Quality Assurance of English Language Teachers: A Missing Paradigm in Teacher Education

Hirofumi Wakita
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Introduction

The quality of education cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. In recent years, many countries have focused on reviewing the system of improving the quality of teachers as well as on their teaching itself. In this context, setting up effective and consistent three stage systems in teacher education, namely, initial teacher education, selection and deployment, as well as in-service training including continuing professional development, is a critical issue and challenge to assure a quality education.

Along with the rapid expansion of English as a lingua franca, a higher level of expertise in subject matter is being demanded of English language teachers (ELTs). In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) presented a new strategic concept to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities” and put forward practical objectives and goals for English education including full-fledged implementation of English education at an earlier stage. Subsequently, as regards ELTs, the action plan in 2003 involved several specific strategies: concrete numerical targets for ELT English proficiency (e.g., 550 points on TOEFL, 730 points on TOEIC), improving the quality of teaching in secondary school and developing a comprehensive pre- and in-service training system. However, it seems that there is one important missing paradigm which has not fully been discussed: What knowledge and skills should be required of ELTs? This issue, fundamental but essential, is typically reflected in the current situation of initial teacher education programs and the employment examination system in Japan.

Given these, this paper aims primarily to explore the following two points to assure the quality of ELTs, focusing on initial teacher education and recruitment and selection:

(1) Assessing the current situation of how the quality of ELTs is being controlled in initial
teacher education in Japan, especially in terms of the on-going certification system and the ELT education curriculum.

(2) Validating a selection of high quality ELTs via employment examinations conducted by each Prefectural Board of Education in Japan.

Also, in discussing the two previous topics, the critical issues of what knowledge and skills are and should be required of ELTs are examined, and are supported by findings based upon a series of research projects conducted in Korea and Japan (Matsumura & Wakita 2007; Wakita 2008, 2009, 2010). In conclusion, a shared reflection upon ELT expertise and actions to assure the quality of ELTs is proposed.

1. Educational and Socioeconomic Context for Assuring the Quality of Teachers

Looking at the educational and socioeconomic context in terms of assuring the quality of teachers, it is clear that there are a number of problems as follows:

(1) The on-going educational reforms require teachers to develop a variety of competences and knowledge domains to satisfy diverse expectations from students, partners, education authorities, the community and the public, thus resulting in a heavier workload.

(2) The retirement of a large number of baby-boomer teachers will lead to a heavily unbalanced age structure of teachers at all school levels and a high demand for new teachers coupled with a limited supply of high quality teachers.

(3) This problem is likely to cause a breakdown in good collegial relationships in schools, which will make it difficult for teachers to share their accumulated knowledge and experience.

(4) It might be anticipated that the so-called “relaxed education” system that has been in place for the past two decades as well as the rapidly declining birthrate will cause deterioration of the academic abilities of prospective English teachers.

2. Initial Teacher Education

2.1. The Current System of Initial Teacher Education

The current system of initial teacher education was started in 1949 along with other post-World War II education reforms, and the traditional normal schools were abolished. Since then, all universities, whether national, public, or private, have been expected to be involved in teacher education under the principles of an open system and accreditation by MEXT.

However, this system, which so far has not undergone any drastic changes, faces a new type of conflict due to the recent trend for higher education reform related to neo-liberalism (Iwata 2008). The government has pursued the decentralization of higher education in order to spur
its competitiveness in the current knowledge-based society. One of the policies was to ease standards for establishment of universities, which inevitably resulted in the rapid expansion of private institutions during the past two decades.

At present, secondary school teachers are trained through diverse channels. There are four major routes whereby students may obtain a teaching certificate: national universities of education (44), departments of education, teacher education programs in comprehensive (national, public and private) universities, graduate schools of education and graduate schools of teacher education.\(^2\) As shown in Table 1, it should be noted that as of 2011, 470 out of 600 accredited universities (almost 80%) are private, which means that private universities play a significant role in currently ongoing Japanese teacher education.

To receive accreditation from MEXT, universities are required to meet accreditation criteria in terms of curricula, teachers and syllabi. Basic requirements for students to acquire a teaching certificate are to obtain a Bachelor’s degree and meet the minimum number of credits required. The criteria of the curriculum are divided into two categories: “subjects on teaching profession” and “subjects on teaching a subject matter.” Table 2 shows the details of the minimum number of credits for a secondary school teacher (ELT) certificate.

### Table 1: Accredited Teacher Education Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of Universities</th>
<th>No. of Junior Colleges</th>
<th>No. of Graduate Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Institutes</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accredited Institutes</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage (%)</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MEXT (2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects on Teaching Profession (Pedagogy, etc.)</th>
<th>Previous</th>
<th>Current</th>
<th>Previous</th>
<th>Current</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjects on Teaching English</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects on Teaching Profession</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects on Teaching English or Teaching Profession</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MEXT (2011)

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\(^2\) Graduate school of teacher education is a new type of initial teacher education institute which focuses more on improving the practical pedagogical and didactic competence of teachers. This challenge started in 2008 with a limited number of schools: 19 national schools, 6 private schools. The capacity to accept students is limited to only 815 in all.
The legislation for teacher certification was partially revised in 1999 and 2000, along with the policy for decentralization of higher education. As a result, the minimum number of credits for “subjects on teaching English” was decreased from 40 to 20. Although there was no difference between the two types of certificate in the previous certificate policy, JHS teachers are currently required to learn more about the teaching profession rather than about teaching English because they are expected to acquire competence in classroom management, student counseling, etc. On the other hand, the focus of a SHS teacher certificate is on acquiring expertise in teaching English. Accordingly, the maximum possible number of credits regarding “subjects on teaching English” is larger than that of a JHS teacher certificate.

2.2. Requirements for “Subjects on Teaching English” and Related Issues

The teacher certification law only implicitly stipulates that “teaching subjects should cover comprehensive contents regarding the related subjects.” It also simply indicates the required categories of “English as a subject matter” as well as the required credits for an ELT certificate.

“English as a subject matter” consists of four categories: English Linguistics, English and American Literature, English Communication, and Intercultural Understanding. Prospective students are required to earn more than 20 credits (more than 1 credit from each category). This simple guideline may well allow universities to autonomously set a “relaxed” curriculum for the English teacher certificate program. Furthermore, this curriculum makes it possible for students to easily earn a teaching certificate, because many credits in the academic subjects they earn may be doubly counted as credits of “subjects on teaching English.” Hence this may result in producing a greater number of certificate holders despite the limited positions available.

2.3. The Curriculum for ELT Certificate Programs and Related Issues

The curriculum for ELT certificate programs differs from university to university due to the implicit guidelines stated by the government. In addition, there is little shared understanding of what prospective English teachers should learn. Table 3 shows an example of a curriculum in which a student can achieve maximum results with the least effort. What students need to do to obtain an ELT certificate are simply to add just four more two-credit “subjects on teaching English” (English Linguistics I, English Linguistics II, English Literature, American Literature) to their own existing academic curriculum. It is obvious that in addition to the overly broad categorization indicated above, the teachers did not fully discuss such critical issues as what the content of the certificate program should be, what knowledge and skills

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3 It is partly because the drastic educational reforms starting in the late 1990s needed to change what is expected of teachers, and partly because the standards for the establishment of universities in 1991 had been substantially relaxed that consequently, higher education became decentralized and diversified in many ways.
students should acquire, and who is qualified to teach which subject in order to assure the quality of the prospective teachers. It is no exaggeration to say that the content of a teacher certificate program is merely a marginal matter and the main concern for these programs is that they are an important means of attracting more students to their department.

To take another typical example, the ELT certificate curriculum set by the departments of English and American Literature, traditionally focusing on literary appreciation, does not usually involve many “subjects on teaching English,” as is the case with the curriculum exemplified by Table 3.

These examples of the ELT teacher certificate curriculum as indicated above might be extreme cases, but they reveal a serious problem which is contained within the initial teacher education system: a discrepancy between *academism* at the university and *professionalism* at school. This discrepancy may be essentially attributed to the misuse of the open-competition based accreditation system, in which all universities and colleges can equally but easily participate in initial teacher education. In fact, this result would be inevitable under the current system without clear guidelines and appropriate internal and external evaluation.

2.4. *ELTs’ Perceptions of the ELT Certificate Programs — What Knowledge and Skills Should Be Acquired?*

In a series of past research projects, I was able to conduct surveys related to Japanese ELTs’ perceptions in order to explore the validity and effectiveness of the employment examination which is supposed to assure the quality of ELT teachers (Wakita & Matsumura 2007, Wakita 2010). The following is one of the questions that was included in the questionnaire: *What
subjects should be learned or what knowledge or abilities should be acquired in ELT certificate programs? Please choose the top three priorities out of the following 23 subjects which are currently taught and explain the reasons.

Table 4 shows the following results: (1) Methodology of teaching English (53%) and practice of teaching English (52%) are highly valued; (2) Approximately 30% of the respondents emphasized oral communication ability such as public speaking (30%) and discussion and debate (28%) equally; (3) These practical abilities are followed by the content-based knowledge necessary for ELTs such as the analysis and development of teaching materials (27%), testing and evaluation (19%) and second language acquisition (17%).

Interestingly enough, the perceptions of the ELTs seem to show a gap between what initial teacher education institutions normally provide in their curriculum and what is needed in real-life classroom situations. From these results it could be safely concluded that current ELTs need more practical knowledge and skills and better English proficiency as the minimum essentials for teaching in real classroom settings. Also, the results may be a negative reflection of the current situation of the ELT certificate programs: that is, most of the respondents, who are secondary school teachers, needed more training to improve their English abilities and did not learn the theoretical and practical subjects they think are necessary in universities.
2.5. Recent Controversies and Challenges in Initial Teacher Education

2.5.1. The Oversupply of Teaching Certificate Holders and Ensuing Problems

In addition to the “relaxed” curriculum, the rapid increase of universities and the subsequent increase of teacher education courses starting in the 1980s, are other reasons for an oversupply of teaching certificate holders. In the 2010/11 academic year, 203,896 certificates were issued and the supply of secondary school teachers remains larger than demand for them by an extreme amount, especially in terms of English, Social Studies and Physical Education.  

This imbalance between supply and demand causes many problems. For example, employment selection is highly competitive and secondary schools are required to accept a large number of student trainees for their teaching practicum every year, although the period is only 2-4 weeks depending on the type of teacher certificate. Therefore, to ensure the quality of teachers it is necessary to adjust the imbalance between supply and demand.

2.5.2. Future Scenario and Challenges

It is a central issue and a challenge to set up an effective and comprehensive system of “teacher education as a continuum.” To this end, on August 28, 2012, the Central Council for Education proposed several significant policies and action plans to upgrade the quality of teacher education. The main challenges involve: (1) The period for the initial teacher education is to be extended from 4 to 5-6 years, which means that a Master’s degree is required; (2) The period for a teaching practicum will be expanded from the currently required period (2-4 weeks) to 6 months to 1 year; (3) Strict evaluation standards will be applied to institutions providing teacher education programs. (4) National universities of education as well as graduate schools of teacher education are expected to take a much stronger initiative in producing quality teachers; (5) Positive and active use of student portfolios is encouraged to assess the performance of pre-service teachers at teacher education institutions over the 4-year period.

Nonetheless, what is essentially required in order to meet the challenge is to set clear professional standards and/or benchmarks for a subject teacher (ELT) as well as for a general teacher. Unfortunately, the Japanese central government’s involvement in this issue has been

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4 In 2010, there were 178,380 applicants for public school teacher employment examinations in Japan. The breakdown of applicants was 63,125 for lower secondary schools, and 37,629 for upper secondary schools, whereas the breakdown of candidates hired was 8,968 (competition ratio: 7.8 to 1) and 4,904 (competition ratio: 7.7 to 1) respectively.

5 The use of a student portfolio would be the most important challenge in assuring the quality of teachers in that student teachers can show what they have learned and acquired (the portfolio as product). The portfolio also helps them to work on their learning process (the portfolio as process).
vague, and accordingly, many critical issues have arisen and various problems as mentioned above have remained in terms of initial teacher education.

3. The Recruitment and Selection of Teachers

3.1. Teacher Employment Examination System
Teacher employment examinations play an important role in the recruitment process in Japan and Korea. In fact, due to intense competition, they have strong negative and positive backwash effects on initial teacher education. These examinations are autonomously conducted in June and August by the Boards of Education in Japan in the 47 prefectures and 18 designated cities (65 in total) as of July 2010. The examinations involve various selection methods to evaluate multiple aspects of aptitude, ability, and competence as a teacher in such ways as by written examination, interview (individual/group), essay writing, microteaching, role-playing based upon various school situations, and aptitude tests. The requirements which are set by each Board of Education seem tacitly standardized, and it has long been criticized that the criteria for selection are not clear enough.6

The Japanese examinations are conducted in a two-stage open competition format and the making, administration, and implementation of both first- and second-stage tests are the responsibility of the 65 prefectural and municipal Boards of Education. The first-stage tests are mainly written tests. The second-stage tests are designed not only to measure the candidates’ practical teaching skills but also to evaluate their character and aptitude as teachers. The written English tests which are usually conducted at the first stage are norm-referenced tests with a time of 50-100 minutes. They aim to assess general the English abilities of the candidates rather than their professional skills and the knowledge required of ELTs in educational settings. The test content has no specific categories or criteria and varies from one test to another and most questions must be answered in Japanese (Wakita 2006).

3.2. First-Stage Written Tests (English) as a High-Stakes Test
The employment examination, especially the first-stage written English test, is a major hurdle that every candidate must clear in order to advance to the second stage. Some pass it in one try while others have to take it several times before they are successful.

It is a very controversial high-stakes test in that researchers and teachers have questioned the validity with respect to both content and format. Shimizu (2005) made the point that “It is highly doubtful that the present employment examinations for Japanese secondary school

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6 After the bribery case involving employment exams to select teachers for public schools in Oita Prefecture was revealed in 2008, MEXT required all Boards of Education to disclose the criteria and processes of their employment examinations. However, they are still not transparent and vague.
English teachers function as a means of selecting quality teachers.” What they see as particularly problematic is that there is a discrepancy between teacher qualities assessed in the tests and those needed in the real-life classroom, suggesting that there is no guarantee that candidates who have passed the test can be quality ELTs. This comment would also suggest that there are no clear guidelines or benchmarks required regarding ELTs’ knowledge and skills.

3.3. Teachers’ Perceptions of ELT Qualities Assessed in the Examinations
I investigated teachers’ perceptions of the gap between teacher qualities assessed in the examinations and teacher qualities needed in real-life classroom situations, and explored the directions in which the examinations should be improved. To this end, a series of research projects were conducted, in relation to the Korean examination system (Matsumura & Wakita 2006, 2007; Wakita & Matsumura 2005, 2007; Wakita 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010).

3.3.1. Evaluation of the First-Stage (English) Written Tests
In one of the surveys I posed questions as to how the ELTs would evaluate the Japanese employment examinations and which they thought were good or bad questions on the Japanese and Korean tests for the purpose of selecting quality teachers of English. Here are the results:

1. A significant number of teachers claimed that the Japanese first-stage written examinations are problematic because they are designed primarily to measure test takers’ English proficiency.
2. A common criticism was that the examinations are difficult because they include many cognitively demanding questions that integrate various components of English proficiency such as reading comprehension, grammar, vocabulary usage, and composition.
3. In addition, it was pointed out that the examinations do not include questions which assess practical teaching abilities required in real educational settings. Many mentioned the necessity of maintaining a balance of teaching methods, linguistics, literature, and general English skills.
4. A predominant number of the teachers thought that the expertise for teaching English, such as teaching methodology and testing, which would be required in real educational settings, should be assessed even on the written examination, in addition to English abilities. In other words, what is required of teachers is not just evidence of knowledge but cognitively demanding “situated knowledge (Tsui 2003).”

Upon analyzing the Japanese teachers’ appraisal of the employment examinations, it appears that, according to them, the ability of good teachers is connected to whether they can demonstrate their knowledge of theories of linguistics and language education in real-life classroom situations. In this sense, the purpose of the employment examinations should not
check explicit (declarative) knowledge of a particular theory but rather make inferences about test takers’ abilities to apply that theory in real-life teaching situations. This finding also suggests that teachers with high English proficiency are not always linguistically aware of students’ struggle with the language.

3.3.2. English Proficiency Required of Secondary School ELTs
As mentioned above, MEXT proposed benchmarks for the English proficiency of secondary school ELTs in the 2003 action plan. In accordance with this proposal, there is an exemption system in which candidates with good English abilities are exempt from the first written tests which usually include tests of general academic knowledge, theory of pedagogy, English ability and English teaching. As of 2009, 37 out of 59 prefectures and designated cities (62.7%) implemented the exemption system for their employment and selection (MEXT 2011). However, it should be noted that as shown in Figure 1, the exemption criteria based upon the scores of the standardized tests are much higher than the benchmarks set by the government.7

Given these, below are responses with regard to the question of English proficiency required of secondary school ELTs (Wakita 2010). (1) Interestingly, a significant number of teachers suggested that standardized tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC should be used as an alternative to the first-stage written test simply because they are more reliable. (2) Furthermore, many respondents claimed that the local government should set a minimum score on those tests as a prerequisite for applying for the examinations or a scale for cutting off those who do not attain the required level. (3) Current teachers acknowledge the necessity for first-stage

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7 A survey conducted by MEXT (2008) identified the problem of teachers’ low proficiency level in English: 27.7% of JHS English teachers (23,562 respondents) and 50.6% of SHS English teachers (18,796 respondents) met the minimal standard of English proficiency set in the 2003 action plans, though there are still many teachers who have not taken such standardized tests.
written tests to contain questions which can measure prospective teachers’ levels of language awareness, that is, the knowledge teachers should have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively.

3.4. Future Orientation of the Employment Examinations to Assure ELT Quality

For the future orientation of the employment examinations to ensure ELT quality, first, a minimum score in standardized tests should be used as a prerequisite for applying for the examinations. Second, the first written tests should focus on assessing candidates’ abilities to apply theory in real-life teaching situations, namely, expertise of teaching English such as teaching methodology and testing which would be required in real educational settings. To this end, questions to effectively test the skills and knowledge necessary for high-quality ELTs should be created and a theoretical framework should be developed for future written tests.8

As regards the selection process, I would like to propose a three-stage employment exam. Specifically, the first stage would be checking the candidates’ overall English proficiency by using a standardized test like TOEFL or TOEIC. The purpose here would be to set a baseline score to assure the minimum required level of proficiency necessary to become an English teacher. The second-stage test, which is equivalent to the present first-stage written test, should focus on theories of language education and/or linguistics. On the third-stage test, in addition to checking candidates’ character and aptitude as a teacher, it is critical to check whether they can actually perform the classroom activities that they have in their knowledge base. At the same time it is important to organize the test in a way that candidates who have the potential to succeed but have limited teaching experience are also able to pass.

Conclusion

“The widely held belief that good teachers are ‘naturals,’ requiring no specific training or education, is detrimental to creating an image of language teachers as ‘true’ professionals, on a par with, say, lawyers or doctors.” (Hüttner et al. 2011).

The most central issue to improve the quality of teachers is to identify what teacher

8 In 2008, Korea implemented a new three-stage teacher employment examination system as the result of a comprehensive reform of university teacher-training programs. The former two-stage tests have been criticized in many ways: for their excessive competitiveness and negative backwash effects on university teacher training programs in addition to questions about their validity and effectiveness in recruiting ‘quality English teachers.’ In this context, before implementing the new employment examination, Korean Institute of Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE) and the Korean Association of Teachers of English (KATE) jointly developed professional teaching standards for Korean secondary school English teachers and procedures for assessment.
professionalism is and to establish professional standards in teaching a subject matter, as seen in the frameworks developed by the National Board of Professional Standards (NBPTS) in the U.S. and the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE).

With regard to what constitutes teacher professionalism, there are a number of concepts. For example, the currently predominant concept, which is heavily influenced by the information-processing model of the mind and a socio-constructivist perspective of learning, focuses upon the cognitive processes of the teacher as “a reflective practitioner” and teacher development as “a learner” (Schön 1983, Richards & Lockhart 1996, Richards 2005). As opposed to this view, Shulman (1986, 1999) argued that “central to the notion of teacher professionalism is subject matter knowledge.” In his view, subject matter is transformed from the knowledge of the teacher into the content of instruction, with deep thoughts and actions in inherently uncertain and complex teaching conditions. However, these two concepts, in other words, theory (explicit knowledge, formalized knowledge, and knowing what) and practice (tacit knowledge, situated knowledge and knowing how), are inseparably integrated and dialectically related with each other in teachers themselves. Therefore, bridging the gap between theory and practice is a critical issue and a challenge in assuring the quality of ELTs.

As long as classroom teaching is the main arena of English education, the quality of the teacher who teaches English to students is a key factor to consider. Establishing an effective system of teacher education as a continuum, as well as clear professional standards or benchmarks for ELTs in a Japanese context, are future challenges for improving English education. MEXT should take a stronger initiative in meeting this challenge, and also coordination and cooperation should be further strengthened among researchers and administrators concerned.
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