

Learning English in Sweden and Japan: An Overview

Stephen Howe

(Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka University)

Introduction

What can we learn from best practice in foreign-language education in other countries? This paper examines why Sweden produces some of the best non-native speakers of English. By the time they graduate, school-leavers and university students in Sweden are almost all fluent in English, and Swedish schools achieve good levels of English across the ability range.

The fact that Swedes speak excellent English is something we take for granted, but it is not a matter of course. What do Swedish schools do, and what factors in Swedish society produce such excellent English ability? The aim of this initial working paper is to make a preliminary attempt to unravel what these might be.

This research will examine various factors, both inside and outside the classroom. It is divided into three parts. The first, published here, is an initial overview of Sweden and Japan and their respective English-language education. Specifically, I will discuss Measuring English Competence and Performance, Sweden and Japan, Linguistic Similarity and Difference, Years of English and Classroom Hours, and Teaching Methods. A second paper, Howe (forthcoming a), examines obstacles to fluency in Japan; and a third paper, Howe (forthcoming b), puts forward recommendations of best practice based on Swedish experience.

For this study, I have chosen Sweden. Although Finland is often cited as a successful education system, for English language specifically, Sweden is a somewhat better performer. In a recent European report discussed below, Swedish and Norwegian schoolchildren showed the best results in English, followed closely by Finland, the Netherlands and Denmark, with Spain and France showing significantly lower results.¹ I was a doctoral researcher in Sweden for about three years and speak Swedish; I have lived in Japan for about eight years. The research is based on a number of reports, informal interviews and questionnaires with teachers and students in Sweden and Japan, and my experience in the two countries.²

My aim is not to single out particular countries, rather to use real-world examples to help understand what leads to a successful foreign-language programme.³ Nor is this simply a Western versus Eastern phenomenon – some

¹ Swedish National Agency for Education, *English Here and There and Everywhere*, p. 14.

² A summary of an earlier version of this paper was presented at JALT 2007 (Howe 2007). I would like to thank the respondents for their helpful input:

1. Swedish university teacher A
2. Swedish university teacher B
3. Swedish schoolteacher of English A
4. Swedish university graduate A
5. Japanese university teacher of English A
6. Japanese university teacher of English B
7. Japanese university student, English major, A
8. Japanese university student, English major, B
9. Japanese schoolteacher A
10. Native-English university teacher of English A, Japan
11. Native-English university teacher of English B, Japan
12. Native-German university teacher of German A, Japan

³ In its 2003 *Action Plan*, the Japanese education ministry suggests research and data collection on English education inside and outside Japan (*Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to*

Western countries – notably the UK and the USA – achieve poor fluency in foreign languages, and some Asian countries – Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines for example⁴ – achieve excellent fluency in English.

In 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) formulated a ‘Strategic Plan to Cultivate “Japanese [people] with English Abilities”’. This was ‘a comprehensive and concrete plan for the purpose of *drastically reforming English education*’ in Japan. The Ministry wrote:

‘At present ... due to the lack of sufficient ability, many Japanese are restricted in their exchanges with foreigners and their ideas or opinions are not evaluated appropriately.’

The goals put forward in the *Action Plan* were that for all Japanese nationals:

On graduating from junior high school and senior high school, students should be able to communicate in English.

And that for university graduates:

On leaving university, graduates should be able to use English in their work.

The *Action Plan* adds that it is ‘important for all Japanese people to aim at achieving a level of English commensurate with average world standards’.

These goals have already been achieved – and for many years – by Sweden. Most students graduating from school and university in Sweden can speak

Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’, 31 March 2003, Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology).

⁴ The colonial legacy (which does not apply to Sweden) will be discussed later.

English very well. In a recent survey by the Swedish National Agency for Education (*English Here and There and Everywhere*, p. 27):

1. 93% of Swedish schoolchildren surveyed in the final year of compulsory school (aged 15–16 years) stated that they could understand English-language radio and TV programmes very or relatively easily.
2. 84% said that it was easy to write down questions for an interview and report from it.
3. Almost as many stated that it was relatively straightforward to describe a journey, weekend, event or party in a personal letter.

In (national-language) literacy and mathematics, Japan, too, has achieved far more than ‘average world standards’. The Japanese education system and Japanese society produces some of the best young readers/writers and mathematicians worldwide. It also achieves good literacy across the ability spectrum;⁵ and in mathematics, Japan is ranked 7th in the world and Sweden 38th.⁶ Why, then, should the results for English differ?⁷

A Japanese emeritus professor of English at Waseda University (Shinoda 2008: 22) recently wrote:

⁵ Percentages of 25–34 year-olds achieving one of the two highest literacy proficiency levels (in their national language(s)): France 14%, USA 16%, Germany 17%, England 18%, Canada 20%, Australia 21%, Sweden 24%, Japan 32%, Finland 37%. Percentages achieving the lowest three literacy proficiency levels: Japan 16%, Sweden 31%, Germany 42%, England 43%, USA 48%. All figures OECD (2014: 50).

⁶ Mean score for mathematics (OECD average = 494): Japan 536 (ranked 7th), UK 494 (26th), USA (36th), Sweden 478 (38th) (PISA, 2012).

⁷ Especially if we assume literacy and mathematics to be linked to human linguistic ability. That is, our abilities to read and write our native language (which are not instinctive but must be taught, unlike speaking or signing) and our ability to do maths derive from our language instinct.

‘The reality in Japan is that students and professionals spend a great deal of time studying English, but unfortunately the results for the most part are still poor.’

Similarly in Britain, 60% of secondary school children drop their foreign language after three years, and even those who pass their exams are often unable to use the language for everyday purposes (Crystal 1997: 373). Passing exams without fluency will be taken up later.

Imagine a situation where, on leaving school, the majority of children could not read or write well in their own language, or do multiplication or long division without a calculator. These are the results currently achieved in foreign languages. These outcomes in foreign languages are despite the UK, USA and Japan having, in global comparison, great wealth and very well-funded education systems.⁸

Native-language literacy and English ability are linked by the authors of a recent report (*EF English Proficiency Index*, Main Report, p. 30):

‘Historically, speaking a second language ... was a marker of the social and economic elite. The influence of the English language has grown, first under the British Empire, and then during the post-war economic expansion of the United States ... However, globalization, urbanization, and the Internet have dramatically changed the role of English in the past 20 years. Today, English proficiency is less associated with the elite, and

⁸ The often near-native English competence one finds in Africa, the Indian subcontinent and the Philippines – albeit with a colonial background (though now more than a half a century ago) – shows that foreign-language ability is not simply a matter of economic resources. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (USD) 2013 (sources: World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files): Sweden \$60,430, USA \$53,042, UK \$41,788, Japan \$38,634, Philippines \$2765, India \$1499, Kenya \$1246. Annual expenditure per student by educational institutions for primary through tertiary education (OECD 2014: 204) (USD): USA \$15,345, UK \$11,312, Japan \$10,646, Sweden \$12,426.

it is not as closely tied to the United States or the United Kingdom as it once was. Instead, English is becoming a basic skill for the entire global workforce, in the same way that literacy has been transformed in the last two centuries from an elite privilege into a basic requirement for informed citizenship.’

Measuring English Competence and Performance

As stated, this paper draws on around a dozen informal interviews and questionnaires with teachers and students in Sweden and Japan. It also draws on a number of published reports. According to Åberg-Bengtsson et al., there have been few large-scale comparative international studies of English as a foreign language. However, a European survey was conducted in 2002 of English at the end of compulsory school in eight countries: Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and, in part, Germany. The survey included around 1500 randomly selected pupils per country and their teachers. In Sweden, the survey comprised 1,431 pupils and 71 schools. In total, the study included almost European 12,000 students, aged 15–16, and 561 teachers. As Erickson et al. point out, direct comparison between countries and over time is difficult, as the study was not conducted identically in all countries. However, the aim was to provide broad indications of students’ abilities from the different countries rather than minute comparison.

I will also discuss the results of three major tests of English: the *EF English Proficiency Index* or *EPI*, *TOEIC*[®] and *IELTS*[™]. The results of the first, a partially free test, differ significantly from those of the other two, paid tests. The *EPI* and *TOEIC*[®] reports do not include data on speaking.⁹ Because of practical difficulties, problems grading consistently and cost, spoken language proficiency is often not

⁹ Although *TOEIC*[®] does have a speaking and writing test, the most recent (2013) *Report on Test Takers Worldwide* includes only the reading and listening test.

measured; this includes Japanese entrance exams, which will be discussed later.¹⁰ The EPI, TOEIC® and IELTS™ data are all subject to biases of who takes the test – i.e. unlike the European survey above, they are not random samples of schoolchildren, students or adults in each country, rather reports about takers of a particular test. The results must therefore be treated with some caution.

EF English Proficiency Index¹¹

EF is originally a Swedish company, now headquartered in Switzerland. For these data, I have used the Country Fact Sheet for Japan, the EF EPI Infographic, and

¹⁰ With the exception of the *EIKEN* test, Japanese entrance exams generally contain little or no speaking component. The national university entrance exams include a listening component but no speaking component.

¹¹ Methodology, test takers and score calculation (Main Report, p. 42): ‘The EF English Proficiency Index calculates a country’s average adult English skill level using data from two different EF English tests completed by hundreds of thousands of adults every year. One test is open to any Internet user for free. The second is an online placement test used by EF during the enrollment process for English courses. Both include grammar, vocabulary, reading, and listening sections. The open online test is a 30-question adaptive exam, so each test taker’s questions are adjusted in difficulty according to his or her previous correct and incorrect answers. The non-adaptive placement test is 70 questions in length ... The test administration is identical for both tests, with test takers completing the exam on computers.’

‘The EF EPI fourth edition was calculated using 2013 test data from about 750,000 test takers. Only countries with a minimum of 400 test takers were included in the index ... We recognize that the test-taking population represented in this index is self-selected and not guaranteed to be representative of the country as a whole. Only those people either wanting to learn English or curious about their English skills will participate in one of these tests. This could skew scores lower or higher than those of the general population. In addition, because the tests are online, people without Internet access or unused to online applications are automatically excluded. In countries where Internet usage is low, we expect the impact of this exclusion to be the strongest. This sampling bias would tend to pull scores upward by excluding poorer, less educated, and less privileged people.’

the Main Report from 2014. The EPI country ranking is based on test data from 63 countries and territories where English is not a native language. In total, 750,000 adults, aged 18 and above, took EF English tests in 2013. The *English Proficiency Index* requires a further qualification in addition to the test-taking biases already noted, as the report speaks of ‘speaking’ ability – for example ‘Japanese adults speak English with moderate proficiency’ – even though the *EPI* does not in fact test speaking. Below are some sample data from the report:

- Denmark has the highest ranking with 69.30
- Sweden is third with 67.80
- Malaysia = 59.73
- Singapore = 59.58
- South Korea = 53.62
- Italy = 52.80
- France = 52.69
- China = 50.15

Japan ranks 26th, with an EF EPI score of 52.88, which equates to ‘moderate proficiency’.

This appears to be a relatively positive result, with Japanese test-takers performing similarly to South Koreans, Italians, French and Chinese. On the other hand, the report adds that on average Japanese ‘EF EPI scores have not improved over the past seven years’ and that ‘All age groups in Japan have similar English

‘Each country is assigned to a proficiency band based on its score. These proficiency bands allow recognition of groups of countries with similar English skill levels and comparison within and between regions. The proficiency bands are aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and EF’s course levels. The Very High proficiency band corresponds to CEFR level B2. High, Moderate, and Low proficiency bands correspond to CEFR level B1, with each corresponding to a single EF course level. The Very Low proficiency band corresponds to CEFR level A2.’

levels’. A further noteworthy finding is that ‘Consistent with the global trend, Japanese women speak better English than Japanese men’.

The report concludes on Korea and Japan (Main Report, p. 15):

‘South Korea spends more private dollars per capita on English learning than any other country. Yet its EF EPI score has stagnated. To improve English education in South Korea, language education experts agree that teachers must be trained to help students develop practical communication skills, and they must be freed from high-stakes exams that focus primarily on grammar and vocabulary.

The Japanese education system faces similar difficulties in teaching English. To revamp its traditional teaching methodologies, Japan has recently implemented new reforms ... A few leading universities ... are beginning to offer undergraduate programs that are taught exclusively in English. And with the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics on the horizon, English training has begun to attract additional funding and media attention.’

TOEIC®

Next I will look at TOEIC® performance for 2013 for listening and reading (Worldwide Report 2013, p. 5). In this test, the mean top ten performers were from:

1. Bangladesh (mean score 895)
2. India (861)
3. Canada (819)
4. Nepal (814)
5. Switzerland (792)
6. Portugal (786)
7. Germany (783)

8. Sri Lanka (780)
9. Lebanon (753)
10. Pakistan (741)

Japanese candidates ranked 40th, with a mean score for listening and reading of 512.

IELTS™

Unlike the other two reports, the IELTS™ data include speaking. Here, therefore, I will give the results for speaking only. Japanese academic candidates scored a mean of 5.5 for speaking in IELTS™. Band 5 is defined as

A ‘modest user’, who ‘has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.’

For comparison, the reader may wish to refer to the Swedish survey results in the Introduction. For comparison with IELTS™ candidates from other countries: test-takers from Germany scored highest with 7.3 in the same speaking category (no Scandinavian country is listed), the Philippines scored 6.9 and Nigeria scored 6.8.

Sweden and Japan

Sweden is a tiny country in terms of population. In area it is somewhat larger than Japan, but its population – around 9.5 million – is smaller than that of Tokyo.¹² Both Sweden and Japan are geographically on the periphery of their respective continents. Neither was a British or US colony. The possible significance of such

¹² World Bank Group website, <http://data.worldbank.org/>, Tokyo Metropolitan Government website, www.metro.tokyo.jp, both accessed 13 February 2015.

factors – population and language sizes, geographical position and (pen)insularity – will be examined later.

Although often described as liberal, Sweden is in fact, by European comparison, a relatively reserved, conformist, Lutheran society.¹³ Conversely, Japanese are sometimes described as formal or reserved, but are a gregarious people who can in some situations seem, to English eyes, quite animated and unreserved.¹⁴ Generalisations about well over a hundred million people, even

¹³ For example, the view of DeWitt (2004: 70): ‘All Swedes today learn English at school from a young age. On one level, this means that it is very easy for the visitor to communicate, but this is deceptive. Although Swedes are charming and helpful to strangers, on a longer-term basis they are reticent, and slow to make new friends. Until the advent of inexpensive flights, travel outside the country was less common, so ideas, attitudes, and social habits were quite insular. For a visitor to move beyond acquaintanceship to friendship requires patience. The Swedes are considerably less loquacious than people from countries further south ... Swedish conversation has an exchange pattern all its own, and foreigners, especially those from North America, tend to go wrong by offering too much information too soon. The conversational comfort zone of a Swede follows a certain cadence: a brief question followed by a brief answer.’

¹⁴ For example, the views of Roberts et al. (2004: 109–115): ‘... generalisations about the Japanese must ... be qualified by the fact that there are considerable differences in the attitudes and outlook of the different generations. Due to its geographical isolation, Japanese civilisation developed with comparatively little influence from other countries and cultures ... Until the late 19th century, the Japanese had only the most limited interaction with other nations ... Longer term visitors who are working in Japan will probably find their employers and Japanese colleagues hospitable and considerate; however, relationships in the workplace are particularly circumscribed by the hierarchical structures which figure so prominently in Japanese relationships – although it is easy to overstate the case and forget, in making generalisations of this kind, that the western world has its own pecking orders ... Many foreigners are surprised by the willingness of the Japanese to go out of their way to help them ... Most Japanese are still fascinated by the *gaijin* and are usually very keen to be hospitable ... you may feel that your new acquaintances are reserved or superficial. Friends may take months to reveal anything about the[ir] personal lives and private thoughts ... westerners, for the most parts, are treated with a degree of courtesy that has given the Japanese a reputation as an exceptionally “polite” people.’

nine million people for that matter, urban or rural, and of different generations, genders and socioeconomic groups are obviously simplistic. One further important point is that *all* normal human beings are social and loquacious. If relative loquaciousness or extroversion were the keys to acquiring a language, we would expect the best speakers in Europe to be in the (Catholic) ‘south’; however, the European report cited above recorded the best results for English in the comparatively more taciturn (Protestant) ‘north’. The situation is crucial: talking a lot *in the foreign language* in the classroom is key. Talking may be suppressed in the classroom for good reason in some cases, but in foreign-language classes it is the *sine qua non*. Language classes in this sense are like music, art or sport – they require *activity* and *practice*.

Sweden and Japan are obviously different, but in a global context both are highly successful, democratic societies – countries with outstanding economies, health and education systems. Swedish and Japanese citizens enjoy some of the highest living standards and life expectancy in the world. And, indeed, there are strong correlations between countries’ English proficiency levels and a number of social and economic indicators, including (EF EPI Infographic):

- Gross national income per capita
- Human Development Index
- Legatum Prosperity Index
- Average years of public schooling

In this respect, then, we would expect *ceteris paribus* both Sweden and Japan to perform very well.

Both Sweden and Japan are Anglophile/Americanophile, at least in some ways. Generally speaking, in Europe young Swedes look to London rather than to Berlin or Paris for news, media, music, sport and so on. In Japan, many parents wish their children to learn some English already at a young age. And sociolinguistically, the fact that Japanese have borrowed and continue to borrow

thousands of English loanwords (far more than Swedes) testifies that English has very high prestige indeed.

Linguistic Similarity and Difference

Swedish is closely related to English. Much of the core, everyday vocabulary is cognate and the two languages have many obvious grammatical similarities. Viking settlement (though not from the modern-day ‘Sweden’ area) means that Scandinavian speakers formed a significant part of the history of English. However, today Swedish (or Danish or Norwegian) and English are by no means mutually intelligible, and even words said in isolation may not be easily understood. To give a few simple examples:

Verbs: *äta* – eat, *dricka* – drink, *prata* – talk, *sova* – sleep, *leva* – live, *dö* – die

Nouns: *hus* – house, *dör* – door, *bord* – table, *säng* – bed, *kök* – kitchen

Adjectives: *liten* – little, *stor* – big, *blå* – blue, *röd* – red

Pronouns: *jag* – I, *du* – you, *han* – he, *hon* – she, *vi* – we, *dom* – they

Numerals: *ett* – one, *två* – two, *tre* – three, *fyra* – four, *fem* – five

Cognates often have related but not directly transferable meanings; for instance Swedish *kvinna* (‘woman’) is cognate with English *queen*, Swedish *mat* (‘food’) with English *meat*, and Swedish *växa* (‘grow’) with English *wax* (of the moon). With the huge borrowing of French words into English after the Norman Conquest and of Low German words into Swedish as a result of the dominance of the Hanseatic League, Swedish and German share a great deal of vocabulary and patterns of word formation, but Swedish and English less.

Swedish has a pitch accent, meaning that older speakers in particular (who grew up with less access to English media) can have a relatively strong foreign accent (used for comical effect in *The Muppets*). It is thus not possible to simply

use Swedish phonemes to produce an English accent. And though Swedish and English grammar are comparatively similar, they are by no means identical: Swedish children cannot simply slot English words into their native grammatical constructions to produce perfect English – grammar and idiom differ. Just a couple of examples may serve as illustration.¹⁵ The definite article in Swedish is suffixed:

*Abba återföre-na-s som silikonavbildning-ar av medlemm-ar-na
på 1970-tal-et*

Abba reunite-PASS as silicon-reproduction-PL of member-PL-ART
on 1970-decade-ART

‘Abba reunites as silicon reproductions of the group members in the 1970s’

And syntax is V2:

På tisdag-en flog-s figur-er-na till muse-et med helikopter

On Tuesday-ART flew-PASS dummy-PL-ART till museum-ART with
helicopter

‘On Tuesday the dummies were flown to the museum by helicopter’

Japanese is only very distantly related to English (by the development of human languages from one proto-language in Africa) and the two languages have significant grammatical and phonological differences. A characteristic or ‘design feature’ of human language is arbitrariness – most words do not sound like the ‘thing’ they signify – they have an arbitrary relationship between sound and meaning.¹⁶ This means that learning a foreign language entails learning a large

¹⁵ Text source: the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* www.dn.se, accessed 4 March 2015. The grammatical analysis is simplified here: the reader will also note other differences such as the passive.

¹⁶ For example, in Japanese the three phonemes /h/, /a/ and /n/ have no meaning. However, when they are combined as /h/ + /a/ + /n/ + /a/, they make a symbol meaning ‘flower’. There is nothing in

amount of new vocabulary (words and multiword expressions), which is even more of a burden if the languages are only distantly related. However, Japanese has borrowed vast numbers of words from English. As an illustration, while Swedish and English share *äta*–*eat*, *dricka*–*drink* and *leva*–*live*, Japanese and English share *naifu*–*knife*, *fooku*–*fork*, *supuun*–*spoon* and *beddo*–*bed* (in Swedish *kniv*, *gaffel*, *sked*, *säng*). To give a feel for the breadth and depth of borrowing from English, below is a brief sample:

Actions: *drive*, *kiss*

Colours: *blue*, *pink*, *orange*, *green*, *blue*, *black* (coffee), *whitening* (toothpaste)

Food and drink: *knife*, *fork*, *spoon*, *cup*, *glass*, *menu*, *dessert*, *milk*, *beer*, *wine*

Home: *door*, *table*, *bed*, *kitchen*, *living*, *shower*, *toilet*, *curtain*, *tissue*, *toilet paper*

Clothing: *shirt*, *pants*, *coat*, *jacket*, *skirt*, *sneaker*, *sweater*, *suit*

Society: *volunteer*, *news*, *domestic violence*, *gender gap*, *stalking*, *recycle*

Japanese learners thus have a significant English vocabulary and should in theory be in a strong position with such a lexical head start, particularly compared to speakers of other distantly-related languages with fewer English loanwords. On the other hand, however, the reader will note that native-English speakers, at least in the UK,¹⁷ with a similar or perhaps even greater proportion of French loan words, do not normally achieve fluency in that language, despite several years of schooling. Common vocabulary, whether cognate or borrowed, will aid

/h/, /a/ or /n/, or in their combination, that is connected with ‘flower’, rather the relationship is arbitrary and must be learned. As will be taken up below, it is important to realise that, while English, Swedish and Japanese have different phonology, combinations and grammatical-lexical patterns, they are constructed in exactly the same way.

¹⁷ Canada has both English and French as official languages.

comprehension, but knowing words in isolation does not produce fluency. This will be taken up later.

Importantly, we should not miss the wood for the trees. That is, we must not be blinded by superficial dissimilarity to the fundamental identity of English, Japanese and all human languages. Although Swedish indeed has, relatively speaking, greater grammatical overlap with English, as human languages Swedish, Japanese and English have fundamental and complete linguistic overlap. It is this that enables Japanese or Swedish to learn English at all, while not ‘a word’ of the whistles of dolphins, songs of birds or dances of bees. The grammatical-lexical patterns of English, Swedish and Japanese differ, but the languages are constructed in exactly the same way (cf. Howe 2012). Additionally, the default medium of those languages is sound and the means of production the mouth. And, of course, English is composed of arbitrary symbols, just like Japanese and Swedish, as every other human language. Further, the organising principles of human communication (shared attention, discourse structure, topic-comment and so on) are shared.

As proof of this, thousands upon thousands of Japanese do speak fluent English, and many thousands of non-Japanese speak fluent Japanese. In the *EF English Proficiency Index* cited above, the fourth-ranked country in the world, Finland, has in Finnish a very different grammar to English, as does the eighth-ranked, Estonia, in Estonian. It is also a fact that a great many people from the Philippines (Tagalog), Singapore (Chinese), Kenya (Swahili) or India (Indo-European Hindi, Dravidian Telugu etc.) achieve fluency in English, despite the superficial differences of their native language.

Superficial dissimilarity may hinder the achievement of perfection, but does it hinder communication? While native grammatical constructions will of course affect what is easier or more difficult to learn, just as native pronunciation will interfere with non-native accent, and vocabulary differences will determine the lexical burden, these are not insurmountable obstacles. Such fine grammatical,

phonological and lexical differences may well be insurmountable obstacles to achieving native-speaker ‘perfection’, but not to perfectly proficient communication.

Years of English and Classroom Hours¹⁸

Japan

Until recently, Japanese children began studying English at age 12 or 13. However, now some foreign language activities begin already in elementary school.

At junior high school, students have about three, possibly four, classes a week, each of around 50 minutes, totalling 105 classes a year. Thus, for the three years of compulsory junior high school, students receive approximately:

$$105 \text{ classes} \times 50 \text{ minutes} = 87.5 \text{ classroom hours per year}$$

Over 90% of Japanese children continue to senior high school for three years. While almost all will take English, the amount of English varies. For example, some senior high schools are academic, preparing students for higher education, while others are vocational, usually with a lower English component. At an academic senior high school, students may receive between five to seven classes per week of English, while in vocational senior high schools this may be two per week. Therefore, approximately:

5–7 classes per week at academic schools

2 classes per week at vocational schools

If, in this preliminary paper, we assume the same number of hours per year in senior high school as in junior high school, i.e. an average of three, 50-minute

¹⁸ This working paper uses preliminary figures and calculations.

classes per week over the whole six years, this gives a total teaching sum, for junior and senior high school combined, of:

$$6 \text{ years} \times 87.5 \text{ hours} = 525 \text{ classroom hours}$$

Further, English is normally a mandatory subject for the first two years at university in Japan, i.e. most graduates will have studied a further two years of English, bringing their total to eight years.

Sweden

In Sweden, many children now begin English at around age 9 or earlier. As in Japan there is a trend to begin earlier.¹⁹ Compulsory school in Sweden is until age 16, but most students continue until age 19.

According to the National Agency for Education, the number of compulsory school teaching hours (= 60 minutes) for English in Sweden is:

$$480 \text{ hours}^{20}$$

This figure is similar to the estimate of 525 hours for Japan. However, it does not include upper secondary school, where students must also study English. Swedish students do not take compulsory English at university. Thus, unless they are English majors or minors, formal English teaching ends upon leaving school. Therefore, overall, both Japanese and Swedish students – those who go on to higher education at least in the case of Japan – will have studied English for around eight to ten years. It is perhaps also worth noting that in the recent

¹⁹ In the recent survey of students' abilities and views of English in eight European countries, just over 80% of Swedish schoolchildren surveyed stated that they began English in school year 3, i.e. aged 9–10, or earlier (The Swedish National Agency for Education, *English Here and There and Everywhere*, p. 29).

²⁰ Source: The Swedish National Agency for Education, www.skolverket.se, 'Compulsory School', accessed 12 October 2007.

comparison of eight European countries, the number of classroom hours for English was *lowest* in Sweden and Norway, the two countries with the best non-native English.

Although numerically the number of years and hours appears similar in Japan and Sweden, this does not of course reveal the true exposure to English, the quality or effectiveness of the teaching, or the amount of student practice. For instance, if teachers teach mainly or only in the national language(s), and if students rarely speak in class, then exposure to and use of English will be much less, even with the same amount of classroom time.

Finally, it is perhaps interesting to put these classroom figures in context by comparing with native language acquisition. If we assume that a child's language exposure and use in native acquisition is approximately 10 hours per day, and that a child reaches fluency (though not adult proficiency in all aspects of language) by age five, then we have a figure for native-language acquisition of about

$$5 \text{ years} \times 365.25 \text{ days} \times 10 \text{ hours} = 18\,263 \text{ hours}$$

If we compare the approximately 500 hours of English in the classroom in Japan and Sweden with this figure, we see that it is less than 3%. Five hundred hours are equivalent, numerically at least, to about fifty days of native-language exposure and use. That is, around seven weeks.

We could of course state that the quality of the exposure is different, and that is obviously true. The classroom, with a teacher and textbook, offers structured language lessons and (ideally) practice, while the exposure in native acquisition is – in the view of Chomsky at least – impoverished. However, we should not forget that humans have evolved and/or developed the ability to acquire language naturally in such an environment and not in a classroom. Children do so without grammar books, textbooks, dictionaries or teachers. So, 'impoverished' or not, this is the natural way for humans to learn any language. Add to this the very strong desire to communicate with those around her, we can see how a child's

native environment provides thousands of hours of exposure and use, and a powerful motive to learn, plus all the ‘tools’ of language acquisition that human children naturally possess.²¹

Looking at it the other way, it also shows clearly that, based on the very small percentage of 3% of native-language exposure and use, and with motivation that surely cannot surpass a child’s desire to communicate with her family, both Sweden and Japan achieve truly remarkable results in the environment of the classroom.

In a following paper, I will examine the quality and quantity of exposure to English *outside* the classroom in Sweden and Japan, and here we will find a significant difference between the two countries.

Next, I will compare teaching methods and classroom style.

Teaching Methods

What is a typical English class like in Sweden and Japan?²²

²¹ Such as intention-reading, pattern-finding, massive storage capacity, productive combinatoriality (see for example Saxton 2010).

²² A note on class sizes. In Sweden the average class size for English is around 24 students, in Japan a maximum of 40. In the recent report of English teaching in eight European countries, the average class size was 22, i.e. significantly lower than the Japanese maximum. This suggests that there might be some difference in the provision of language teachers and the student/teacher ratio, and this ratio could make a difference to language teaching. In 2002, overall average class sizes in Japan (not just for English language) were 28.6 in primary education and 34.0 in lower secondary school, both above the OECD mean and one of the highest levels of any OECD country (MEXT 2006: 22). However, unlike Sweden, Japan has the JET programme, meaning that language classes can have native-speaker assistant teachers. Thus, the actual Japanese student/teacher ratio might be lower than the maximum of 40, or the 34.0 of lower secondary school, depending on how the teacher and assistant function. Do they work together, do they divide the class, or does the main teacher take a break while the assistant teacher is in the room?

Japan

In Japan, traditional grammar-translation was long the norm in English teaching. However, there has been some shift towards a more conversational style. In its *Action Plan*, the Japanese Ministry of Education states:

‘in English classes, instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centered classes are not recommended.’

It adds:

‘it is important for teachers to establish many situations where students can communicate with each other in English and routinely to conduct classes principally in English.’

In grades 5 and 6 of elementary school, the objective is for students:²³

1. ‘To experience the joy of communication in the foreign language’
2. ‘To actively listen to and speak in the foreign language’
3. ‘To learn the importance of verbal communication’

And in its current requirements for foreign language teaching at junior high school, the Ministry writes:²⁴

‘For ... Grammatical Items’, care should be given that the treatment does not center on differentiating between terms and usages. Rather emphasis should be on the teaching of actual usage.’

And for senior high school, it writes:

²³ MEXT *Foreign Language Activities* for elementary school, www.mext.go.jp/english/elsec/1303755.htm, accessed 17 March 2015.

²⁴ MEXT *Current Requirements for Foreign Language Teaching* (in Japanese and English), p. 18.

‘Analyses and explanations of language elements should be minimized. Emphasis should be placed on understanding how language elements are used in actual situations and on utilizing them.’

Examination of Japanese English textbooks suggests that they are engaging and attractive.

In Japan, the JET programme, providing assistant language teachers mostly at high school, has been running for more than twenty years. Recently, there were almost 5000 JETs in Japanese schools, most of whom were assistant teachers of English.

On paper, at least, then the situation for English in Japan seems positive.

However, entrance exams – to senior high school and later to university – still loom large, shaping what is taught, and influencing or even determining the curriculum and teaching goals. This will be taken up in a following paper.

My information from a Japanese first-year university student and a fourth-year university student, i.e. both relatively recently out of high school, is that much of their English teaching at school was reading, grammar and translation. One student stated that teaching was 80–90% in Japanese, and one suggested that speaking was left to last in lessons and could be dropped due to lack of time.

Therefore, even given the very positive education ministry curriculum objectives above, attractive textbooks and laudable JET programme, English-language teaching cannot change overnight. Older teachers more comfortable with the grammar-translation method are of course not replaced immediately, and younger teachers who are not confident speaking English may also favour reading and writing.

Traditional methods of language teaching are not unique to Japan, of course, as Crystal (cited earlier) and Scrivener (2005: 32) point out:

‘Sometimes traditional teaching methods have seemed to emphasise the learning of language systems as a goal in its own right and failed to give

learners an opportunity to gain realistic experience in actually using the language knowledge gained; how many students have left school after studying a language for years, unable to speak an intelligible sentence?

Anecdotally, one very noticeable thing in Japan is the large number of English conversation schools. This might indeed reflect a lack of focus on speaking or a different focus of English at school, compare the *EF English Proficiency Index* comments (Main Report, p. 38):

‘Although English is more accepted every year as the global lingua franca, it takes time for education systems and societies to adapt. Workplace demand for English is high, and many countries are scrambling to meet that need. Our research shows that most countries are successfully raising adult proficiency levels, but some are investing in ineffective programs, and many lack a comprehensive national plan. Private initiatives by parents, professionals, and companies are responsible for a large portion of the progress in English proficiency worldwide. That so many individuals and companies are funding their own English training is a clear indication of the shortfall in school systems and public programs.’

Sweden

In the recent comparison of young people’s abilities in and views on English in eight European countries,²⁵ Swedish pupils also gave a picture of a relatively traditional, teacher-led and textbook-centred teaching style. However, teachers for the great majority of the lesson spoke English. A number of points from this report are worth highlighting:

²⁵ *English: Here, There and Everywhere*, The Swedish National Agency for Education, press release 2 March 2004.

Learning English in Sweden and Japan (Howe)

1. English is clearly the dominant language of instruction in English classes in Sweden: three-quarters of teachers stated that they used English more than half of the time, and almost half of all teachers said that they used English over 75% of the time.
2. The report seemed to show that Sweden was the country where English was used most in language classes, both by teachers and pupils.
3. Pair and group work were much more common in Sweden than in the other European countries in the study. Nevertheless, 43% of pupils stated that they used English only 'sometimes' and 13% stated that they 'never' used English with classmates in class.
4. Swedish children also reported often using tapes, cassettes or CDs in lessons, video and newspapers sometimes, but the Internet and computer programs only rarely (the report is from 2002/2004). Almost no Swedish schools had or used language labs.
5. Compared to the other European countries, Swedish teachers gave the least homework, with on average one assignment per week.
6. Unlike in Japan with the JET programme, English-speaking visitors to class were very rare, indeed in all the European countries surveyed.

Swedish pupils stated that their teachers encouraged and supported them in a number of ways:

- To work with and use their English as much as possible
- To set goals for themselves
- And, most of all, to speak English in the classroom

One Swedish interviewee states about her experience of learning English in school:

‘...we practised speaking a lot. We listened to tapes, watched video/TV clips, worked with our textbooks and exercises. The grammar component was still there – verbs etc.’

Asked how much speaking students did in class, she stated:

‘Percentage-wise – 50/50. In general it was more fun to practise speaking rather than writing.’

And the head of English of a Swedish upper secondary school²⁶ describes the aims of English teaching as follows:

‘Focus on communicating, and on using the target language in as many various contexts as possible, integrating different oral and written assignments. The emphasis is on student participation and involvement and the students should gradually become aware of how they learn and develop their language. The overall aims are to develop the students’ communicative skills. Quite a lot of speaking is done in school, especially during the first years of studying English.’

Preliminary Conclusions

This paper has briefly compared English-language education in Sweden and Japan. Below is a summary of the main findings:

- Sweden produces much better English speakers than Japan
- Japan produces much better results in (native-language) literacy and mathematics
- Expenditure on education in the two countries is similar

²⁶ Katarina Flenmark, Head of English, *Katedralskolan*, Lund, Sweden.

- The number of classroom hours of English is similar
- The number of classroom hours is very small compared to native-language exposure and use, so both countries' results are highly laudable
- Given that Japan produces world-class results in (native-language) literacy and mathematics, English-language education has the potential to achieve a similar level

A following paper, Howe (forthcoming a), will examine obstacles to fluency in Japan; and a final paper, Howe (forthcoming b), will put forward recommendations of best practice based on Swedish experience.

References

- Åberg-Bengtsson, Lisbeth; Erickson, Gudrun; Gustafsson, Jan-Eric; Ohlander, Sölve; and Velling Pedersen, Dorte, *Differences and Similarities in English Language Proficiency from a Swedish and European Perspective*, research project, Department of Education, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, [www.ped.gu.se/ sol/ proj/ uses_abstract.htm](http://www.ped.gu.se/sol/proj/uses_abstract.htm) and [www.ped.gu.se/ sol/ proj/ uses.htm](http://www.ped.gu.se/sol/proj/uses.htm), accessed 1 September 2008.
- Action Plan, Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'*, 31 March 2003, Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, online document, www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm, accessed 21 August 2007.
- The Assessment of Pupils' Skills in English in Eight European Countries* (2002) Bonnet, Gérard (ed.), commissioned by the European Network of Policy Makers for the Evaluation of Education Systems, quoted from Swedish report *English: Here, There and Everywhere*, 2004, available at [http:// cisad.adc.education.fr/ reva/ english/ publicationsurvey.htm](http://cisad.adc.education.fr/reva/english/publicationsurvey.htm).
- Chomsky, Noam (1980) *Rules and Representations*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Crystal, David (1997) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, *JET Programme*, 2007–2008 brochure.
- DeWitt, Charlotte J. (2004) *Culture Smart! Sweden*, London: Kuperard.
- EF EPI (EF English Proficiency Index) 2014* (Main Report), Education First, www.ef.com/epi.
- EF EPI (EF English Proficiency Index) 2014* (Infographic), Education First, www.ef.com/epi.

Learning English in Sweden and Japan (Howe)

- EF EPI (*EF English Proficiency Index*) 2014 (Country Fact Sheet, Japan), Education First, www.ef.com/epi.
- Erickson, Gudrun (2007) *National Assessment of Foreign Languages in Sweden*, Göteborg University, Sweden, www.ipd.gu.se/digitalAssets/1115/1115389_National_assessment_of_foreign_languages_in_Sweden.pdf, accessed 26 August 2008.
- Erickson, Gudrun; Velling Pedersen, Dorte; and Åberg-Bengtsson, Lisbeth, *Assessment of English: Engelska i åtta europeiska länder [Assessment of English: English in eight European countries]*, research report, Department of Education, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, www.ped.gu.se/sol/proj/assessment.htm, accessed 1 September 2008.
- Howe, Stephen (2007) 'Looking In, Looking Out: Best and Worst Practice', Paper presented at the 33rd JALT International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning, Tokyo, November 2007.
- Howe, Stephen (2012) 'A re-examination of Greenberg's universals', *Fukuoka University Review of Literature and Humanities*, vol. XLIV, no. I, pp. 209–253.
- Howe, Stephen (forthcoming a) 'Learning English in Sweden and Japan: Obstacles to Fluency'.
- Howe, Stephen (forthcoming b) 'Learning English in Sweden and Japan: Recommendations for Best Practice'.
- Johansson, Henrik (2004) *När engelskan tog kommandot i skolan* [When English took command in school], *Tvårsnitt* 1:04, www.vr.se/huvudmeny/arkiv/2004/tvarsnittnr12004/nar_engelskan_tog_kommandot_i_skolan.4.64fbc2110dabf7901b8000632.html, accessed 28 August 2008.
- King, Arthur (1944) *Folkskollärarnas Tidning* 40.
- MEXT, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2006) *Japan's Education at a Glance: School Education*, www.mext.go.jp/english/statist/07070310/005.pdf, accessed 31 August 2008.
- OECD (2014), *Education at a Glance 2014*: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en>.
- Oijen, Paul van (2003) *A Brief Outline of Early Foreign Language Teaching Provisions in Europe*, European Network of Policy Makers for the Evaluation of Education Systems, <http://cisad.adc.education.fr/revu/pdf/abriefout.pdf>, accessed 29 August 2008.
- Orwig, Carol. J., *Learner Language Principles*, www.sil.org (formerly Summer Institute of Linguistics), accessed 17 September 2007.
- PISA Snapshot of Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science 2012*, source OECD, PISA 2012 Database; Tables I.2.1a, I.2.1b, I.2.3a, I.2.3b, I.4.3a, I.4.3b, I.5.3a and I.5.3b.

Learning English in Sweden and Japan (Howe)

- Roberts, David; Roberts, Elisabeth; White, Joshua (2004) *Live and Work in Japan*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Vacation Work.
- Saxton, Matthew (2010) *Child Language: Acquisition and Development*, London: Sage.
- Scrivener, Jim (2005) *Learning Teaching*, Oxford: Macmillan Education.
- Shinoda, Yoshiaki, *Logic is Elementary for Clear Communication*, The Asahi Shimbun/International Herald Tribune, English edition, 4 September 2008, page 22.
- Skolverket/The Swedish National Agency for Education, 'Compulsory School', www.skolverket.se/sb/d/374/a/1215, accessed 12 October 2007
- Skolverket/The Swedish National Agency for Education, *Kursplanen i engelska för grundskolan [English curricula for compulsory school]*, no date, www.ped.gu.se/sol/nafs/ep9_ex/kpl_6_9.pdf, accessed 31 August 2008.
- Skolverket/The Swedish National Agency for Education (2004) *Svenska ungdomar är mycket duktiga i engelska [Swedish youngsters are very good at English]*, press release 2 March 2004, www.skolverket.se/sb/d/203/a/825, accessed 30 August 2008.
- Skolverket/The Swedish National Agency for Education, *English Here and There and Everywhere: En undersökning av ungdomars kunskaper i och uppfattningar om engelska i åtta europeiska länder [English here and there and everywhere: An examination of young people's abilities in and views on English in eight European countries]*, Erickson, Gudrun, Swedish main report, available at www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=1284.
- Svartvik, Jan (1999) *English spoken – fast ibland hellre än bra*, Lunds universitet meddelar, 7, accessed 19 November 2007, www3.lu.se/info/lum/LUM_07_99/01_engelska.html.
- TOEIC 2013 Report on Test Takers Worldwide: The TOEIC Listening and Reading Test*, published by Educational Testing Service.
- World Bank, The, *GDP per capita*, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>, accessed 14 March 2015.