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Micromanagement and the implementation of a university autonomous learning center

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マイクロマネージメントと大学自律学習センターの実施

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Abstract : Recently the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has had increased pressure from the business market to foster Japanese students with spoken English abilities. This has led to several changes in the English curriculum for compulsory education. However, these changes are hampered by the entrance exam system for university, which are principally translation-based exams. Meanwhile, in effort to fulfill MEXT's objective of improving Japanese students spoken English skills, many universities are considering different options. One route is the creation of autonomous English spaces where students can freely improve their English. This paper is a case study presenting the challenges of setting up and running an English Training Center at a national university in northern Japan. While the educational goal of the English Training Center is to develop students' English, both in terms of their confidence and ability, as business aspects of the university are emphasized, influences from the administration often intervene in the Center's objectives and operation. A discussion of the set up of the English Training Center, how students are attracted to come, its daily operation, and influences from the university administration are presented.

要旨: 近年文科省は、日本の学生の英会話力を伸ばすようと、企業市場から圧力を受けている。これは義務教育の英語カリキュラムに幾つかの変革をもたらしてきた。しかし、文章訳に重点を置く大学入試システムにより、その変革は妨げられている。一方、学生の英会話力を伸ばすという文科省の目的を達成するために、多くの大学は様々な方法を試みている。その一つが、大学内で学生が自由に英語力を伸ばせる自律的な英語空間 (autonomous English spaces) の設立である。この論文では、北日本のある国立大学における「英語トレーニングセンター」の設立と運営の際の挑戦について、事例研究として検証していく。この「英語トレーニングセンター」の教育目標は、学生の英語力を、自信と能力の両面において、伸ばしていくことであるが、大学の企業的側面が強調されるに従い、大学当局からの影響が度々センターの目的や運営にも及んでいる。英語トレーニングセンターの設立の状況、どのように学生の利用を促したか、また日常の運営、そして大学当局からの影響について議論していく。

Key words : administration, autonomous learning center, ideologies influencing language policies

1. Introduction

It is not uncommon to hear that Japanese lack oral communication skills yet excel in English reading and writing. Over the last decade, the Japanese Ministry of Education has had pressure from the business

market to foster Japanese with spoken English abilities. This has led to several changes in the elementary and junior high schools English curriculum. The majority of the changes to the curriculum at grade school are inhibited by the system of entrance exams for university, which are principally translation-based exams. In effort to fulfill the Education Ministry's objective of improving spoken English, many universities have divided English into speaking/ listening classes and reading/writing classes. Some universities are taking steps beyond this and creating English spaces where students can autonomously improve their English. This empirical paper will investigate these questions: What are the ideologies underpinning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan? And: How do these ideologies influence the implementation of autonomous EFL learning at the university level? To understand the ideologies behind foreign language learning requires knowledge of the development of foreign language policies in Japan. Stemming from this historical framework, the challenges faced when setting up an English Training Center in terms of administration, the student body and their motivation, and finally activities available in the English Center will be addressed.

2. Influences on foreign language policies

When describing the ideologies behind Japanese foreign language policies, two terms are commonly employed: *nihonjinron* and *kokusaika*. *Nihonjinron* is used to describe the uniqueness of Japan, while *kokusaika* is used to describe Japan's notion of internationalization. These terms have several implications for Japanese foreign language learning policies. First, many claim that the term *nihonjinron* promotes the idea that Japan is a monolithic insular nation (Crump, 2008; Gottlieb, 2005; Seargeant, 2009). From this perspective the Japanese language is viewed as being linguistically homogeneous: there is only one type of Japanese language, and this is a barrier to foreigners as language is tied to both race and culture. From this logic many Japanese feel that it is not only impossible for them to learn a foreign language, as to do so would alter their Japanese use as well as influence their culture, but also it is next to impossible for foreigners to learn Japanese. However, Japanese is a language which consists of many different dialects and local influences. In the last decade and a half Kubota (1998 & 2011) and Gottlieb (2005) state that the number of speakers of Japanese as a second or foreign language has increased. While Kubota (1998) solely

attributes this to Japan's economic strength, Gottlieb (2005) also points to the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) emphasis on the Japan English Teacher (JET) programme, and scholarships available to foreign students to study in Japan made available by the Japanese government. The key is that while there is the ideology of *nihonjinron*, in reality it is possible for foreigners to not only acquire the Japanese language, but also to understand its cultural perspectives. The upshot of the *nihonjinron* ideology is that it is often used as a shield to explain why the majority of Japanese do not speak a second language.

The *nihonjinron* policy is only half of the ideological shield behind which international language learning policies in Japan hide; the other half is the notion of *kokusaika*. As stated above, *kokusaika* is a term which reflects Japan's idealization of internationalization. Here internationalization means to expose the Japanese to new ideas. These new ideas should ideally stimulate Japan's role in the international community, add depth to social reforms, and also ensure that the Japanese safeguard their own identity (Gottlieb, 2005; Liddicoat, 2007b). However, this idea of internationalization is not in keeping with English ideology. For many native English speakers, *internationalization* means to transcend either national boundaries or viewpoints and to be open to the world. However, in the sense of *kokusaika* Suzuki (1995), quoted in Liddicoat (2007b), describes internationalization as the "spreading [of] Japanese culture, values, and history internationally, and moving the other to see the world from a Japanese perspective, in order to preserve Japan's interests and promote the 'correct understanding of Japan'" (page 207). In this manner while Japanese businesses are able to compete on the international market at a level equal to other nations, Japan as a nation can also protect its unique cultural heritage (Hagerman, 2009; Liddicoat, 2007b). According to the *kokusaika* ideology, the best way for change to occur is through educational reforms. This ideology thus allows Japan to interact on the global scale while also promoting and protecting its own values. It is through this milieu that English language education has developed and been implemented in Japan.

3. Policy implications for foreign language learning

Both the ideologies of *nihonjinron* and *kokusaika* have greatly influenced English language

teaching in Japan. From the *nihonjinron* stance, there is only one Japanese language and it is unique and linguistically homogeneous. This is a barrier to both foreigners wanting to learn Japanese and Japanese wanting to learn a foreign language as, according to this view, language is explicitly tied to race and culture; without belonging to both the race and the culture, it is impossible to learn the language. This plays into the *kokusaika* ideology where Japanese students are taught and form their own cultural identity and how from this position the Japanese, as a nation, can coexist harmoniously with and become a respected member of the world. These ideologies influence Japanese language policies, which seemingly embrace teaching EFL and foreign cultures but also repels them. It is within this duality that EFL education is borne.

Recently the Japanese Ministry of Education has had increasing pressure from the business market to foster Japanese with spoken English abilities. Here, the idea is that having knowledge of English will lead businesses to become international (MEXT, 2011). With this notion English is seen as a part of the internationalization of Japan, and the level of an individual's English knowledge is important in terms of the screening process of their university education, as well as their eventual job and subsequent promotions. This model has led to several changes in the foreign language curriculum for the different levels of education. However, these changes are hampered by the university entrance exam system, which are principally translation-based exams (Hagerman, 2009; Liddicoat, 2007a). As long as the English component of Japanese university entrance exams continues to focus primarily on grammar, translation, and reading abilities, EFL language education is unlikely to change. As the university entrance exam is a criterion for acceptance for most students, teachers at the grade school level of education will continue to focus on what their students need to know in order to successfully pass the examination. As most universities do not have a listening or conversation component of the entrance examination, these aspects of communicative teaching receive less weight during classes at the grade school level of education.

The university entrance examination has in essence influenced foreign language learning at grade school. At first, it was only mandatory that students were exposed to a foreign language and culture; Monbusho (2002a)¹ stated that “for compulsory foreign language instruction, English should be selected in *principle*” [emphasis added]. Accordingly, while it is not mandatory, English is

typically equated with the teaching of a foreign language in Japan (Crump, 2008; Kubota, 2011; McKenzie, 2008). These authors note that this is generally because English is equated with being the international lingua franca of the business world. However, only Liddicoat (2007a) makes a key observation: that the focus of English language education is North American English. What is important about this, he explains, is that the “focus of internationalisation is then clearly directed at communication with the economically and politically dominant English speaking nations, rather than at communication across a broad geographical and linguistic spectrum” (p. 36). Therefore, Japan in essence is being selective and limiting other cultural influences.

As can be seen from the above discussion, language policies and reforms are performed in a top-down manner. The international market, through high-level bureaucracy, does influence Japanese education, and in particular EFL teaching, through policy changes that are made at the political level. These changes at the grade school level are then passed down to the teachers to implement. Teachers are provided with full lesson plans and ministry approved textbooks. However, the changes are typically manipulated to suit the teacher’s current style (Iino, 2002). Even with instructions for implementation teachers are more likely to adapt what they have been told to do with what they already are doing. This would then suggest that in order to fully implement new teaching pedagogies or imperatives, either teachers need training seminars, or at the university level where students are training to become new teachers, these new imperatives must be made part of the curriculum. Otherwise, as Hagerman (2009), Liddicoat (2007a), and Yoshida (2003) assert, reforms in foreign language education will not take place very quickly. It seems that for the policy makers appearance is what is important. While EFL reforms are in place it is questionable whether or not these reforms are to actually improve Japanese communicative abilities in a foreign language, or for economic appeasement.

Ideologies such as *nihonjinron* and *kokusaika* influence and in effect become fundamental components in language learning policies set out by MEXT. However, language policies are not only shaped through construction, but also as Liddicoat (2007a/b) outlines, in the specific circumstances in which they will be implemented. The situation influences the actions and reactions taken to follow specific policies. Liddicoat (2007a) continues and states that language policies are essentially

ideological constructs, and as texts will be manipulated and shaped according to the environment they are implemented in. The current foreign language policy mandate as set forth by MEXT is to create 'Japanese with communicative abilities' (MEXT, 2003; Monbusho, 2002b)². In an effort to fulfill MEXT's objective of improving Japanese spoken English skills many universities are considering different options. The creation of English spaces where students can come freely to improve their English is one route some universities have taken. This has led to the creation of (English) Language Training Centers such as: the English Lounge at Toyo-Gakuen in 2004, the World Plaza at Nanzan University in 2006, and more recently the English Lounge at Hirosaki University in 2012. The purpose of these language centers is to create an autonomous language-learning environment for university students to improve their foreign language skills.

4. The English Training Center and its Challenges

The challenges of setting up and running Hirosaki University's language learning center, the English Lounge (EL), will be addressed here. Hirosaki University is a national university in Aomori. The educational goal of the EL is to develop student's English in terms of their confidence and ability. However, the university is also a business and accordingly there are influences from the administration. This is further complicated by the ideologies behind language policies. The following discussion describes the composition of the EL, methods of attracting students, and the running of the EL. Interwoven with these are influences from the university administration.

4.1. The English Lounge

The English Lounge, when it opened in April 2012, was officially a part of the International Exchange Center. It comprises of two rooms on the second floor of Hirosaki University's General Education building. One room is labeled as the 'noisy room'; here active conversation is encouraged. There is also complementary tea and coffee. The second room is the 'quiet room' where students can study or get assistance with English homework. The two rooms are separated by glass paneling and a door. The aim of the EL is to allow students to develop their ability to freely converse in English as well as to autonomously improve their overall English skills; in essence to take the leap from being English learners to that of being English users in an EFL environment.

4.2. The University Student

The EL was created on the concept that generally most Japanese students lack conversation skills in English. This is in recognition that after six years of English education at the compulsory level, students are not reaching MEXT's goal of Japanese with English abilities. Unlike the grade school level of education level at the university level MEXT has limited influence in terms of how English classes evolve and the specific books chosen for a class. In fact, at the university level, as Iino (2002) states, although MEXT outlines the required courses, it has no control over what actually happens in the classroom. Teachers can individually choose their own textbooks and the direction individual classes will take. What must be acknowledged however, is that English is being taught as a second language (L2) in a first language (L1) environment. While many instructors aim to get their students to use English outside of the classroom, in Japan most students have little or no need to use English (Barker, 2004). This is complicated by the fact that the Japanese student is often characterized as being shy and overly dependent upon their instructor in comparison to western students (Moritoshi, 2009). English conversations with students tend to be short and stilted. It is in recognition of these facts that both university instructors and administration searched for other options for students to use English outside of the classroom. Autonomous English Language Training Centers, such as the EL, appear to be the answer to this search.

4.3. Student Users

Hirosaki University has approximately 6700 students including about 100 foreign exchange students enrolled in five different faculties. The EL is open to all students university wide. As a new service available to students, advertisements of the EL were posted within each faculty as well as on bulletin boards all over the university grounds to encourage a wide range of students to take steps to improve or maintain their level of English.

4.4. Administration and the English Lounge

Over the last decade many national institutions have been allotted greater autonomy over their programs from the central government. However, it is still common for some national universities to have stronger ties with the central government than others. At Hirosaki University there is a

representative from MEXT who is known as the Dean of Academic Affairs (DAA). The duty of the Dean is to oversee the university academic programs and to ensure that the university follows mandates from MEXT. The Dean, as Inoki (2001) explains, is considered to be on loan from the central government and his duties include creating and maintaining the flow of information from the central to the local governments. This system allows the university to implement new programs with accountability. However, as the DAA is held accountable for program changes he has the authority to intervene and make adjustments where he thinks necessary.

The purpose of the EL at Hirosaki University, as stated above, is to improve its Japanese students' English abilities. The DAA has played a pivotal role in ensuring that the objectives of MEXT are met. However, this has caused controversy with the Director of the English Lounge in terms of how these objectives are turned into reality. The first major problem was the spending of the EL budget. Like any other department at a university the EL has a budget. However, as a new department the regulations of how this budget could be spent were not decided upon before the EL opened. As an incentive for creating a regular base of return students, the manager of the EL created point cards where students received a point for each visit to the EL. These cards, however, were put into circulation before what or how prizes would be rewarded to students was confirmed. While debates about what would constitute an acceptable educational prize were conducted between the EL's Director and the DAA, students were left wondering the purpose of the point card was. As one student stated: "this place isn't well organized". When several students had completed their cards, it was decided to award students a Lounge Dollar to save and exchange for a prize at a later time once it was decided how the budget could be spent. Therefore, not being able to access the budget is both affecting the running of the EL and student's impressions of it.

The EL is advertised as a 'Fun and relaxing place to study English' on posters throughout the university. In the beginning one part of this poster invited students to come and chat with native speaker English instructors while enjoying tea or coffee. To take the step across the threshold of the EL's doors and to enter an English only environment is difficult for some students. The idea behind offering beverages to students was to help create a distraction for students, something for them to focus on and relax as well as to try and improve their English. These drinks were provided by a

private fund from the university. Yet, as the university is an educational institution the DAA decided it was not appropriate for the EL to be offering free beverages to students. Accordingly, even though the fund for these drinks was privately funded, through his academic authority the DAA was able to halt this incentive. Some students were dismayed by this decision; as one student stated “The drinks made conversation easier, more relaxing. When I had a coffee I could focus on that while I thought about what I wanted to say.” Although implementing a new department is difficult, student's perceptions are important; when regulations suddenly change and students feel the direct consequences of these changes, their opinions alter. This could potentially have negative effects for students and their autonomous English learning.

All departments of an academic institution must be held accountable and the EL is no exception. It is questionable how a department such as the EL can obtain accountability when it is not mandatory for students to attend. This problem was much discussed and it was officially decided in June that the EL's accountability will be assessed on students' TOEIC results university wide. Students at most universities in Japan are required to take TOEIC exam during their first year of study. Students also typically take the TOEIC exam again before they start their job hunt sometime during their third year of university. However, this does vary. Since accountability is now based on students' TOEIC scores, the focus of the EL has turned towards providing mini classes to improve students' test taking abilities. In addition, keeping with MEXT's (2009) Japanese with English academic abilities goal, the EL will also assist students with their English education through help with debates and speeches, and presentations. This, according to a proclamation sent by the Director of the English Lounge on July 6th, 2012 is “to increase the outgoing force for employment, and is also important for students seeking their way through research” (translated from Japanese). Thus, as Liddicoat (2007b) suggests, in this context English has become only a tool. Through these functions the EL is perpetuating the *nihonjinron* and *kokusaika* ideology. It is creating an avenue where students can develop their English communication skills but it is narrow and it is limiting their expression of Japanese ideologies and points of view in English.

Student recognition is important if the EL is to be successful. For students attending the EL this should translate into some sort of academic recognition. Accordingly, creating a mini-TOEIC

class schedule, and assisting student with other English language placement tests is not a hindrance to students. As stated above one of the main reasons why grade school English education has not changed is due to the high school and university entrance examinations. Students and their parents want schools to be accountable for their instruction. This accountability in the minds of the students and their parents is based on students successfully completing entrance examinations (Hagerman, 2009; Liddicoat, 2007a; Yoshida, 2003). This same mentality carries over to students' use of the EL. On campus there is a privately owned and run English language school, an *Eikaiwa*, which focuses on grammar instruction, TOEIC test taking skills, and conversation. Depending on their course of study, students pay 60,000 yen or more per term. Upon completion of the course of study students gain a sense of academic recognition as they receive a certificate of completion. This, and the fact that the classes are not free, creates a desire for completion of a course at the *Eikaiwa*.

As an autonomous learning center how is it possible for the EL to develop and maintain student motivation to come? This would necessitate that the EL clearly posts a schedule of activities and mini-courses available. However, the schedule alone is not enough. The EL cannot charge students for its services as it is part of the university system. This then leads to two important points in the offering of free classes: 1) students are not obligated to attend additional classes even though they signed up for them; and 2) they may not feel it necessary to attend each week. This then creates problems for instructors. Most importantly each week there may be not only a different number of students attending, but also different students in a class. This would be counterproductive as it would inhibit the natural run of a course. One solution in the creation of a mini-course would be to require students to sign a contract stating that they will attend regularly. However, this could also be counterproductive. A better solution would be to offer students some sort of prizes, such as an English book, at the completion of a mini-course. This, however, would require that regulations of how the budget could be spend are agreed upon. While it was suggested to offer students certificates, as the mini-courses offered in the EL are not officially sanctioned courses by MEXT, it would therefore be impossible to offer an official or unofficial certificate with the name of the university according to the DAA.

4.5. Use of the EL

When students attend the EL they sign in using their university ID number. Figure 1 shows the

frequency of visits by students for May and June 2012.

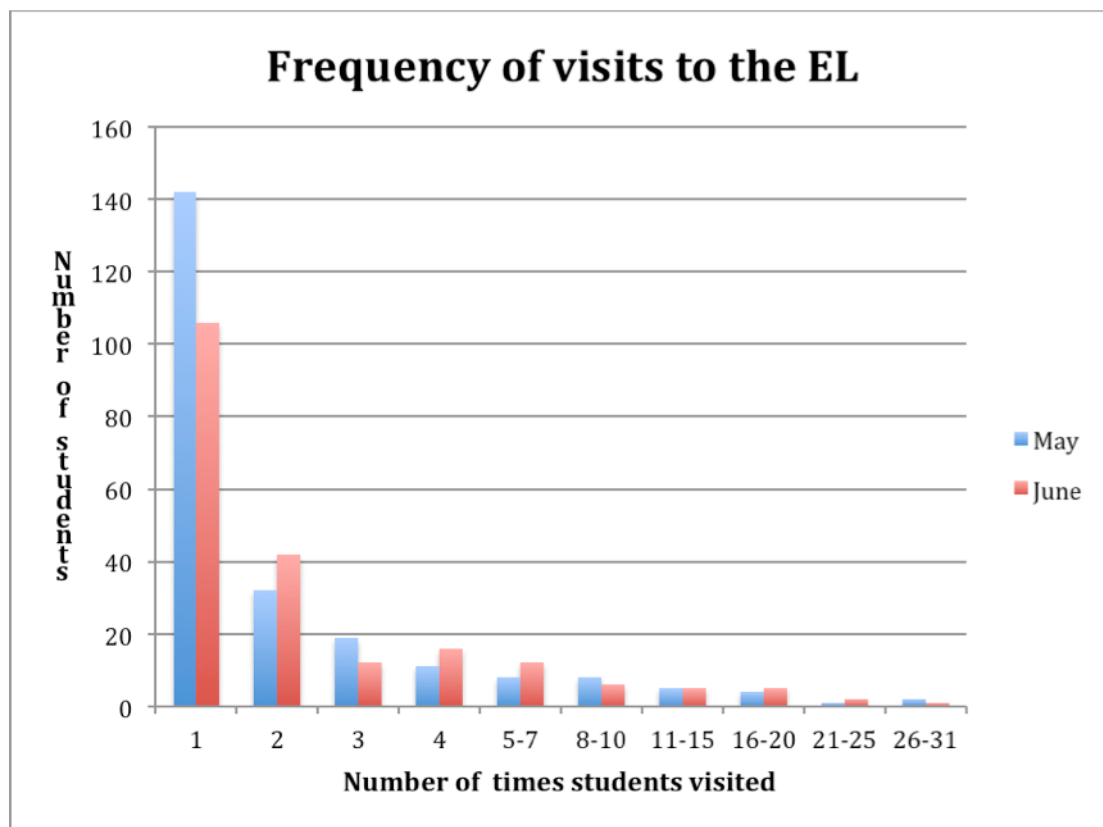


Figure 1: Frequency of Visits

The original goal, set by the DAA, was to have 100 visitors a day. This was later revised to 50 visitors a day. In June there were a total of 666 students visiting the EL over a 21-day period. This equals to an average of 32 students a day. These students typically spend an hour in the EL per visit. In this hour the quality of learning and use of English was far greater than if more students had visited for a shorter time span. During this longer time span students were learning and practicing English in the way they wanted to use it, using a wide range of activities both individually and in groups. Furthermore, the capacity of the EL rooms are limited, more than 20 students per room at one time is not only uncomfortable but it becomes too nosy to hear, talk and think in English.

4.6. Lounge Activities

When it opened the EL provided a range of activities focusing heavy on oral skills. In the beginning, students had several options for how they could make use of the EL:

1. 1) chat, play games, have discussions.
2. 2) get help with homework, or one-on-one consulting.
3. 3) use English audios and videos.
4. 4) read English books and manga.
5. 5) make friends.

However, once it became clear that the EL was to be held responsible for improving university-wide students' TOEIC results, the schedule was altered to include TOEIC specific assistance (see figure 2 below).

Monday 月	Tuesday 火	Wednesday 水	Thursday 木	Friday 金
基礎英語 Hiro: Basic English 11:00-11:50 ----- ----- TOEFL ミ ニコース Yohei: Mini TOEFL course 15:00-15:45 ----- ----- 基礎発音と英語のリズム Shari: English rhythm and pronunciation 16:00-16:50	TOEIC ミ ニコース Hiro: Mini TOEIC course 14:30- 15:30 ----- ----- 句動詞とイディオム Brian: Phrasal verbs and Idioms 16:00-17:00	ビギナー英語 Adam: ABC Beginner English 13:15-14:15 ----- ----- TOEICリスニングの練習Liz: TOEIC listening practice 14:45-15:30 ----- ----- 基礎発音と英語のリズム Shari: English rhythm and pronunciation 15:45-16:35	句動詞とイディオム Brian: Phrasal verbs and Idioms 14:00-15:00 ----- ----- TOEFL ミ ニコース Yohei: Mini TOEFL course 15:00-15:45 ----- ----- TOEICリスニングの練習Liz: TOEIC listening practice 16:00-16:45	TOEIC ミ ニコース Hiro: Mini TOEIC course 14:30- 15:30 ----- ----- 基礎発音と英語のリズム Shari: English rhythm and pronunciation 16:00-16:50

Yet, the instructors of the EL felt it was necessary to balance this TOEIC schedule with other opportunities to use English. Accordingly the EL's schedule expanded to include a movie night twice a month. These take place after fifth period and run from 17:40 until 19:00. This new schedule also

led the instructors to question the EL's hours of operation. The EL is open from 10:00 to 13:00 and 14:00 to 17:00, which are times when most students are attending regular university classes. Therefore they are unable to come to the EL. As most students continue to study until 17:40 it was decided to extend the EL hours to 19:00 twice a week. This allows students additional opportunities to practice their English in the EL.

It is important that the instructors of the EL make continual efforts to improve what the EL offers for students. However, these efforts must be considered in tandem with the notion of student motivation. Motivation is a complex topic and many of the issues surrounding it are beyond the scope presented here; however, it is important to briefly address student motivation. Learning EFL in a L1 environment is difficult and presents many challenges for both the students and the instructor. In the L1 environment there is little opportunity to use English outside of the classroom; to do so would require a commitment and desire on the part of the EFL user, it would necessitate intrinsic motivation. Japanese students are well aware of the external forces upon them to study English by the fact that they must complete first and second year English courses at university in order to graduate (Yoshikawa, 2011). While their extrinsic motivations may be high, often their intrinsic motivations are much lower. This combined with the *nihonjinron* ideology that it is difficult for Japanese to learn a foreign language acts as a barrier for low-level EFL students. In this situation, the challenges to motivate these students to autonomously use a language-training center, such as the EL, are enormous. Therefore, while the EL should make every effort to reach a wide student body, the fact remains that if students do not like English, and feel no need to improve their English skills, they are unlikely to take advantage of the EL. Accordingly, the EL should ensure that programs are offered not only to the low-level student, but also to the student who is motivated to improve and expand their EFL competence. In this way, the EL will find its success.

5. Conclusion

The obligation lies with both instructors and the university administration to create stress-free opportunities for students to use English outside the classroom. This would enable students to appreciate the value of communication skills in a second language. The EL at Hirosaki University is

one possible solution towards improving the English abilities of students. However, in this situation the ideologies of the uniqueness of Japan, *nihonjinron*, and internationalization, *kokusaika*, at times interplay and at other times are at odds with the goals of the EL. Many low-level EFL speaking Japanese students have the misconception that learning another language is extraordinarily difficult, so difficult that it is in fact impossible to do so. This is further complicated by the micromanagement of the Japanese administration. While it is acknowledged that the EL is a part of an academic institution, the administration must acknowledge that the EL is a unique entity. If the administration could step back from its management position, then perhaps the EL could offer a better language-learning situation for students. However, within the confines of the administration, the EL aims to reach as much of the student body as possible. The challenge for the EL then is to integrate itself with all the faculties of the university and to offer these students faculty specific assistance in English study. In this way the EL is not only offering English practice that is relevant, but English is seen as potentially useful for students. It is in this way that the EL would create the motivation for students to leap from being English learners to being English users.

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NOTES

⁽¹⁾ *Monbusho* is the predecessor of *Monbubukagusho* (MEXT in English).

⁽²⁾ Although the *Monbusho* started this policy, it nevertheless still is a fundamental element of the current stance on foreign language learning in Japan today.

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