

## **Behind The Silence: Uncovering The Roots Of Japan's English Proficiency Crisis**

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**Abstract** – *This study investigates the persistent low ranking of Japan in global English proficiency indices despite decades of educational reform. Using an integrative literature review, this paper identifies structural, pedagogical, and cultural factors influencing English instruction outcomes across Japanese public schools. The review synthesizes empirical data from classroom practices, policy reports, and international assessments. Key findings reveal that the traditional grammar-translation approach remains dominant, oral communication is deprioritized, and team teaching practices often suffer from unclear roles and limited collaboration. The study highlights how deeply embedded language ideologies and systemic constraints affect both teacher performance and student outcomes. Recommendations include teacher training reforms, increased communicative practice in curricula, and structural support for meaningful ALT–JTE collaboration.*

**Keywords**– *English Proficiency, Japan, Language Pedagogy, Native Speaker Ideology, Team Teaching*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Japan has long struggled with English language education despite repeated national reforms intended to enhance communicative competence. According to the 2023 EF English Proficiency Index, Japan ranks significantly lower than neighboring Asian countries like Singapore and the Philippines, reflecting persistent systemic issues (EF Education First, 2023). While policy reforms such as the 2020 Course of Study emphasize communicative approaches, implementation at the classroom level often remains bound to traditional methods (Taguchi, 2005; Butler, 2015).

One major contributing factor is the continued reliance on the *yakudoku* method—grammar-translation instruction focused heavily on reading and grammar at the expense of speaking and listening skills (Hino, 1988; Gorsuch, 1998). Standardized university entrance exams reinforce this imbalance by assessing primarily reading and grammar, which discourages classroom innovations and reinforces test-driven teaching (O'Donnell, 2005). Furthermore, despite the deployment of native English-speaking Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) through the JET

Programme and other dispatch companies, collaboration with Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) is often superficial due to unclear roles, cultural hierarchy, and lack of co-planning time (Carless, 2006; Mahoney, 2004; McConnell, 2000).

Deep-rooted language ideologies, such as the native speaker fallacy—that ideal language models must be native speakers—also affect teacher self-perception and hiring practices (Holliday, 2006; Kubota, 2011). These ideologies contribute to role imbalances between ALTs and JTEs and limit local teacher agency in developing communicative competence.

This paper investigates the systemic, pedagogical, and cultural roots of Japan's low English proficiency by synthesizing findings from empirical studies and education policy analyses. Through an integrative review, it aims to identify barriers to communicative instruction and propose actionable reforms to align classroom practice with national goals.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to explore the key factors contributing to Japan's low English proficiency despite ongoing education reforms. Guided by a synthesis of existing research, the central hypothesis guiding this study is:

**Hypothesis:** *Despite the introduction of communicative reforms and the integration of native-speaking Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), Japan's English education outcomes remain low due to persistent reliance on traditional pedagogy, weak ALT-JTE collaboration, and entrenched native speaker ideologies.*

Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Examine pedagogical practices prevalent in Japanese classrooms.
2. Assess the impact of native speaker ideology on teaching and learning.
3. Analyze the effects of team teaching dynamics between Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and ALTs.
4. Identify structural and institutional constraints limiting communicative instruction.
5. Propose strategies to address these challenges and improve English learning outcomes.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed an **integrative literature review** as its methodological approach. This method allows for a comprehensive synthesis of past research, policy documents, classroom studies, and empirical data related to English language education in Japan. The integrative review approach is particularly appropriate when the research objective is to identify trends, evaluate current practices, and propose informed recommendations based on existing knowledge.

### Source Selection and Inclusion Criteria

The review included peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, and academic dissertations published from 2000 to 2025. Sources were selected based on their relevance to English pedagogy in Japan, especially those addressing teaching practices, educational reforms, communicative language teaching (CLT), native speaker ideology, and team teaching

implementation. Databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, and Scopus were used to retrieve materials, using keywords like "English education in Japan," "team teaching," "native speaker ideology," "ALT-JTE collaboration," and "grammar translation method."

### Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

The selected literature was systematically analyzed using **thematic coding**, with recurring concepts grouped into categories such as pedagogical approaches, structural limitations, cultural beliefs, and teacher collaboration. This thematic synthesis allowed the researchers to identify cross-cutting patterns and to map out interrelated factors influencing English language outcomes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The themes were validated by cross-referencing findings from multiple sources to ensure consistency and academic rigor.

### Scope and Limitations

While this review provides valuable insights into Japan's English education system, it is limited by its reliance on secondary data. The absence of direct field observation and participant interviews restricts the ability to assess real-time classroom practices. Nonetheless, the study compensates for this by incorporating a wide range of empirical findings and scholarly interpretations, offering a well-rounded understanding of the issue.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this integrative review highlight recurring patterns in Japan's English education system that contribute to persistently low proficiency (Table 1). Synthesizing evidence from empirical studies, institutional reports, and classroom observations reveals four interrelated factors: dominant traditional pedagogy, weak oral communication practice, fragmented ALT-JTE collaboration, and systemic policy-practice gaps (Table 2).

As Table 1 shows, classroom practices heavily prioritize translation, leading to critically low oral proficiency. The National Speaking Test (3rd Year JHS) revealed 60% of students scored zero on speaking

assessments, and Yakudoku Method observations consistently show minimal speaking output due to its translation-focused nature. This gap between policy and practice persists as exams increasingly emphasize reading and writing, with speaking proficiency lagging two Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels behind (Koizumi et al., 2022).

**Table 1.** Summary of Key Findings from Reviewed Literature

Study / Source	Measure	Finding	Key Insight
National Speaking Test (3rd Year JHS)	Speaking test scores	12.4% correct average; 60% scored zero	Shows critically low oral proficiency
Koizumi et al. (2022)	CEFR level comparison	Listening improved slightly; Speaking lags by 2 levels	Reveals exam system's reading/writing bias
ABE (2013)	Listening strategy use	Heavy reliance on L1; Few strategies among low-level listeners	Indicates need for metacognitive training
Classroom Observation (Yakudoku Method)	Classroom observation	Translation-focused; Minimal speaking output	Shows cultural pedagogy restricts fluency
Inoue (2014)	ALT teaching frequency	1 class/week; Rote tasks; No real interaction	Demonstrates poor engagement reduces motivation

Despite the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) introducing reforms encouraging communicative language teaching (CLT), actual classroom implementation remains limited (Butler, 2011; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). The dominance of yakudoku (grammar-translation) persists, especially in junior high schools where test preparation takes precedence.

Notably, speaking and listening are the most neglected domains, as shown in national performance data. Koizumi et al. (2022) found that speaking

proficiency scores were two CEFR levels below reading scores. This aligns with ABE (2013), who emphasized that students struggle with listening due to a lack of strategy training, often relying heavily on their first language (L1).

**Table 2.** Summary of Themes and Structural Constraints

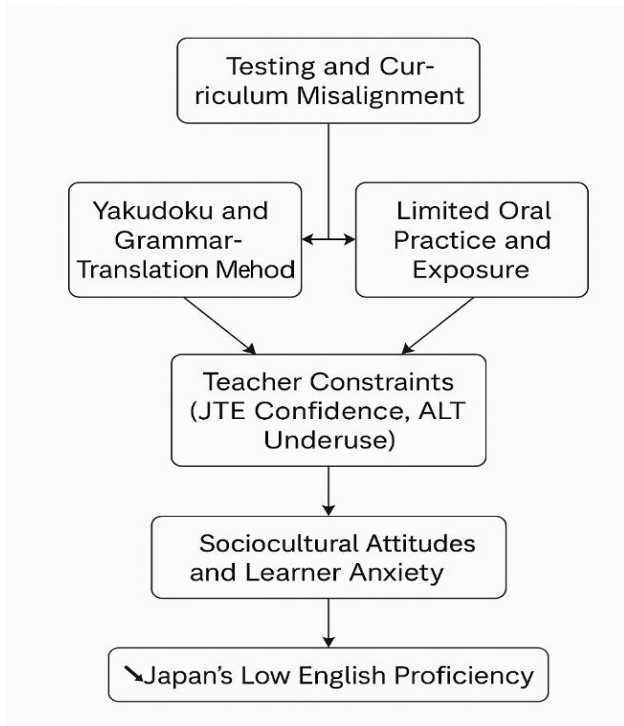
Category	Observed Challenge	Implication
Pedagogy	Grammar-translation remains dominant	Limits communicative competence
Oral Skill Development	Limited practice and assessment	Poor speaking and listening outcomes
ALT-JTE Collaboration	Role ambiguity and minimal co-planning	Reduces potential of team teaching
Policy Implementation	Reform intentions not matched by practice	Fragmented execution of CLT

The visual representation in Fig. 1 demonstrates the compounding nature of pedagogical inertia, ideological framing of the native speaker model, and insufficient classroom-level reform. Even with team teaching initiatives, ALTs often remain marginal in planning and delivery, weakening the benefits of native speaker input (Carless, 2006; Tajino & Walker, 1998).

Additionally, cultural norms emphasizing perfectionism, fear of error, and exam-centric schooling discourage risk-taking in spoken English (Yashima, 2002; Gorsuch, 2001). The symbolic value of English proficiency as a marker of globalism is undermined by daily classroom realities marked by rote memorization and passive learning.

These factors, collectively, explain why despite increased English contact hours and earlier introduction of English in elementary education, Japan's overall proficiency ranking has not significantly improved over the past decade (EF EPI, 2023).

**Figure SEQ Figure \\* ARABIC 1. Interlocking Factors Affecting Japan's English Proficiency**



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This integrative review set out to identify the underlying factors contributing to Japan's persistent low English proficiency, despite years of national reform and investment. The review sought to answer key questions regarding prevailing pedagogical practices, the influence of native speaker ideology, the role of team teaching, and the broader structural constraints that hinder communicative instruction.

First, it is evident that **traditional pedagogical practices** remain deeply entrenched in Japan's English education system. The dominance of the grammar-translation method (GTM) continues to shape classroom instruction, emphasizing accuracy, memorization, and test preparation at the expense of meaningful communicative use (Butler, 2015; Koizumi et al., 2022). Even with the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in official policy documents, implementation at the classroom level remains inconsistent due to teachers' lack of training and systemic assessment constraints (Gorsuch, 2001).

Second, the **native speaker ideology** exerts a strong influence on classroom dynamics and professional roles. ALTs are often perceived as linguistic models rather than pedagogical collaborators, which reinforces unequal power dynamics between them and Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) (Houghton & Rivers, 2013; Kubota, 2011). This belief undermines the development of collaborative and reflective teaching practices and limits the full pedagogical contributions of both parties.

Third, while **team teaching** was introduced as a strategy to enrich language instruction, its success is limited by a lack of clear role definitions, inadequate pre-service and in-service training, and minimal joint lesson planning (Carless, 2006; Tajino & Walker, 1998). These issues often lead to fragmented instruction and missed opportunities for modeling naturalistic conversation in the classroom.

Lastly, **institutional and policy constraints**—including rigid national entrance exams, curriculum standardization, and top-down policy implementation—significantly restrict classroom innovation (Taguchi, 2005). Teachers remain bound by pressure to “teach to the test,” leaving little room for the flexible and student-centered learning necessary for communicative competence.

**Recommendations** arising from this review are multi-tiered. At the **policy level**, curriculum reforms must be accompanied by a reconfiguration of assessment practices that measure speaking, listening, and pragmatic language use—not merely reading and grammar. MEXT should also establish clearer guidelines and support systems for collaborative lesson planning between ALTs and JTEs. At the **school level**, there must be ongoing teacher training focused on CLT principles, intercultural communication, and reflective teaching. Creating professional development communities that include both ALTs and JTEs can promote shared learning and reduce hierarchical barriers (Nishino, 2008).

Finally, further **empirical research** is needed to assess the actual classroom practices and learner outcomes associated with team teaching and communicative reforms. Mixed-methods studies involving interviews, classroom observations, and



student achievement data will be crucial for identifying what works and for informing context-sensitive policy improvements (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004).

In conclusion, Japan's low English proficiency cannot be attributed to a single cause but results from a complex interplay of cultural, pedagogical, and structural factors. Sustainable change will depend on addressing these interconnected challenges through inclusive, evidence-based, and context-responsive reforms.

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