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English Language Education in Japan: In Transition or Intransigence?

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This paper will explore some of the contradictions and complexities facing Japan as it endeavours to ready its population to use English globally in time for the 2020 Olympics. Even before the Olympic Games were awarded to Tokyo, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been introducing major reforms in language education. The most recent of these have included an earlier start for language study in elementary school (which became compulsory in 2011) and the conducting of English classes principally in English in senior high schools, among other reforms. These reforms have been largely top-down statements of policy that have been met either by resistance or stoic resignation.

Transitions through Reforms

Elementary School

Moves have been afoot for many years to reform English teaching in Japan by introducing the language at an early age. Consider the elementary school starting age reform: Between 1998 and 2002 there was an attempt to move the starting age for learning English in Japan's state schools from age 13 to six. However, that plan was scrapped partly because of a change of government and partly because there were virtually no teachers in elementary school who were capable of teaching English. Even a decade later, when in 2009 the government again tried to introduce English into elementary schools, "according to a report by the Japan Institute of Lifelong Learning, many teachers at public elementary schools expressed concerns about instruction methods, with 77 percent saying they needed to improve their language and English teaching skills, while 76.6 percent said they need more training." (Japan Times, 2009).

In April 2011 English instruction became compulsory starting in the 5th grade of elementary school (age 10). According to the Benesse Educational Research & Development Center, (2010) in public elementary schools in Japan, homeroom teachers teach English in 97.5% of surveyed schools. Many of these

elementary teachers feel overwhelmed (according to research by Kusumoto, 2008; Fennelly & Luxton, 2011) because they “have neither taught the language nor studied it since their university years decades ago.” (JT, 2011). Furthermore, according to research by Kasuya and Kuno (2010), most of them do not have certificates for the teaching of English. In 2013 MEXT reported that it was considering the introduction of English education in grade three by 2020, yet elementary school teachers remain unprepared, unsupported and unqualified to accomplish this task (JT, 2013).

Besides the lack of qualified teachers to support this reform, it is only necessary to hold a foreign language class during one 45-minute period each week. In Japan a mere 354-402 hours is allotted to foreign language study from primary to lower secondary school (6-30 hours per year for 2 years in primary school (Carly, 2012), and 114 hours per year for 3 years in lower secondary (MEXT, 2011). Compare this with the comparable hours of instruction in Italy--891 (80 hours per year in primary school and 165 hours per year in lower secondary) (Tatsuki, 2013). Haruo Erikawa, an English-education professor of Wakayama University stated, “With one lesson a week, it is like pouring water onto a desert. It will immediately evaporate - not create an oasis” (JT, 2011).

When the reform first came into effect, some schools voluntarily offered 2-3 classes per week. “Since 2002, about 97 percent of public elementary schools have introduced English classes, with 82.9 percent of them starting in the first grade, according to a survey by the education ministry. But in reality, the frequency varies greatly, and the national average for sixth-graders stands at only 13.5 hours, according to Tatsuya Kitaoka, a ministry spokesman.” (Japan Times, 2009). This variance (and some other factors) led to large disparities in program offerings so gaps in quality among regions emerged. To narrow these disparities and establish a minimum standard (Japan Times, 2010), the ministry introduced a uniform curriculum in 2011.

The Ministry also created state sanctioned materials, which though not mandatory are widely used. Haruoka (2014) reported serious shortcomings in MEXT published elementary school materials, which 90% of elementary school teachers use. For instance, half of vocabulary presented by the textbook is beyond the basic General Service List (West, 1953; Browne, 2013) and more than half do not even appear in Junior High School texts. Furthermore, some very frequently used basic words like the pronouns “he” and “she” are not presented at all. The

reasoning behind this is to avoid the complexities of 3rd person conjugation of verbs. But as Haruoka noted, “if children only use ‘I’, ‘you’ ‘we’ and ‘they’, the communication seems to be very much one-way, and cannot be two-way” (p. 21).

High School

At the high school level, MEXT has plans for students to develop an ability to communicate, including the surprisingly controversial goal of teaching English classes primarily in English. There is such resistance to this rather commonsense goal, in large part, because of the political and educational issues at the heart of an “English as a medium of instruction” policy (Tollefson & Tsui, 2004). Hashimoto (2013) states,

When MEXT announced its plan to revise the course of study in 2008, it caused a stir in public circles, including among JTEs in senior high schools. It has been reported that JTEs felt it put them under greater pressure to perform, MEXT did not consider this a problem because ‘teachers are supposed to be experts’ (Katayama, et.al. 2008, p.34, cited in Hashimoto, 2013, p. 166).

These MEXT reforms are expected to be carried out over the next 6 years just in time for the Olympics which means unfortunately the fruits of the reform will not be enjoyed until years after that.

Some teachers are trying to work ahead of the 6-year time line and are trying to augment their own teaching to meet the MEXT goals. One example is work by Komori (2014) who investigated the gaps between the objectives in the new Course of Study (MEXT, 2009) and textbook resources for senior high schools. She reported that there are two main objectives with suggested means to achieve them:

Objective 1): To foster a positive attitude toward communication through the English language; by things like guessing the meaning of unknown matters, continuing to keep listening or reading in a positive attitude; and so on.

Objective 2): To develop students’ abilities to evaluate facts, opinions, etc. from multiple perspectives and communicate through reasoning and a range of expression according to two aspects. (Komori 2014, p. 17)

Komori found that even the “new improved” textbooks covered only 2 out of

these MEXT language education objectives (p.29) so she made recommendations for extensive supplementary activities and materials.

Intransigence through Reforms

There is a complex interplay between the earnest desire to articulate and meet (or even surpass) MEXT objectives and the subtle resistance based on deep-seated beliefs about language learning and teaching. One such widely held misconception is that native speakers of a language—any language—are automatically qualified to teach them. Another misconception is that communication in English can (or need) only occur when a native speaker is present.

A case in point: Osaka BoE

Osaka Board of Education is currently making one of the most extensive English language education reforms in the entire country, with the goal of readying students to compete globally. The English Reformation Project team leader, Toru Nakahara puts it this way: “Whether you like it or not, you need to deal with other cultures, and you need to deal with people outside of Japan,” (JT, March 30, 2014). The entire program is directed at TOEFL-iBT exam preparation. To attain high scores on the TOEFL exam, the Osaka Board of Education realizes it must work backward and chart a comprehensive, holistic and strategically integrated English-language course that starts in primary school grade one. This will be followed up with intensive reading programs in middle school and rigorous standards in high school.

Another long overdue reform is to hire NETs (Native English Teachers) who actually possess teaching credentials/qualifications so that they are better able to participate properly in the classroom setting. This is a positive development because unfortunately there has been a long history of assuming that native speaking ability equalled the ability to teach a language, which of course is nonsense. As Hadley (2006) writes,

Until the late 1980s, the issue of discrimination between native English speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English teachers (non-NESTs) was generally ignored. Most seem to have blindly accepted the myth that native English speakers were best suited as language teachers, and that while the non-native teachers of English had their place, it was only in a support role

to the “real” task of Communicative Language Teaching. Such views are now condemned as a form of linguistic apartheid. (p. 35)

Identifying who is and who is not a native speaker is also extremely difficult (Davies, 2003) and “there is little linguistic support for a native-non-native speaker distinction (Braine, 1999, Canarajah, 1999; Jenkins, 2000)” (Holliday, 2013, p. 17). Both native and non-native speakers of English are needed in classes rooms because they each bring something unique to the teaching experience (Medgyes, 1996, pp. 41-12). Tajino and Tajino (2000) offer concrete examples of such mutually beneficial collaborations. It is also very regrettable that English education in Japan “is still based too much on American and British models” (Lee, 2012, p. 155-56) which do not reflect the world reality. It would be more realistic to embrace the notion of *expert speakers* (as described by Rampton, 1996) and focus instead on a person’s language expertise rather than their linguistic “pedigree”.

However, this positive, proactive reform (requiring professional credentials of native speaking teachers) is paired with another potentially explosive reform that is related to Japanese speaker teachers of English. Nakahara claims that many current teachers cling to “old-fashioned” methods of teaching English and are resistant to change. Therefore he has proposed another unprecedented plan to hire a new type of Japanese teacher of English who would be called Super English Teachers (SETs) to teach at these pre-selected top high schools. SETs are defined as,

“...the best and brightest Japanese, English-speaking citizens... who have TOEFL iBT scores of over 100 points or an IELTS score above 7.5. The Osaka Board of Education will grant special teaching licenses to these candidates, and they will teach for three- to five-year contracted terms and be paid approximately \$74,000 per year. In contrast, 20-year veteran teachers in Japan earn approximately \$44,000 per year.” (JT March 30, 2014, emphasis added).

It should be strongly noted that proficiency alone is not what makes an effective teacher and there does not seem to be any specific requirements for SETs to have teaching qualifications. It is highly ironic that on the one hand, the Osaka BoE is requiring teaching credentials for native speaker teachers (a good move), yet they are at the same moment succumbing to the old faulty assumption that

“ability” alone is its own credential for SETs. Furthermore the huge difference in salaries may possibly alienate the other veteran teachers and lead to a non-cooperative working environment.

There is also another aspect to the deep-seated resistance to current reforms. Tsuneyoshi (2013) claims that there is a certain irony in the MEXT initiatives:

What is ironic about this communicative English focus especially oral focus, is that English is a language that is used in daily life neither by the Japanese nor by any of its major cultural minorities, ... This we are faced with the paradox that though English has little to do with everyday life, it is linked to ‘internationalization’ and occupies a special position relative to other languages in Japan as an exam and school subject, the language of the global economy, the global science and the international community at large. (p. 120)

Tsuneyoshi claims that the majority of Japanese do not need English for communication and merely tolerate it during school since it is an entrance exam subject and is required in some university classes (2013, p.121). She does concede that there are some Japanese who need communicative English “because they are at the forefront of contact with the outside world where English is largely used as the language of communication (e.g. business persons sent abroad, international athletes, tour guides, etc.)” (p. 120, emphasis added).

However this stance reveals a serious underestimation of the reach of English in professional (particularly, science and economics/finance) and daily life, which may be a reflection of the myopia suffered by many who teach in the liberal arts. “Certain professions in Japan rely heavily upon English. For example, in the biomedical sciences the volume of research, reports and articles published in English in Japan is more than the combined amount published in Canada, Australia and New Zealand” (Bailey, n.d.). Even Tsuneyoshi (2013) concedes that students in globalized fields (science, technology, commerce) “need to acquire field-specific English” (p. 131) and notes that the predominantly Japanese teaching staff in these globalized fields at Tokyo University routinely teach English-as-medium-of-instruction courses that are attended by Japanese and international students alike.

Transcendence?

Japan must take steps to prepare its citizens for world in which the

predominant common language of business and research is English—more precisely English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) or English as an International Language (EIL). There are a number of initiatives to bring English as an International Language into the Japanese language scene. In 2012 Matsuda published a ground-breaking book, “Principles and Practices of teaching English as an International language” in which some chapters describe university level approaches.

Hino (2012) describes a video/broadcast media based class, which could be considered “legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice” since watching TV news is a “common core” task for all EIL users. He states, “It is highly desirable for the learners to have an actual experience in the use of EIL or at least a direct exposure to it” (p.192). Even exposure is desired since it is, as he says, “...unusual to communicate in English with fellow students...” (p. 198)

In the same volume, D’Angelo (2012) describes efforts to diversify the teaching staff in Chukyo University since it sends the message that it is possible for Japanese to become competent (p. 128). They therefore employ Japanese teachers of English in oral classes and employ outer/expanding circle speakers of English in part time posts. Inner Circle speakers of English are only employed if they speak Japanese well so that they are competent enough to recognize incidents of positive Japanese L1 transfer and can understand sources of lexico-syntactic creativity thereby viewing them as divergence rather than as errors.

Other universities are trying the use of Model United Nations simulations (MUNs) as a means to bring the world of ELF to Japanese students and also bring them to it. MUNs are a dynamic community of practice (Wenger, 1998) that offer more than mere exposure to ELF; they give direct opportunities to actively participate.

The pedagogical implications of ELF research reported by Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey in 2011 are very relevant to the way we are approaching MUN preparation at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies. Jenkins, and her colleagues stated that ELF users should be encouraged to focus on:

- Developing effective communication rather than having anxiety about sounding non-native;
- Strategies and fluency rather than accuracy;
- Convergence to their interlocutor moment to moment rather than conformity to a predetermined set of ENL norms;
- Innovative combinations rather than statistically defined collocations.

In order to converge to an interlocutor the ELF user benefits from the development of accommodation skills:

- Gauging and adjusting to interlocutor repertoires/styles
- Strategies to signal non-understanding
- Strategies to reinforce meaning
- Strategies to seek clarification
- Strategies to seek explicitness

Initially when we started looking for ways to train our students to participate in MUN simulations, we looked to various ELF corpus collections for examples of the kinds of strategies just mentioned. Among the problems we found in these corpora were that most people knew they were being recorded, and are chatting in informal situations such as while relaxing at home, with others of fairly equal social status. This means the interactions are generally consensual and collaborative, so these corpora had minimal evidence of conflict or adversarial exchanges.

If the interactions are “generally consensual and collaborative with interlocutors of fairly equal social status, the range of pragmatically challenging situations is very limited. Therefore it is not surprising that ELF researchers assert that ELF users rely on a “let it pass” strategy regarding possible pragmatically based misunderstandings—in consensual and collaborative interactions that is precisely the strategy that one would expect. As Jenkins (2007) states ELF is “an emerging language”, it is not a finished product; it is being developed. In 1998 Jenkins outlined a proposal for a ‘core’ phonology of English (Jenkins, 2007) that takes into consideration the problems that learners of the language face. She wrote of “the difficulties... to harmonize pronunciation among L2 varieties of English”, and on the other, “to preserve international intelligibility” (1998, p. 120).

Jenkins (1998, p. 124) also presents an important distinction between the terms “norm” and “model”. Norm is linked to the idea of correctness and models are seen as points of reference-models for guidance that ELF users can “decide to approximate... more or less according to the demands of a specific situation.” (p. 124). Until we have sufficient ELF user data that shows how ELF speakers actually behave in conflictual, adversarial exchanges or even in basic non-equal status/power relationships what can we do? We propose and offer to students the idea of a “pragma-strategic core” in English for those who are still developing their ability to participate as ELF users.

MUN simulations put participants into situations of conflict and adversity, for which they need preparation. We are currently collecting many hours of MUN simulation data in a variety of settings (formal debate, informal debate and during informal caucusing) in order to find examples of how other MUN participants work towards a diplomatic solution during competitive and sometimes adversarial events. So, we are also providing students with examples of formulas/expressions (using items that are well within ELF core syllabus) such as conventional indirectness (using modals) and politeness markers.

We also raise awareness of and practice backchannels, responders, turn taking, turn keeping and provide students with strategies to deal with disagreements and refusals among other face threatening situations. This will be safe and useful for ELF contexts and if by chance students plan to spend time in ENL (so-called ‘inner-circle’) countries, where they might have interactions with ENL speakers, this kind of training will be very important because there will be pragmatically charged occasions when their interlocutors might not “Let it pass”.

This paper has explored the current state of reform in ELT in Japan. Despite a wish to be optimistic, one observation comes through: The more things change, the more they stay the same.

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