

# English as a Global Language: Implications for English Education in Japan

Nozomu Sonda  
Yamaguchi University  
(part-time instructor)

## Reference Data:

Sonda, N. (2005). English as a Global Language: Implications for English Education in Japan. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This presentation is a review of David Crystal's book "English as a Global Language" and discusses the implications of this concept for Japanese English education. English is now a global language and its status seems here to stay. However, its linguistic map is a very unique one in that the number of its non-native speakers is three times as large as that of native-speakers. The non-native speakers' sense of ownership of English is very strong, and there is a new phenomenon called World Englishes, new variations of English. In Japan, a new variation is appearing. There is an indication that Japanese college students can actually converse in English fluently using this "Japanized English." English educational reform is needed to meet unique needs of Japanese students of English including both timing and contents of such educational programs. In this study, the concept of artificial language is also discussed.

この発表は、Crystal(2003)の"English as a Global Language" のレビューであり、同時に、日本の英語教育に関するこの本の内容の示唆に関する考察である。英語はいまや「世界語」となっており、その地位はしばらく揺らぐことはなさそうである。しかし、英語を母国語としない英語話者の数はそれを母国語とする話者の数の3倍にのぼり、非母国語話者の英語所有感是非常に強い。また、非母国語話者を含む新しい形態の英語が出現してきており、日本の"Japanized English" その例である。筆者の研究では、"Japanized English"を用いた場合、日本の大学生はかなり「流暢に」英語が話せることが明らかである。以上の点を考慮して、英語教育を「タイミング」及び「内容」の2点において改革していくことが早急に望まれる。本発表では、人工語の概念も含めて考察する。

**W**hen I first started to learn English in junior high school, I believed that English was "the official international language" and never questioned it. I was determined to master the language and thus studied it diligently. My fluency in English never really came until I became 18 years old when I spent one year as a high school student in Kansas, USA. The following year, I was ready to enroll in the regular program at a university there. It was during those university years that I began to realize that English was not *the* official international language. Moreover, the world was not quite ready to attach any official status to any one language as the international language for all the countries. It was a shocking experience.

From then on, I have been thinking about why the world is not ready to take this step as well as whether it is possible to choose any one language as the international language for the whole world. At the individual level, it is possible. But at the collective level, it has never been easy. Even at the United Nations, there are six official languages. Then, how can the world at large come to an agreement on this issue? Japan also has been divided into half in terms of accepting English into the elementary school education system. The same thing goes for the recent proposal to

designate English as a second official language for Japan (c.f., Mainichi Interact, 2000).

This is why I became very interested in David Crystal's work *English as a Global Language* (2003). In this book, Crystal addresses three basic questions: "What makes a global language?" "Why is English the leading candidate?" and "Will English continue to hold the position?" These questions deal with exactly what I have been struggling to find out and therefore I have decided to do a review of this book. I have also decided to select a few important issues and discuss their implications for English education in Japan. The first half of the paper will present a summary of the salient features of this book and the latter half will be the discussions of the implications.

## Analysis

### *Why a global language?*

In the first part of the book, Crystal gives a historical background of how English has come to be a global language. But before that, he sets forth a definition of a global language.

#### *What is a global language?*

Crystal defines a global language as one that has a special role that is recognized in every country (pp. 3-4). This has three manifestations. One is that it is spoken as a mother tongue. A second is that it has the official status in a country, such as Ghana, Nigeria, India, Singapore or Vanuatu. And a third is that it is given priority in a country's foreign language teaching, such as in China, Russia and Japan.

Then he defines what makes a global language. First, he makes clear what it is *not*. It is not the number of speakers, not the ease of learning it, not the intrinsic structural properties, not the size of vocabulary or not even the association with great literature or culture or religion that makes a global language. But it is "who" speaks the language. In short, when the people with great political and military power use the language, it is likely to spread widely. Today, English spread globally through the colonizing activities of the United Kingdom and the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and with the subsequent economic and political influence of the latter country during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### *What are the dangers of a global language?*

First, because of the reasons above, native speakers of global languages could automatically be in a position of power over those who learn them as an official or foreign language. Secondly, those who already speak the global language may not be motivated to learn other languages. Finally, the emergence of a global language may threaten the existence of some minor languages, leading to their possible extinction. However, Crystal adds a note saying that in some countries the emergence of English as a global language conversely stimulated a stronger sense of support for a local language.

#### *Could anything stop a global language?*

Historically, the decline of the political or economic dominance of a ruling country meant the decline of the

language dominance used by that country. If the leading English-speaking countries follow the same path, it is likely that the power of English will fall too. However, a unique feature of the present age is that the sense of ownership of English by those countries where it is not spoken as a native language is getting so strong that this decline may be prevented. Another possibility is that machine translation technology may take over the role of a global language. However, this technology still has severe limitations and the emergence of a global language will probably take place much faster. Thus, the position of English as a global language is going to be stronger.

#### *A critical era*

As a conclusion of the first chapter, Crystal states that the status of English as a global language is unprecedented in history. Although it is a fact that two thirds of the world's population still do not speak the language, it is still an amazing fact that one third, which is about 2 billion people, speak English in one way or another. It is an unheard-of phenomenon in human history; that is where the importance of this development lies. It is, therefore, also a critical time for language planning in many countries of the world.

#### ***Why English? The historical context, the cultural foundation and the cultural legacy***

In the following three chapters (2, 3 and 4), Crystal summarizes the history of English as a global language starting with the Pilgrim Fathers' emigration to America from England and ending with the current spread of English

in many aspects of the global affairs including the political-diplomatic areas, the media, travel, safety, education, and communications. Since these points deal mostly with historical facts with relatively little interpretation, the present author would like to place a focus on a section titled "A world view" (pp. 59-71).

In gist, this section discusses the three "circles" of English speakers/users: the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle. The inner circle includes speakers of English as a native language, such as those of the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The estimated number of speakers is 320 to 380 million. The speakers in the outer circle use English as a second or official tongue but not as a native language. This circle includes countries like Singapore, India, Malawi and fifty others. The estimated number of speakers is 300 to 500 million. Users in the expanding circle speak English mostly as a foreign language and they come from countries like China, Japan, Russia, Poland and Greece. The estimated number is 500 million to 1 billion. Thus, for every native speaker, there are three non-native speakers. This last circle is expanding most rapidly. Therefore, this ratio is likely to change even with a greater proportion of non-native speakers.

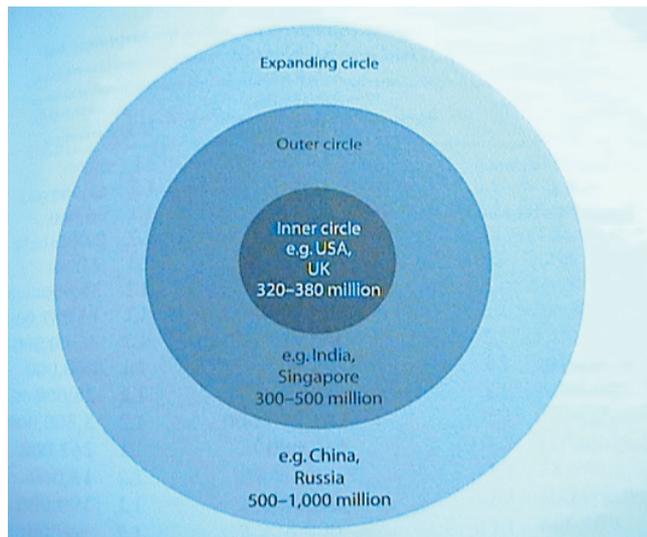


Figure 1. The three circles of English (from p.61)

### The future of global English

#### Rejection of English:

Although English is definitely a growing global language, it is also a fact that there is rejection of English in some parts of the world. First, in the former colonies of the UK and the USA (e.g., Kenya, Tanzania, Malaysia and India), English has been rejected as their national language. Secondly, economic limitations necessitate some countries to put priority on their native languages rather than on English. For example, Latin America would choose Spanish, North Africa would favor Arabic, Russia would choose Russian

and Germany would prioritize German in their language education. Thirdly, due to the issues of intelligibility and identity, some countries refuse to accept English into their daily life (e.g., France, Francophone Canada, Japan, Spain, Mexico and Myanmar).

#### *New Englishes called World Englishes*

Because of the rapidly growing number of English speakers in the outer and expanding circles, various versions of English have emerged throughout the world. These are called World Englishes, which include the following: American, Canadian, Caribbean, Irish, Scots, Welsh, Australian, New Zealand, South African, West African, East African, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Chinese. Each of these Englishes has their distinct features in grammar, phonology, vocabulary, code-switching, pragmatics and discourse. This is mainly because the expanding circle territories are now bending English to suit their purposes. These various Englishes are now forming a new “language family of English.” Thus, the distinct feature of this language family is that it has an increasing tendency of multi-dialectism and increasingly syllable-timed rhythm. Crystal predicts that there will soon be a new form of English called “World Standard Spoken English” (WSSE) in order to facilitate spoken communication among various nations. Thus, there will be three forms of English in the future: Standard English as represented by British and American English, World Standard Spoken English and standard written English (British/American English). This is the diglossic trend of future English.

*A unique event?*

In connection to this unique, unprecedented phenomenon, Crystal poses several questions in regards to the future of English. First, what happens to a language when it is spoken by many times more people as a second/foreign language than as a mother tongue? Second, if English does fade away, will subsequent global languages follow the same path? Thirdly, is there a critical mass for a language to grow as a global language? Fourthly, will the inner and outer circles lose relative influence on the future of English? Finally, he poses an ultimate question: “In 500 years’ time, will it be the case that everyone will automatically be introduced to English as soon as they are born?” “If this is part of a rich multilingual experience for our future newborns,” he asserts, “this can only be a good thing.” “If this is by then the only language left to be learned,” he counter-argues, “it will have been the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has even known.”

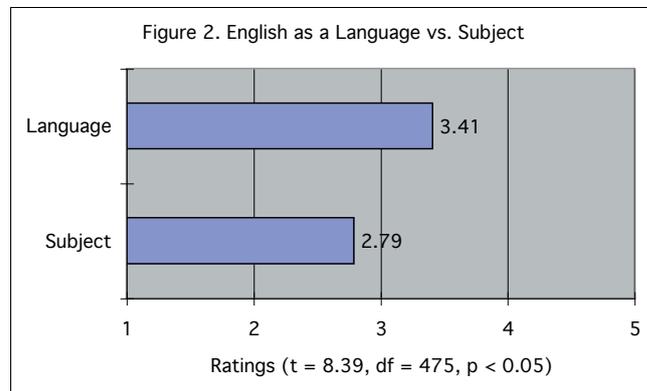
**Discussions: Implications to the English Education in Japan**

*Language attitudes*

In this section, I will share a study I have done in terms of language attitudes and relate the results to the concept of a global language mentioned in Crystal’s book. In this study, a questionnaire was administered to 250 college students (126 females and 124 males) in Japan and their attitudes towards English were rated. The sample was a convenient one taken from the English courses at three different schools I taught in 2000 (81 nursing students, 126 engineering students and 43

medical students). The questionnaire was piloted earlier in the same year with 45 college students. The questions were written in Japanese.

One item asked the students whether they liked English as a language and another asked them whether they liked English as a school subject. The result showed that they liked English as a language more than as a subject (see Figure 2). Since the scale was a 5-point one (1 to 5), their rating of English as a language is a positive one, while their rating of English as a subject was a negative one. The result implies that despite the general negative attitude towards English in the school settings, their attitude toward English itself is a rather positive one. At least among this young college population, English is accepted rather favorably.



**Figure 2. English as a Language vs. Subject**

In the same study, another item asked the students whether they favored the idea of English as a second official language of Japan. The result was similar to that of English as a language (see Figure 3), implying that the idea itself is relatively favorably accepted.

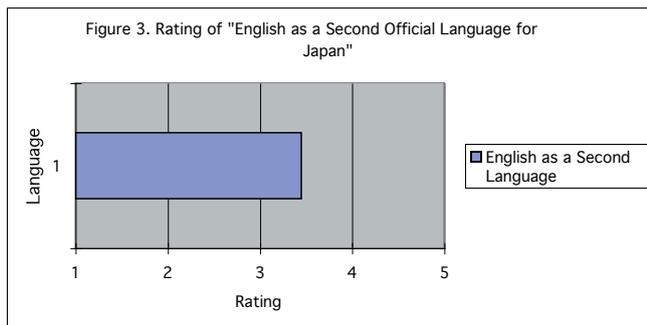


Figure 3. Rating of "English as a Second Language for Japan"

The next set of questions asked the students how they would feel if the six official languages of the UN were designated as the international official language by the UN to be taught at all schools in the world. In the questionnaire, the "international language" was defined as "the common language used as auxiliary to the mother tongues of the nations." In the same set, the same question was asked about Japanese and an artificial language. The results were as shown in Figure 4. As expected, of the six official languages of the UN, English was the only one favorably regarded by over half of the

respondents. The reasons for accepting English included the following: "it is already widespread," "it is familiar," "it has a global status," "it is advantageous to know English in the real world" and the like. On the other hand, relative rejection of other languages included the following reasons: "an unfamiliar or unknown language," "associated with negative images of the political/military world," and "sounds very difficult to learn." Other than English, Chinese was slightly more favored than others because "it is spoken by so many people," "it is more familiar (to Japanese) because of Chinese characters," "China is close to Japan," and "The Chinese culture is familiar."

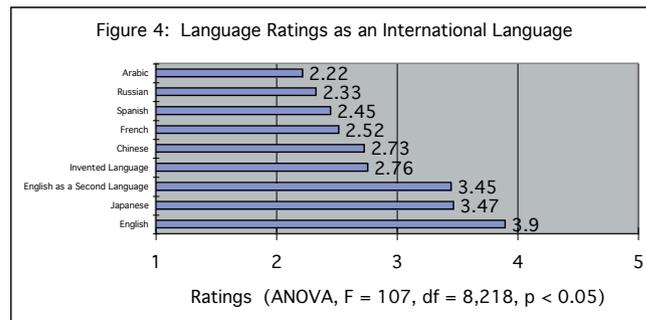


Figure 4. Language Ratings As an International Language

When we compare the rating of "English as the international language" with the rating of "English as a second official language of Japan," we obtained a very

interesting contrast. The students favored the former more. The result implies that they held a double standard: English as a common language for the entire world is more acceptable than English as a second common language for Japan. These two ideas mean essentially the same thing; however, in reality, English as a second official language for Japan has more direct impact on people's daily life because international communications are distant happenings for the majority of people.

Japanese as the international language was rated the second highest because it is the students' "native language," it is "the most familiar tongue" and "there is no effort involved" in implementing it. However, the difference in the rating between Japanese and English was significant because English is after all far more widespread and "easier for other people to learn than Japanese."

Another interesting result was that the concept of invented language was rated higher than the five other official languages of the UN. Although it was not regarded as favorably as English or Japanese because it is "unknown" and "unfamiliar" to the students, it was more favored than the others because "it makes sense to have a language with completely regular rules," "it has the advantage of neutrality and fairness" and "it brings a fresh impulse to the linguistic map." The idea of invented language will be explored in a later section, so we will keep its discussion at the minimum level here.

### *World Englishes: The Japanese version*

The phenomenon of varieties of English or World Englishes can also be observed in Japan. There are distinct patterns of lexicon, syntax, and phonology in Japanese English. In this section, I would like to share my classroom experience with the English Speaking students I teach at a regional university.

In this course, there are two groups of about 20 students, who spend most of the 90-minute class period speaking English. The course and the textbook were developed by Takemoto (2004). The course was designed for students whose TOEIC score was between 350 and 395. The aim of the course is to have students speak as much English as possible using what they have already "learned" through their grammar lessons in the previous years (starting from their junior high years). The rationale behind the course objective is that most college students have "learned" English rules and words but have not yet "acquired" them because they have not practiced them. So, in this course the instructor spends minimum time explaining things about English but rather motivates and encourages students to practice their English and mostly listens to them while only occasionally giving them some quick feedback. Students are given several pages of simple English readings about college students' life, which they are to study and read beforehand. They are also given a list of various questions to generate conversations related to the readings. They are also required to ask follow-up questions of their own after using the given questions. Students are allowed and actually encouraged to "make mistakes" but are expected to make full English sentences. They are not to speak Japanese but if they have

no knowledge of certain words they can throw the Japanese counterpart into a full English sentence. They are graded based on how fluently they speak English and how much sincere effort they make to do so.

The result of this approach has been simply overwhelming. The students in this course are actually at a very low level (TOEIC score of 300-395) but they spoke a great deal of English. Although they make numerous grammatical mistakes and use wrong words, their fluency level is very high and, most importantly, they can actually communicate with each other about many things in their daily lives. The English they use is typical “Japanese English,” which has the following characteristics: (1) the pronunciation is syllabic, almost always consisting of vowel sounds in each syllable. For example, “restaurant” would be pronounced as “resutoranto.” (2) When the sentence gets long or complex, the sentence structure is often mixed up with that of Japanese. For example, I often heard a sentence like “How many do you have music CDs?” or “What do you like foreign movies?” In other words, the students had difficulty connecting “how many” and “music CDs” or “what” and “foreign movies” because in Japanese the phrases can be separated. (3) Ways of address people, presenting ideas or responding are culturally affected. For example, they would often address teachers saying “(so-and-so) teacher instead of “Ms./Mr. (so-and-so),” “Professor (so-and-so)” or “Dr. (so-and-so).” They would not blatantly disagree with their partners; they would avoid confrontation, repeatedly use the expressions like “I see,” “Really?” or “Hmmm” and state their opinions.

While native English speakers *may* have difficulty understanding or possibly disagree with their English, anyone who is somewhat familiar with Japanese English can easily follow their conversations. The Japanized English may not be understood very well outside Japan; however, it may be a stepping-stone for average Japanese to truly communicate in English. The keys points in the results are that (1) Japanese college students can actually communicate in English, (2) they can do so with each other (between Japanese speakers of English), and (3) they can do so if a flexible and comfortable situation is given. Although this type of English may have difficulty being understood on a global scale, the result is still an encouraging one because despite a general belief that Japanese oral proficiency is very poor in English, these students can actually communicate among themselves in broken English. With some more proper training and further encouragement, the same students may be able to speak more “correct” English with the same fluency.

### Artificial language

The emergence of World Englishes is, in a sense, an indication of the cry for a common language that is easier to learn and acquire. The efforts to create artificial languages are direct responses to this need. However, is it really possible to create a new language? Yes, there have already been numerous attempts to create new languages for daily usage: Volapuk (Schleyer, 1880), Esperanto (Zamenhof, 1887), Idiom Neutral (Rosenberger, 1902), Latino Sine Flexione (Peano, 1903) and Ido (1907) to name just a few.

What are some of the advantages of artificial languages? For example, we can create languages with perfectly regular

rules, spellings and pronunciation, which make it easy to learn. Also, they can be relatively neutral in the political, ideological and linguistic sense.

How about disadvantages? For one thing, they do not have tradition, history or culture (when they start). So, many find the idea of artificial language too “superficial” or “lacking in human touch.” Secondly, an artificial language would be unfamiliar and unknown to learners, which makes it difficult for them to approach. Thus, it would be difficult to motivate the masses to learn it. Thirdly, it seems almost impossible to create a language absolutely equally neutral to all. Most of the first inventions were Latin-based, which may have been relatively neutral to European users but certainly not for the rest of linguistic families. Finally, monitoring and maintaining its development would be a challenging task, requiring international governance.



Figure 5. Zamenhof

those who favored English as a world language and those who supported other artificial languages. There were also objections on political grounds because much of its support

Among the numerous languages invented since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most influential has been Esperanto created by Zamenhof. In 1908, a proposal to grant it an official status as an international language was submitted to the United Nations. It was signed by over a million people from 74 countries but was not accepted by the UN due to the opposition by

came from the Eastern European countries. Thus, the world is not quite ready to grant an official status even to an artificial language as an international language.

Ogden’s Basic English (or BASIC, 1938) is an attempt to modify a natural language. He simplified English by limiting the vocabulary to 850 words which cover daily needs and supplementing this with some international and scientific words such as “radio” and “geography.” BASIC made it easier to read, but writing posed limitations to express clarity, and thus its influence has remained minimum. In this respect, modifying a natural language by minimizing irregularities in grammar and spellings, rather than *simplifying* them, could be a promising project. For example, as often shown in World Englishes, some modifications in English rules can make it much easier for non-native speakers to use it more freely and spontaneously.

### English education reform?

So, given the understanding based on the above discussions, how can we reform English education in Japan? Most of all, there must be consensus as to what will be the international language education. Right now, Japan has not even come to agreement on whether to really start English language education at the primary school level. This issue must be settled first. Once we decide to adopt any language for global communication education, it must be offered at least at the primary school level, preferably sooner. When English education starts as early as at the primary education level, then English education at the secondary and tertiary levels must be adjusted too. At the secondary level, for example, different English subjects can be selected according to student needs,

not according to the grade level. Thus, at the tertiary education level, English education would be further diversified. For example, at Sophia University, English courses are going to be offered at 18 different levels in the new curriculum (Yoshida, 2004). For further discussions of this topic, see my previous work “A study of the proposal to designate English as a second official language” (in Japanese, 2000).

### Conclusion

English as a global language is a unique event in history in three ways. First, it is the most widely spoken language in both number and geographical distribution. Second, it has three different circles of speakers: those who speak it as a native language, those use it as an important second language or an official language, and those who recognize it as an important tool of international communication but with no official designation. Third, the number and the proportion of the third circle are becoming larger than the first two, resulting in a phenomenon called World Englishes.

An artificial language is also a possibility for a global language; however, it may still have a long way to go before developing one that is acceptable to a greater proportion of the world's population.

In either way, there seems to be a great fear and difficulty accepting a global language with uniformity. No nation wishes to lose its native tongue. Having a global language does not mean that we have to abandon our mother tongue. We can enjoy lives of two languages as a testimony to a rich diverse world. We anticipate a bilingual age in the future. To do this, we need to be humble and willing to learn about

different languages. Crystal gives a most befitting conclusion in his preface to the first edition (xiii), which the present author would like to also echo in this paper as its conclusion:

I believe in the fundamental value of multilingualism, as an amazing world resource which presents us with different perspectives and insights, and thus enables us to reach a more profound understanding of the nature of the human mind and spirit. In my ideal world, everyone would be at least bi-lingual....I believe in the fundamental value of a common language, as an amazing world resource which presents us with unprecedented possibilities for mutual understanding, and thus enables us to find fresh opportunities for international cooperation. In my ideal world, everyone would have fluent command of a single world language.

### References

- Blomfield, L. (1935). *Language*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Crystal, David (1997). *Cambridge encyclopedia of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, David (2003). *English as a global language*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Graddol, David (2000). *The future of English?* The British Council.
- Mainichi Interact (2001). <http://www.mainichi.co.jp/eye/debate/18> (note: no longer online).

- Macnamara, J. (1967). The bilingual's linguistic performance. *Journal of Social Issues*, 23, 58-77.
- Ogden, C.K. (1938). *Basic English*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.
- Sonda, Nozomu (2000). "A study on the proposal to designate English as a second official language," *Journal of Yamaguchi Chapter of the Japan Association of Language Teaching*, Vol. 6, August, 2000. JALT Yamaguchi Chapter.
- Takemoto, Timothy (2004). *English speaking*. Yamaguchi University Common Language Department.
- Titone, R. (1972). *Le Bilinguisme Précocose*. Brussels: Dessart.
- Webster (1961). *Webster's third new international dictionary of the English language*. London: Bell & Sons.
- Yamamoto, Masayo (1991). "Bilingualism and its misunderstandings" in *Gengo*, Vol. 20, No. 8. Tokyo: Taishukan.
- Yoshida, Kensaku (2004). Forum at the JALT2004 Annual Conference.