging in the short term, a transitional approach might be necessary. This could involve a balanced integration of communication-based teaching with more structured, rule-based methods.

English Language Education Implementation Survey

By law and in practice, public school teachers have to follow the Course of Study as laid out by MEXT. This highlights the need for teachers to fully understand how well they are doing this, especially when it comes to teaching English, an idea which Dr. Yoshida mentions in the interview (Ferguson, 2023). Dr. Yoshida believes that in order to better understand the Course of Study, educators should make use of the English Language Education Implementation Survey (英語教育実施状況調査 [eigo kyoiku jisshi jokyo chosa]). This survey, which is issued yearly by MEXT, provides data that Dr. Yoshida argues is crucial. It allows teachers to spot problems with aspects such as the "Use of English in the Classroom" and the "Use of ICT Equipment" which can, in turn, help teachers refine their teaching methods. However, Okuzumi (2023) raises questions about the reliability and validity of the survey data. One main issue pointed out is the survey's heavy reliance on teachers' subjective assessments. For example, when asked about "the proportion of students with English proficiency equal to or greater than Level 3 on the English proficiency test," teachers must make a personal judgment about the percentage of "students who, even if they have not taken the test, would likely pass it" (Okuzumi, 2023). This leaves room for inconsistency due to the subjective nature of the judgment. Similarly, for criteria like "the use of English in the classroom," teachers are required to provide their own judgment on how much English is being used without considering the quality of the spoken English. This leads me to argue that the survey lacks a consistent level of validity and reliability. As a result, I find myself disagreeing with Dr. Yoshida's suggestion that survey results, which are marked by subjectivity and lack a reliable level of validity, can be effectively used to enhance English education in the future.

Conclusion

Dr. Yoshida is a major figure in English education in Japan who has made lasting contributions that have significantly shaped the field, which was made particularly evident in the recent interview (Ferguson, 2023). However, as scholars dedicated to examining every angle, we need to take a closer look at his ideas. His assertions deserve rigorous review, and that is exactly what I aim to do in this paper. I offer my views based on both academic knowledge and personal experience as an English teacher and researcher in Japan. There is no question that Dr. Yoshida's thoughts are valuable and help us better understand English education in Japan. However, it is vital to apply critical thinking to fully evaluate the soundness of his views and their possible impact. The issues I bring up in this paper require us to more carefully analyze Dr. Yoshida's arguments. I hope that by carefully discussing and scrutinizing these matters, we can work towards a better English education system in Japan. The goal here is not to undermine previous efforts to improve English education in Japan but to enhance them. By critically assessing the work of respected educators like Dr. Yoshida, we can help English education in Japan to evolve and better meet the changing needs of our students.

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