

COMPARING ELT IN MALAYSIA AND JAPAN: LEARNING FROM BEST PRACTICES

Novan Andrianto, Saefurrohman, Destia Oviyani

Master of English Language Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto

* Corresponding Author

saefurrohman@ump.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the differences in English language proficiency between Malaysia and Japan, emphasizing the educational frameworks, instructional strategies, and sociocultural factors that influence language learning in both countries. The colonial history of Malaysia and its bilingual policies have established English as an essential element of the education system, fostering communicative competence via task-based instruction and comprehensive curricular integration. Conversely, Japan's dependence on grammar-translation techniques and a focus on exam-driven teaching has impeded the cultivation of practical communication abilities, resulting in diminished English proficiency levels. This paper employs a literature review methodology to explore two

primary questions of inquiry: (1) What elements have contributed to the high levels of English proficiency in Malaysia? (2) What challenges prevent Japan from attaining comparable success? Comparative analyses underscore Malaysia's proactive policies, multilingual frameworks, and focus on communicative strategies as essential factors contributing to its success. On the other hand, the obstacles faced by Japan arise from cultural perspectives, restricted familiarity with English, and conventional educational methods that emphasize rote memorization. The results highlight the importance of combining communicative and task-based teaching methods, implementing policy reforms, and providing more immersion opportunities to improve English education. Suggestions involve implementing bilingual policies, enhancing interactive teaching techniques, and encouraging the use of English outside of academic contexts to foster a vibrant language-learning atmosphere. This study adds to the ongoing conversation about global language education, providing valuable insights for enhancing English proficiency in Japan and other regions encountering comparable challenges.

Keywords: English Language Proficiency, Educational Policies, Communicative , Teaching Methods, Bilingual Education, Sociocultural Influences.

INTRODUCTION

The English language has established itself as the primary means of communication worldwide, playing a crucial role in education and economic progress, effectively connecting diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The importance of this extends to global commerce, academic inquiry, and technological progress, rendering mastery of English an essential capability for both individuals and countries aiming for worldwide integration and competitive edge (Kurniawan, 2024). As a result, nations across the globe have established English language education initiatives to prepare their citizens with the necessary language skills for the modern era. Nonetheless, variations in English proficiency levels

continue to exist, underscoring discrepancies in policy execution, teaching methodologies, and cultural perspectives on language learning (Adnyani, 2022).

Malaysia and Japan illustrate this difference, presenting distinct approaches to English language education. Malaysia, once a British colony, has a rich history of integrating English into its education system, bolstered by bilingual policies and a curriculum that prioritises communicative skill (Abu Bakar et al., 2021). The prevalence of English in business, higher education, and government underscores its established position within the country's linguistic framework. In contrast, Japan, while notable for its economic stature, has faced challenges in attaining similar levels of English proficiency. In Japan, the approach to English education frequently emphasises grammar and translation at the expense of practical communication skills, leading to diminished fluency and confidence in learners (Jones, 2019).

The difference in English proficiency levels between Malaysia and Japan is extensively recorded, with Malaysia regularly achieving higher scores than Japan in international English proficiency rankings. Malaysia stands out as one of the leading Asian nations in English language proficiency in 26th position of EF English Proficiency Index (2024), whereas Japan falls short in the 92th place, prompting worries regarding its capacity to utilise English for global cooperation and economic advancement. This study aims to explore the fundamental elements that lead to this difference, analysing the educational structures, teaching strategies, and sociocultural factors that influence English language learning in the two environments.

This research focusses on uncovering the primary factors contributing to Malaysia's notable achievements, as well as the obstacles that impede Japan's advancement. This work emphasises successful approaches utilised in Malaysia while identifying challenges faced in Japan, offering valuable perspectives for those involved in policy-making, education, and curriculum design.

Grasping these distinctions can guide focused reforms and enhance the effectiveness of English language education methods in Japan and other countries encountering comparable issues.

This study delves into essential enquiries regarding these matters: What elements have contributed to Malaysia's attainment of elevated English proficiency levels? What are the structural and cultural obstacles that limit Japan's initiatives to improve English language education? This analysis enhances the scholarly conversation surrounding language education and provides actionable suggestions for refining English teaching methods and policy structures.

Methodology

This research employs a literature review approach to explore the critical elements contributing to the success of English language education in Malaysia, as well as the challenges faced in Japan. This review aims to address the following research questions by examining the contrasting achievements of these two nations:

1. What factors lead to Malaysia's elevated level of English proficiency?
2. What obstacles does Japan encounter in reaching comparable success?

Comparative Studies on English Education in Malaysia and Japan

A number of comparative studies have emphasised the distinctions in English education systems between Malaysia and Japan. Studies indicate that Malaysia's colonial past and its early embrace of English as a second language contributed to extensive institutional and societal assistance for English education (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). On the other hand, the approach to English education in Japan has been significantly shaped by a focus on examinations,

resulting in deficiencies in communicative skills despite a considerable amount of time spent in the classroom (Jones, 2019). The findings emphasise the significance of historical, structural, and cultural influences in determining educational results.

Global Indices of English Proficiency

The EF English Proficiency Index (2024) indicates that Malaysia maintains its status as a high-proficiency nation, surpassing Japan, which is categorised within the low-to-moderate proficiency range. Malaysia's position highlights its focus on practical language application and bilingual education strategies, while Japan's lower ranking points to difficulties associated with rote memorisation and restricted opportunities for English usage beyond educational settings. These indices offer a numerical confirmation of the differences noted in qualitative research.

Key Factors Influencing Success of Malaysia and Challenges of Japan

1. Government Policies

Malaysia has implemented proactive bilingual and multilingual policies that integrate English into the national curriculum starting from primary education (Chan & Abdullah, 2015). Historically, Japan has concentrated on grammar-translation methods, while recent reforms have only started to highlight the importance of communicative skills (Jones, 2019).

2. Curriculum Design and Instructional Methods

Malaysia integrates task-based and communicative methods in its curriculum, promoting practical application (Fazil et al., 2018), whereas Japan predominantly depends on standardised assessments that emphasise reading and grammar at the expense of speaking and listening abilities (Jones, 2019).

Societal Attitudes and Cultural Perceptions

Research shows that Malaysians typically perceive English as a means for socioeconomic advancement and global competitiveness, which has led to its extensive use in everyday communication and professional settings (Sarwari et al., 2016). In contrast, the societal view in Japan tends to categorise English as a foreign and academic discipline, rather than a practical ability, which further entrenches obstacles to achieving fluency and confidence (David, 2018).

Malaysia's Success in English Education

Behind the fact that Malaysia is considered a country with high English proficiency index according to EF, some factors contribute to this achievement:

1. Historical and Colonial Influences

The success of Malaysia in English education can be linked to its colonial past under British governance, which set the foundation for English as a language of instruction in both educational and administrative contexts. The colonial legacy established an excellent basis for the acquisition of the English language, integrating it into the nation's legal, administrative, and educational systems (Rashid et al., 2017). Following its independence in 1957, Malaysia continued to uphold English as an important language, acknowledging its role in sustaining international relationships and promoting economic growth. The ongoing historical continuity has played a crucial role in maintaining English as a vital competency within the nation's educational systems and social norms.

2. Strong Policy Support for Bilingualism and Multilingualism

The national language policy of Malaysia highlights the importance of both bilingualism and multilingualism, advocating for the use of

English in conjunction with Bahasa Malaysia and various regional languages (Chan & Abdullah, 2015). Government initiatives, including the Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI) policy, demonstrate ongoing efforts to incorporate English into essential academic disciplines. These policies emphasise the importance of English proficiency while promoting its application in technical and scientific fields. These frameworks facilitate the acquisition of English for students within meaningful contexts, emphasising its significance beyond the classroom and aligning with wider national goals of modernisation and globalisation.

3. Emphasis on English in Curriculum and Assessments

The Malaysian curriculum prioritises the acquisition of the English language, embedding it throughout all educational stages (Darmi & Albion, 2013). English is a mandatory subject throughout primary and secondary education, with national assessments evaluating skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Abu Bakar et al., 2021). Task-based approaches and communicative language teaching methods are integrated into lesson plans, guaranteeing that learners cultivate practical language skills instead of mere rote memorisation. Moreover, ongoing evaluation methods enable educators to track development and modify teaching strategies to meet specific learning requirements, thereby improving English proficiency among Malaysian students.

Japan's Challenges in English Language Education

Japan encounters significant obstacles in attaining higher standards of English proficiency, even with substantial investment in language education. The challenges arise from solid cultural and linguistic influences, restricted opportunities for daily English usage, and a conventional emphasis on exam-focused educational approaches (Hashimoto, 2017) (Iino, 2018). The combination of these obstacles has limited Japan's initiatives to enhance communicative competence and practical language application.

1. Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

The cultural focus in Japan on maintaining linguistic uniformity and preserving the Japanese language has established both psychological and structural obstacles to acquiring English proficiency. The notable linguistic disparities between Japanese and English, especially in terms of grammar, phonology, and syntax, add layers of complexity to the process of acquisition. The variations frequently result in diminished confidence when communicating in English (Yazawa, 2017), as learners are apprehensive about making errors and experiencing embarrassment. Such attitudes lead to a lack of enthusiasm for language learning and hinder the growth of communicative competence.

2. Limited Use of English in Daily Life

In contrast to Malaysia, where English is commonly used in various sectors such as business, education, and social interactions, Japan presents limited chances for practical engagement with the language outside the classroom setting. The widespread usage of Japanese in various sectors such as media, entertainment, and professional settings diminishes the necessity for English language skills in everyday situations. The absence of immersion restricts learners' opportunities to practise and retain language skills, resulting in persistently low levels of fluency.

3. Emphasise Memorisation Over Communication Skills

Japan's conventional educational methods prioritise memorisation and exam readiness rather than engaging and communicative strategies (Nishino, 2011). English instruction frequently emphasises grammar and vocabulary exercises designed to help students succeed in standardised exams, like university entrance tests, instead of promoting practical language application. The emphasis on exams results in students being inadequately prepared for practical communication, limiting their capacity to employ English proficiently in multilingual contexts.

The differences in English language education between Malaysia and Japan reveal significant discrepancies in teaching methods and the influence of globalisation on language learning. Malaysia's achievements are rooted in communicative and task-based teaching approaches that prioritise practical language application, whereas Japan's dependence on rote memorisation prevents oral proficiency. Furthermore, Malaysia enjoys increased exposure to English via media and global interactions, while Japan's more isolated linguistic setting restricts chances for substantial practice.

Implications

Japan has the opportunity to gain significant insights from Malaysia's strategy regarding English education, especially in terms of conducting bilingual and multilingual policies, emphasising communicative competence, and integrating English into essential subject areas. Adopting task-based and interactive teaching approaches may enable Japan to move over its exam-focused system, promoting better fluency and confidence in learners. Furthermore, increasing engagement with English via media, extracurricular activities, and international exchanges could effectively connect classroom education with practical application in the real world. These reforms have the potential to foster a more dynamic and effective language-learning environment, equipping Japan's students for improved global engagement.

Conclusion

The study has shown the key factors that have led to Malaysia's achievements in English education, as well as the obstacles that prevent Japan's advancement. Malaysia's colonial past, favourable policies for bilingualism, and focus on communicative methods have established it as a prominent figure in English proficiency within the region. On the contrary, the cultural and linguistic challenges in Japan, along with a restricted exposure to English and

a dependence on repetitive instruction, have limited its capacity to attain comparable results. The findings highlight the necessity of incorporating practical language application, policy changes, and international collaboration to improve English education.

Future studies might investigate deeper into the long-term effects of Malaysia's policies and methodologies to offer more comprehensive insights into strategies that could be replicated in other contexts, such as Japan. Furthermore, investigations into the impact of technological innovations and integrated learning approaches on English proficiency may reveal novel avenues for reform. By engaging in ongoing assessment and modification, nations can establish enduring structures for language education that align with the needs of an interconnected world.

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Novan Andrianto, Saefurrohman, Destia Oviyani

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