

# Discourse of 'early ELT for local development'

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Assumptions and ideologies in Japan's rural education policies<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Economic globalization and the concomitant prominence of English as a global language (EGL) have had a considerable impact on educational policies and practices worldwide. The widespread belief in the economic benefits that individuals and societies can attain from greater English proficiency has created a global trend of early English language teaching (ELT) (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014; Enever, Moon & Raman, 2009). In line with this global trend, Japan, as an economically advanced nation, has also gradually lowered the age at which English is introduced at school. Previous studies have explored the development of national ELT curricula, critically examining the discourses behind these official language-in-education policies (e.g., Kubota, 1998, 2002; Seargeant, 2009; Shiroza, 2020). However, obvious to the keen observer is that early ELT is often implemented more extensively and vigorously in Japan's rural communities than in urban areas, despite the latter's image of being only remotely affected by globalization.

In fact, the country has recently seen various disparities becoming increasingly apparent between urban and rural areas, the most urgent of which is the declining local population and the accompanying economic stagnation. Meanwhile, as government-led decentralization and deregulation progress, the discretion of local municipalities in political, fiscal, and administrative domains is expanding. Therefore, in the context of language-in-education policy, Japan's small local communities are increasingly forced to formulate and administer educational policies at their own discretion for a dwindling young population, based on diminishing financial resources. In this light, it is worth examining how unique ELT

efforts in local communities are designed and implemented and what types of beliefs and expectations they are based on. Kubota & McKay's (2009) study is one example that focused on ELT in Japan's rural communities using a field survey methodology, to which the present study aims to supplement from the perspective of language policy and planning. More specifically, this study attempts to identify the ideologies and assumptions behind ELT policy-making in small municipalities, with a particular focus on early English education.

## 2. Background

English was officially introduced into the elementary school curriculum in Japan in 1998, when a decennial revision of the curricular guideline, the Course of Study (COS), was announced.



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Implemented in 2002, the new curriculum launched the General Studies period in which local governments and schools could conduct foreign language activities of their choice, aiming to promote international understanding (Monbusho, 1998). The following revision in 2008 upgraded foreign language activities to an independent and compulsory curricular unit. Under this guideline, fifth- and sixth-graders participated in English activities one to two times a week. This often involved team-teaching by a Japanese classroom teacher and an assistant language teacher (ALT), who in most cases is a native English speaker from abroad. While these activities were not subject classes and had no grading involved, from 2012 on, the education ministry<sup>2</sup> provided the teaching materials and guidelines for local teachers to adopt, which resulted in a more unified content in elementary school ELT. However, significant changes were made to the teaching structure in 2020, when another revised COS (published in 2017) was implemented. Not only were these activities expanded to the third and fourth grades, but fifth- and sixth-graders now receive English subject classes three times a week using certified textbooks and grading strategies and are taught by teacher teams who have gone through some form of improvised training program (MEXT, 2017b).

While the Japanese education ministry has taken the initiative to expand primary school ELT, upon closer examination there is apparently a more complex interplay between the national government and local municipalities, along with top-down curriculum development. Regulations have also steadily been relaxed for local boards of education, following a broader policy scheme of decentralization and deregulation beginning in the 2000s. This enabled local administrative bodies to deviate from the COS and implement the original curricula that provided further and earlier ELT to local children. Butler (2007) points out that an increasing number of local authorities have independently embarked on a mission to develop teaching materials and lesson plans and to experiment with various pedagogic strategies. The outcome of these local efforts has accumulated and circulated through formal and informal channels (e.g., official reports and open-class events). Furthermore, the resultant diversification in local education has, in turn, provided the education ministry with a rationale for further expansion of ELT in its succeeding policies to secure more equitable educational opportunities.

Butler's (2007) observation that bottom-up forces are becoming increasingly influential in formulating Japan's central education policy is also

supported by the survey results. A questionnaire survey of selected municipal boards of education (Aota, 2017) found that, while about 40% of the 537 respondent municipalities said that they implemented primary school ELT following government instruction, 25% cited the local schools' independent planning and undertaking as a direct cause. The data also indicate the presence of other driving forces, including public opinions, parliamentary petitions, and requests from the municipal head or school board members. However, few studies have investigated the rationale behind these bottom-up policymaking processes. More specifically, little has been understood regarding why small, rural communities, though few in number, allocate their limited human and material resources to provide their own ELT beyond the government policy, and how such 'peripheral' ELT practices are viewed considering the local economy. This study aims to address these issues by investigating how English is promoted in rural education policy documents and unveiling the assumptions and ideologies related to English, its speakers and culture, and its learning and teaching in local contexts.

### 3. Methodology

This study focuses specifically on a policy scheme implemented in 2008 called 'Kyoiku Katei Tokurei-ko,' or literally 'Education Curriculum Special Exception School' (hereafter 'Special School'), in which schools approved by the ministry are granted greater flexibility in their curriculum design. In principle, local authorities formulate innovative education programs that maximize each local context and execute programs on their own budget after receiving approval from the education ministry.<sup>3</sup> The approved Special School programs include teaching modules on traditional industry, historic sites, and nature in the local vicinity, as well as courses teaching traditional skills like abacus and calligraphy (Oshida, Nakata & Okamoto, 2013). Special Schools are required to annually conduct and publish the results of self-assessment and evaluation by parents and other stakeholders (MEXT, 2017a). As of April 2019, the total number of such designated schools was 3,182 across 318 municipalities, of which as many as 2,392 primary schools in 233 municipalities (over 73%) have implemented some form of ELT for lower and middle grade elementary school children under this system (MEXT, 2017a).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it can be safely assumed that this Special School system has largely been used as a

platform to implement ELT at an even earlier age than the national curricular guidelines.

Of the 233 municipal boards of education, 38<sup>5</sup> were selected based on two criteria: 1) one or more of the primary schools therein received the Special School status in 2014 or thereafter, and 2) the population density is less than 400 per square kilometer. The rationale for the first criterion is that the education ministry announced a major reform scheme in 2013 – the ‘English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization’ – to expand ELT in primary schools (MEXT, 2013). The Special School plans approved in 2014 and afterwards can, thus, be considered a local response to the top-down initiative. The selected municipalities ranged in population density from four to 340 per square kilometer (average: 162/km<sup>2</sup>, median: 141/km<sup>2</sup>) and in populations from approximately 1,000 to 70,000 (average: 27,389, median: 16,264).

After the 38 target municipalities in 18 prefectures were selected, online research was conducted mainly using the municipal websites of these towns and villages. The search focused on documents recording the application and approval processes of the Special School system, early ELT programs implemented before and after the designation, and other relevant materials regarding local ELT policies. These included official policy statements, school board meeting minutes, and publicity materials. Adopting the discourse analytical framework (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), the author manually extracted recurring keywords (e.g., ‘globalization’<sup>6</sup>, ‘ALT’, and ‘migration’) from over 200 collected documents. Through close reading of the text and analyzing the context in which each keyword was used, the author identified the discursive patterns that articulated the content. The patterns were then categorized into the five distinctive themes that are described in the following. The materials obtained are predominantly written in Japanese, as the official websites of rural municipalities provide little or no information in English or any other foreign language. In such a linguistic environment, examining how local ELT is discursively constructed highlights the implicit views of English shared by education policymakers in Japan’s rural communities.

## **4. The discourse of English in local ELT policies**

### **4.1 English as a global language: Echoing the central policy**

In this research, five discursive patterns regarding local ELT policies were identified, the primary

and most frequent of which was the concept of EGL. As Seargeant and Earling (2011: 8) note, the belief in global English is ‘so entrenched in contemporary thinking and has become such a commonsensical notion’ that it is often unstated but implied in policy documents through the collocation of English with such concepts as ‘world’, ‘international’, and ‘global’. These expressions were also prevalent in the local policy documents examined in this study. However, in most cases, such notions are a carbon copy of the top-down policy. For example, the expression ‘English education corresponding to globalization’, which appears in policy statements in many municipalities, ranging from a small village (e.g., Genkai Town, Saga [pop. 5,518, pop. dens. 154/km<sup>2</sup>]) to a relatively large city (e.g., Nagai City, Niigata [pop. 26,780, pop. dens. 125/km<sup>2</sup>]), is directly derived from the 2013 policy recommendations mentioned above.

Based on the understanding that the preceding reforms, including a series of COS revisions, did not produce the intended outcome, the 2013 reform plan proposed enhancing communicative opportunities in English at schools by increasing class hours for English language activities in elementary schools, promoting the teaching-English-through-English (TETE) policy in secondary school ELT, and further expanding ALT placement in both. As it turned out, this scheme later constituted the basis for the 2017 revision of the COS, fully implemented in 2020. However, considering the preceding government policy planning and implementation processes, many local municipalities understood that the plan would become the source of an official syllabus before the curricular revision was actually announced. Thus, municipalities that won the Special School designation in 2014 and afterwards formulated and implemented the measures that appeared to simply follow the government-initiated reform plan, paving the way for a smoother transition to a new curriculum. Reflecting this context, almost none of the municipal policy documents explain the meaning of ‘globalization’ for the town or city, or what it means to teach English in a manner that considers aspects of globalization. In this light, although the Special School system was intended as a policy scheme for regional governments to plan and implement their own curriculum taking each local context into account, the resultant policies, particularly their stated objectives, appear to be strongly guided by the central government’s initiative.

#### 4.2 English for inbound tourism, outward internationalization

Only six local governments describe the issue of globalization in a more localized manner in their policy documents. More specifically, they use the term ‘globalization’ to reference reality, or the hope that an increasing number of foreign tourists would visit their communities. According to this narrative, these villages and cities are faced with an urgent need to prepare for the rapid increase in foreign tourists, which necessitates fostering young people who can communicate in English and welcome visitors from overseas.

For instance, Naoshima Town in Kagawa, a town comprising small islands with a population of approximately 3,000, has become known as a ‘town of modern art’ and it co-hosts an international art festival, receiving over 700,000 tourists per year. A publicity article that introduces the town’s ELT under the Special School designation says that their program aims to develop students’ ability to talk about themselves and the community in English. This is because, ‘There are many opportunities to interact with foreigners, such as children being asked for directions, and we feel a greater necessity to acquire an international sense (*kokusai kankaku*) in our daily life than in other regions’ (Feature Article, 2017; my translation). Similar narratives are also observed in other areas, such as Inakadate Village in Aomori, which has attracted tourists with its rice paddy art, and Yamanakako Village in Yamanashi, which draws international tourists to its World Heritage site, Mount Fuji (Inakadate-mura Kyoiku Iinkai, 2019; Yamanakako-mura, 2016).

Although the 2020 pandemic significantly restricted the inflow of foreign tourists, there have been no observable changes in inbound-oriented policies. The Olympic Games, for example, the biggest tourist attraction for Japan, was held in summer 2021 after a one-year postponement. Meanwhile, Japan’s rural areas have largely been unaffected by the pandemic, in stark contrast to metropolitan areas such as Tokyo and Osaka and popular tourist destinations like Okinawa. Ironically, this shows that local efforts to attract foreign tourists have been unsuccessful thus far.

It should be noted that discourses are missing the important perspective of multilingualism. In recent years, there has been a prominent increase in non-Japanese, non-English-speaking workers across Japan and an accompanying increase in the number of linguistic minority children enrolled in Japanese schools. Students who need Japanese linguistic support include Brazilians, Chinese, Filipinos,

Vietnamese, and a few native English speakers (MEXT, 2017c). As Kubota (2002) points out, ‘multilingualism’ in Japan effectively means English–Japanese bilingualism. Even in communities that have accepted many foreign workers in their factories and farms, and have also sometimes welcomed them into households as permanent residents through marriage with locals, the bottom-up language-in-education policies are still largely based on this narrow view.

#### 4.3 The more native speakers, the better the ELT

The third discursive pattern highlights the fact that more native English-speaking teachers are deployed under the Special School scheme. Of the 38 municipalities, 27 cited their efforts to invite more ALTs from overseas with their own budgetary allocations. Traditionally, ALTs were recruited via the JET Program, originally a youth exchange project launched in the 1980s with English-speaking countries. However, an increasing number of local governments are employing ALTs directly using their own budgets and accepting their application through private human resources agencies. Recent data show that as of 2018, only 28.5% of ALTs were recruited through the JET Program, while 23.2% were employed directly by local governments, and the remaining 48.3% were appointed through worker dispatch and other forms of service contracts (MEXT, 2018). It is worth noting that the diversification of employment opportunities for ALTs has recently attracted media attention as a labor issue (e.g., Yamada & Kiyokawa, 2010), although this topic is beyond the scope of this study.

The documentary sources gathered for this study include PR brochure articles that introduce newly appointed ALTs in local communities. Webpages and blogs provide a detailed account of how they spend their days teaching English at local schools while learning about Japanese local culture through interacting with residents, suggesting their symbolic status as local cultural interests. A great majority of these ALTs are recent college graduates from the Inner Circle in Kachru’s (1985) three-circle model of English. Kachru divided the speech community of English into Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles which, respectively, correspond to the contexts of English as a native language, English as a second language, and English as a foreign language. Without the Japanese proficiency or official ELT credentials being required, the ALTs, primarily from the US, are essentially expected to model English by their own example and provide

local children with the opportunity to interact with ‘foreigners’.

Meanwhile, there are a few notable cases in which Outer Circle speakers, particularly those from the Philippines, are involved in Special School English programs. For example, Nagai City in Yamagata has introduced online English conversation lessons through which students can talk one-on-one with Filipino lecturers in English through video conferencing (Nagai-shi, 2018). Similarly, in Wake Town, Okayama, a private company has provided an online English conversation service in its public-run afterschool learning center since 2016 (Taira, 2017). The service provider is known for hiring its instructors mainly through three recruiting centers in the Philippines. This program in Wake, currently free of charge for its residents, was initially established for local workers and volunteers in the service and tourist industries, but has since been extended to children and students from nursery to high school. According to Iwabuchi, Yoshikawa, and Nagamune (2017), who studied the town’s educational policies designed for its economic revitalization, half of the current online conversation service users are elementary school students, and the number of junior high school students is also on the rise. One Wake town official suggested that for his town and other small municipalities with limited human resources for local ELT, compared to large cities with many English-speaking foreign residents, the online conversation program provides local children with easy access to authentic English communication, thereby contributing to equalizing learning opportunities (Taira, 2017).

However, one characteristic of these English conversation programs is the recognition that the Outer Circle speakers of English can provide ‘high quality’ English for a ‘more reasonable’ price. The majority of ALTs are still invited from traditional English-speaking countries, such as the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia, to local schools across Japan, where their presence is advertised with expressions such as *‘ikita Eigo’* or ‘living English’ and *‘honmono no Eigo’* or ‘real, authentic English’. In Nagai City, Yamagata, which provides online English conversation lessons with Filipino teachers, the number of ALTs has increased to six (and soon will increase to eight) under the Special School designation, all of whom were invited from the US. An issue of the city’s PR magazine explains that the objective is ‘to help children experience real [*riaru na*] English by communicating on a daily basis with ALTs who grew up in different cultures’ (Nagai-shi, 2016; my translation). By adopting these

programs, local municipalities are apparently taking advantage of a perceived hierarchy among the Inner and Outer Circle versions of English and their speakers. In addition, English is largely regarded as something ‘foreign’ that is brought and introduced by foreigners. Thus, the obvious contradiction between the concept of EGL and the desire for the Inner Circle, or simply native-speakerism (Holliday, 2005), remains unacknowledged.

#### 4.4 The earlier, the better

As mentioned, an increasing number of ALTs are now directly hired by local municipalities. The greater flexibility resulting from their direct contract allows these ALTs to be sent to local nurseries and kindergartens, in addition to their regular teaching engagements in primary and secondary schools. This study found that in 17 of 38 local municipalities, ALTs were dispatched to kindergartens and nursery schools to engage in activities such as singing songs and playing games in English. For example, Chikuhoku Village, Nagano, has only two nurseries, but both offer English-related activities (Chikuhoku-mura, 2015). In Amakusa City, Kumamoto, five specialized teachers travel around kindergartens and nurseries, offering 35 sessions of 15-minute English activities over the year (Amakusa-shi Kyoiku Iinkai, 2017). Many local governments are advertising these pre-school English activities to local parents with catchy phrases such as ‘The best town to raise your child in the prefecture’ (Maibara City, Shiga) and ‘The English education town Kanegasaki’ (Kanegasaki Town, Iwate).

Even after primary ELT became a national standard in 2020, the Special School designation still benefits these municipalities because they are granted the freedom to exceed the national curriculum and introduce English to lower graders and even preschoolers. Given the background that local ELT efforts effectively propelled the central authority in curricular reforms, it is not difficult to imagine that English activities targeting pre-school children will rapidly spread to local governments in the foreseeable future. In addition, it is speculated that such efforts will provide the education ministry with a policy basis to further lower the age of introduction of ELT in public schools in the name of providing equal education opportunities across the nation.

#### 4.5 English for local development: An emerging discourse

The accumulation of research in second language acquisition has shown that the superiority of native

speaker instruction and early exposure to the target language is unfounded (e.g., Kubota, 2018). Consequently, none of the assumptions identified above present a convincing argument for the early implementation of ELT in small, rural municipalities. However, another discursive pattern provides us with a clue to better understand how early ELT is justified in local policymaking processes. This constitutes an emerging discourse related to English for local development. More specifically, in some rural municipalities, the discourses discussed above regarding teaching EGL, increased native-speaker involvement, and extremely early exposure to English are utilized together as publicity materials to advertise the quality of local ELT to non-residents who may be prospective migrants. This research found that 11 local governments feature their ELT programs, which start from early childhood and include regular ALT participation, in their PR brochures and special websites to promote internal migration from other areas of Japan. Often present in these sources was the notion that these communities create an ideal environment for parents to enjoy not only a rich natural environment in the countryside of Japan but also quality education, exceeding the national standard, for their children.

One seminal example is Soja City in Okayama, the largest municipality in this study, with a population of over 67,000. While the city center district has seen a slight increase in population, the mountainous areas are facing gradual depopulation (Benesse, 2015). To address this issue, the city set a priority policy agenda in 2014, which included promoting the influx of the childrearing generation by developing a special English education zone in rural areas. The initiative, entitled '*Yama no naka no eigo kyoiku suishin jigyo*', or 'The Project Promoting English Education in the Mountains', has even set numerical targets for the migrant population over the next three years (Kantei, 2016). Currently, a school complex in the mountainous area offers English lessons to students from kindergarten through junior high, providing English immersion classes in some subjects. The school-board president boasts that this project has been successful not only in improving students' English proficiency but also in attracting more students from outside the school district (Benesse, 2015).

A similar undertaking was initiated at the opposite end of the population spectrum. Itsuki Village in Kumamoto, the smallest of the 38 municipalities in this study, with a population of 976, has advertised its expanded ELT program, which aims to foster

'Global Communicators', in its PR brochure (Itsuki-mura, 2016). This project also emphasizes a focus on EGL and an increased involvement of ALTs as selling points for parents raising young children. Chikuhoku Village in Nagano, another small municipality with about 4,400 residents, also publicizes its Special School designation and English language activities in its nurseries, along with other parent-friendly policies, such as free medical services for children, for prospective migrants (Chikuhoku-mura, 2015).

Additional evidence exists for the predominant belief that earlier ELT can appeal to young parents thinking of migrating to the countryside. The Japan Organization for Internal Migration (JOIN), a non-profit corporation promoting internal migration, has published a list of 'unique' educational projects implemented by rural cities and villages across the country. In this list of 42 prefectures, 75 municipalities in 34 prefectures are featured as offering notable ELT programs, especially for small children (JOIN, 2019). This document presents regional educational measures as one of the key factors that potential migrants consider when determining where to move.

Underlying these discourses is the assumption that metropolitan cities can offer greater educational opportunities for children, thereby attracting population influx and accelerating rural depopulation. It then follows that guaranteeing quality education in local communities would stop population outflow and even attract immigration inflow of the childrearing population. For instance, Wake, Okayama Prefecture, which has implemented ELT-focused educational reforms as an official measure against population decline, partly bases their policy decisions on questionnaire responses from residents. According to a survey conducted in 2015, 29.4% of the respondents in their 20s and 46.1% of those in their 30s cited the conditions of education and child-care as an important factor when considering where to live. The town's general policy director said that follow-up interviews further revealed the locals' interest in English, leading the town to focus on establishing its original ELT programs (Iwabuchi et al., 2017). A Wake town official suggested that education reform is a relatively cost-effective and feasible measure for a small local government, compared to other factors often cited as facilitating migration such as 'transportation', 'shopping', and 'medical facilities' that require more substantial financial resources (Taira, 2017).

As Lee and Sugiura (2018) indicate, the pursuit of better education is indeed among the most important factors for those who choose to migrate

to urban cities. However, whether local efforts to promote early ELT are linked to reversing the migratory trend has not been and is unlikely to be substantiated. Although Wake town reportedly saw a notable increase in incoming migrants (Shimizu, 2018), it is unclear whether this demographic change is attributable to its English-oriented education reforms because the town has simultaneously adopted additional policy measures, including free medical services for children under 19. In fact, data from Aomori Prefecture, one of the most sparsely populated areas in Japan, illustrate that most incoming migrants to rural communities are in their 50s and above, transitioning into semi and full retirement, and have little interest in the educational investment in children's programs (Lee & Sugiura, 2018). Furthermore, if parents choose to move to a small rural community because their children can receive high-quality English instruction early on, it is even more likely that such education-conscious parents will return to the metropolis once they discover very few options for higher educational institutions in rural areas.

Meanwhile, the expansion of local discretion in implementing early ELT has obviously produced some negative effects, most significantly involving regional disparities in education and increasing competition among rural municipalities. Data have shown that many local governments reference the preceding projects, designed and implemented by other municipalities, when they plan to develop their own programs (Aota, 2017). For example, the minutes of the Kumamoto Prefectural Assembly reveal that small cities and villages are keenly aware of the policy reforms and innovations in their neighboring communities. One member of the assembly stated the following:

[In our prefecture], there are already 46 Special Schools in 13 municipalities, and 55 schools in 14 with Kumamoto city included [\*an ordinance-designated city]. Actually, there are already variations among the municipalities. [. . .] I warned that there'd be a competition with other prefectures when English is officially introduced to the elementary school curriculum. [. . .] However, now competition has already begun within our prefecture, not with other prefectures. So, what I'm concerned is that a disparity will emerge between those [municipalities] preceding in implementation [of early ELT] and [the rest that wait until] the full implementation. (Kumamoto Prefectural Assembly, 2017: 12; my translation)

Considering the locally held assumption regarding the relationship between early ELT and population

trends, underprivileged local governments, both in terms of population and economy, may logically feel the threat of losing their locals to a neighboring district, prompting their offering of early childhood English instruction.

The 'innovative' approaches implemented by municipalities may reveal the way the education ministry wishes to proceed with elementary school ELT. By slowly and gradually extending the reach of English instruction among younger children in its official policy, the ministry seemingly encourages a competitive environment in which each local authority must provide 'unique' educational programs using the government-initiated, yet financially unsupported, policy scheme. Within this scheme, local teachers have taken on an extra burden; they have developed and taught curricula they were not trained to teach, collaborated with inexperienced non-Japanese 'teachers' whose only credential is a vague interest in Japanese culture and language, and are now being considered 'experts' in elementary school ELT simply due to their painstaking efforts, which are unrewarded by financial support from the central government. Hence, early ELT is rapidly expanding as a 'voluntary' initiative from rural stakeholders, even in small-scale communities.

## 5. Conclusion

This study describes how English is situated in the bottom-up policies planned and implemented by small rural municipalities in response to top-down policy initiatives. It has identified several discursive patterns in the narratives that promote early ELT in less populous communities and discerned an emerging discourse related to English for local development. This study has some limitations. As the investigation focused on a select pool of municipalities, it is unclear whether the assumptions and discourses described here are shared by other local governments with the Special School designation. In addition, more schools offer some kind of English-related activity outside of a formal curriculum than what is demonstrated by official statistics. Therefore, the discussion in this study highlights only one aspect of the discourse constituting a basis for early ELT. Furthermore, because this analysis is based on documentary sources available primarily through online research, the findings should be triangulated with other data sources and analyses, including open questionnaires and interviews with municipal officers, policymakers, teachers, parents, and other local stakeholders to gain a more in-depth view of the

decision-making process involving the expansion of ELT in rural schools.

Nonetheless, this study provides new insights into the relatively under-researched topic of bottom-up policymaking within rural communities in an economically advanced nation like Japan. Textual analysis has shown that small rural communities are making efforts to reconstruct the top-down initiative from the central authority as a measure to address their local concerns including depopulation and to implement their independent projects in response to the needs of current and prospective residents. It is unclear whether the earlier introduction of ELT in rural communities can truly contribute to local development. However, disregarding such concepts as ‘fostering global-minded citizens,’ ‘attracting inbound tourists,’ and above all, ‘inviting internal migrants through earlier ELT’ as a set of unwarranted expectations does not contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between the national and local governments in the language-in-education policy and planning processes. Exploring local interests and examining policy effects is indeed a necessary step in the pursuit of ‘English education that best suits each local situation,’ as advocated by Japan’s education ministry.

## Notes

1 The earlier version of this paper was presented at the 17th Asia TEFL conference in 2019. The author would like to thank those in the audience as well as two anonymous reviewers of *English Today* for their comments and questions that helped improve the manuscript.

2 Japan’s Ministry of Education was reorganized in 2001 from Monbu-Sho into Monbu-Kagaku-Sho, or the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). To ease understanding, this paper refers to both the pre- and post-2001 institutions as ‘education ministry’.

3 The total number of applications and the approval rate are currently unpublished as of September 2019.

4 There are 1,741 municipalities in 47 prefectures in Japan, about half of which have a population of less than 50,000 (Consumer Affairs Agency, 2018).

5 The list of 38 municipalities and other data are available from the author upon request.

6 There were multiple variants in the original Japanese text (e.g., *gurobaru*, *gurobaruka*, *gurobarizeishon*, etc.) for each keyword (e.g., ‘global’).

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