

A History of the Native-Speaking English Teacher

Scott Sommers

Ming Chuan University

Taipei, Taiwan

PAC3
at
JALT
2001

**Conference
Proceedings**



**International
Conference
Centre**

**Kitakyushu
JAPAN**

**November
22-25, 2001**

Native-speaking language instructors are not new to Asia. Beginning in the Meiji Restoration, native speakers began to travel to Japan to assist with its plans for modernization. This contribution has been largely ignored. Currently, Asia is experiencing the arrival of a huge number of foreign people whose goal is to become native-speaking language instructors. The size and nature of this group is astonishing. The last time that similar numbers of English speakers migrated was during the migrations that populated the colonies and nations of the British Commonwealth and North America. And like these earlier migrations, a new form of cultural expression is emerging from their settlement in Asia. The chance for social scientists to study these phenomena is being bypassed. My paper is a call to historians, sociologists, and other related social scientists to pursue this possibility while it is still around us.

ある言語の母語話者が外国語教師としてアジアに身を置くというのは、決して今日に始まったことではない。明治維新直後には、日本の近代化への取り組みの一助となるべく多数の外国人が来日したが、こうした貢献の価値はあまり省みられてこなかった。現在でも、多くの外国人が、みずからの母語を教える教師になることをめざしてアジアの地を踏んでおり、その数は驚くべきものになっている。英語話者に関して言えば、このように大規模な移動が観察されるのは、英連邦や北米の植民地・国家へ続々と人々が向かったとき以来のことである。そして当時と同じく今日でも、アジアへの彼女ら／彼らの移動は、文化表現の新たなかたちを生

み出すに至っている。しかしながら、社会科学研究は、こうした興味深い現象を見逃してしまっている。本論文は以上のような観点から、歴史学・社会学および関連諸領域の研究に携わる人々に、われわれの身の回りで感知できるさまざまな可能性に目を向けることを呼びかけるものである。

The Early Teachers of English in Asia

Beginning in the 1870s, Japan experienced a series of reforms that came to be known as the Meiji Restoration. Their goal was to create a modern Japan as quickly as possible, and ‘catch up with the West’. Lacking the knowledge to do this on its own, the government established special schools throughout Japan whose main purpose was to prepare students who could transform Western knowledge into a form useable by the Japanese people. The vast majority of this information was written in English, and it soon became apparent to the Meiji government that Japan did not have enough teachers capable of assisting with this task. The program that followed imported some 3000 teachers to Japan to teach Western languages and technology in what became known as the *English Language Schools* (Burke, 1985).

While many of the foreign teachers at these schools taught subjects such as engineering, science, law, or medicine, a substantial number of them must have been involved in teaching EFL. Certainly, the level of English spoken by a large number of the students, particularly those newly entered to the program, would have made instruction more like content-based language instruction

than the instruction of modernizing skills. This perception was not lost on the teachers involved in these programs. In the autobiographical notes of Thomas Mendenhall, a Meiji era educator, his son would write that,

The *oyatoi* (foreign) professors at his school, despite sometimes inflated titles and salaries, were essentially language teachers...the other oyatai professors in this period enjoyed the convenience of lecturing in their native language, their students were disadvantaged by having to put such an effort into language learning. For these students, the language was a serious obstacle to independent and creative research. In general, it was not Mendenhall’s students but their students, instructed in their own language, who became the founding generation of advanced scientific research in Japan (Rubinger, 1989; 10-11).

The goal of the Meiji-era educational programs had always been to create a technologically self-sufficient Japan. Reliance on foreign instruction was merely a stopgap to speed along the acquisition of this information. Around 1881, institutions began to incorporate increasing amounts of Japanese curriculum into their programs. By the early 1900s, the use of foreign languages for instruction was reaching the end of its usefulness as a conduit to transmit knowledge into

Japan. However, well into the 1920s, Western travelers in the colonies of Japan would still be commenting on the English proficiency of these educated under this system (Bigelow, 1923).

Ironically, as Japan was engineering the demise of English education, it was emerging as the main medium of instruction in the Christian schools of the Republic of China (ROC). Christian missionaries had been establishing schools in China since 1845 (Lutz, 1971). The demise of the traditional examination system in 1905 and the rise of foreign trade made English such a valued business skill that the Christian colleges, such schools as St. John's in Shanghai or the Beijing College, had more applicants than they could admit. With the insistence that students admitted to these schools have a strong mastery of English, practically the only students who could gain admission were graduates of the English-speaking Christian high school system.

Traveling through East Asia in the first part of the century, one would be left with the impression that English was increasingly an important language. In Japan, senior military officers, bureaucrats, and many of their older children could speak at least a little English. In China, attendance at the English-medium missionary schools had become part of admission into the elite commercial class. But by the end of the next generation, all this had ended. Governments, pursuing nation-building policies had established national schools

that used only one national language as the medium of instruction.

The Demise of English

In 1949, the ROC government of Chiang Kai-shek was defeated by the Communist Party and fled to Taiwan, where it flourished under US support. The island that it fled to had had a very different history from the Republican mainland. Taiwan had been under fifty years of Japanese colonial control, and Mandarin Chinese, selected by the ROC government to be their national language, was no longer a useful language. The *National Language Movement*, defined in the 1946 *Taiwan Provincial Propagation and Promotion of the National Language* (TPCPPNL), initially incorporated the local Chinese dialect (Minnan Hwa) and other non-Mandarin languages into a single policy. The original goal of the TPCPPNL was not only to promote the use of Mandarin, but also to recover the use of Minnan Hwa into the daily lives of Taiwan Chinese (Chen, 2001).

Shortly after the retrocession, this became impossible. The KMT government began to encounter strong resistance to their control (Lei, Myers, and Wei, 1991). In 1948, Taiwanese was declared, "inadequate for academic and cultural communication". By 1956, Mandarin had become the only legal language of communication for schooling and other aspects of life. Some of the Christian colleges that had been displaced

by the Communist victory in the mainland were able to reestablish in Taiwan. The Shanghai Law College of Soochow University was reopened in 1951 as Soochow University in Taipei. Tunghai University was eventually opened by the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia in 1955 at their Taichung campus. The Catholic University of Beijing was reestablished in the San Chung District of Taipei County in 1962. But due to strict government control over language spoken in schoolrooms, none of these schools was ever able to reestablish their unique English-medium curriculum. It was during this period that it became the custom to instruct even foreign language classes in Mandarin. It is no wonder that *all* of the currently well-known speakers of English educated during this generation; Lien Chan, Ma Ying-jou, James Soong, Sissy Chen, Jaw-shaw Kong, were educated overseas.

Growing Affluence

The Second World War shattered the economy of East Asia. In 1945, the annual per capita GNP of Taiwan was \$224 US and South Korea \$146 US (Johnson, 1992). But by the 1980s, it was clear that something was happening. Annual per capita incomes had risen enormously, and by the 1990s, led by Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, this region had become among the most prosperous in the world.

Military regimes had established themselves in South

Korea and Taiwan following the war. Despite the growing demand for teachers of communicative English skills, students were neither free to travel abroad for language education, nor able to freely hire qualified, competent foreign teachers. In 1987, military regimes in both Taiwan and South Korea stepped down, and by the end of that year every East Asian, outside of the Communist states, lived in a fully democratic nation with an internationally competitive economy. The stage was once again set for the reemergence of native-speaking English teachers.

The Reemergence of English

By the 1990s, thousands of native-speaking teachers were teaching in East Asia. Native speaking teachers had become the norm and the accepted standard for many potential students of English. The magnitude of these phenomena has never been accurately explored. However, the *China Post* (Aug 2, 1993 p. 15), a major Taiwan-based English language newspaper, reported a 1993 Taiwan National Police Agency statistic that 2,000 US citizens were living illegally in Taiwan. Taking into account that this number includes only Americans living illegally in Taiwan, the total number of native speaking teachers in Taiwan at that time must have been enormous, perhaps as high as 10,000. A similar numbers would be reasonable for South Korea, and a number twice this large for Japan. While this number is at best

a guestimate, it points to an enormous movement of people to East Asia.

The migrants who traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to populate North America are estimated at around 100 million people over perhaps 200 years (Yans-McLaughlin, 1990). Given the calculation above, the number traveling across the Pacific could one day approach the number who traveled across the Atlantic. Such a comparison raises an important issue; can the number who traveled across the Pacific be compared in other ways? In fact, these groups share many other characteristics.

Contrary to early sociological theories (Park, 1950), most migrants appear to have been affluent and educated, or at least more so than average (Sanchez-Alonso, 2000). While it is sometimes presumed that migrants were fleeing poverty, it is more likely they were leaving behind a lack of opportunity. Dino Cinel (1982) and Josef B. Barton (1975) have demonstrated how immigration occurred in places where either foreign currency had the most utility or where land was not available for purchase at any price. In areas where purchasable land was available, return migration was common.

What are English teacher's motivations for leaving? While it is hard to generalize, a series of exchanges left on the Internet chat room of Dave's ESL Café (2001) point in the same direction as these earlier migrations:

“the unemployment rate is REALLY high in Canada.”
“the Canadian government has REALLY screwed up the country so many of its own citizens are sick of the place”
“the taxes(income, sales, booze, are REALLY high, about the highest in the world)”
“I mean, whacha gonna do w/ a degree in History or Sociology? The market is extremely small to absorb all new grads: How many adjustor jobs are there in Canada?”

It is no surprise to contemporary native-speaking English teachers to say that English teachers return back to their native countries with some regularity. Return migration, however, was a common phenomenon among earlier migrants. About 60% of Italian migrants to the US returned to Italy. The rate of return migration among English migrants was as high as 30% at certain times (Chan, 1990). And in South America, return migration of Spanish migrants to South America eventually outstripped migration (Sanchez-Alonso, 2000). In fact, drawn by the high wages and easy access to work, a significant number of migrants returned to the Americas two, or more times.

The Emerging Culture of the New Migrants

As in other migrant groups, our migration has its own

emerging culture. A number of factors have appeared as salient points in this development. For example, the background of most English teachers is homogeneously Anglo-Saxon-based, creating, not only experiences and tradition, but also language, from which a new culture can develop. Such a bond brings with it a potential to shape homogeneity. The recognition that East Asia is a shared marketplace for native-speaking English teachers marked a new point in the consciousness of the migration. Beginning in the 1990s, particularly following the economic crises of 1997, foreign, native-speaking English teachers discovered that there were qualifications and work experience recognized throughout the region in a way different from other parts of the world. Following the collapse of the won in South Korea, Taiwan was literally flooded with teachers trying to find a more stable economic climate. While this lop-sided situation has very much subsided to its original equilibrium, the knowledge that Taiwan combined a potentially lucrative market with a livable situation became widely understood. Like citizens of a nation that speaks a different language in its different regions, these teachers quickly realized that they could move effortlessly within the region as economic and personal condition changed, even more freely than citizens of the region.

The next major development in our cultural infrastructure was the linking of the Internet with this

developing consciousness about who inhabited the same world space. Without the information networks of typical migrant communities, the kind of information typically needed for immigrant life, e.g. information about jobs, living conditions, or social events, needed another forum. The emergence during the 1990s of the Internet as a practical means of personal communication provided this. Today, most of the essential facts of life in East Asia, ranging from the location of English-speaking businesses in one's neighborhood all the way to preparations needed for one's trip to Asia, can be found on Internet web sites dealing with East Asia.

Perhaps the most intriguing question does not concern what is happening to us now, but rather what will happen to our children. What will become of their sense of national identity? What role will language play in their lives? How will they fit into the social fabric where they live? There is an amazingly fertile ground for research. Once you can imagine that the native-speaking teacher of English in East Asia has more than just an educational focus, that it is also a social phenomenon, a migration in fact, an entire world of research possibilities opens up.

References

- Baldwin, Robert, Tain-jin Chen, and Douglas Nelson *Political Economy of US-Taiwan Trade* University of Michigan Press 1998.
- Barton, Josef. *Peasants and Strangers: Italians, Rumanians, and Slovaks in an American City, 1890-1950* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1975
- Bigelow, Pourtney *Japan and Her Colonies* London: Edward Arnold and Company, 1923.
- Burke, Ardath *The Modernizers: Overseas Students, Foreign Employees, and Meiji Japan* London: Westview Pres, 1985.
- Chan, Sucheng, European and Asian Immigration into the United States in Comparative Perspective, 1820s to 1920s in *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics* (ed Virginia Yans-McLaughlin) pp. 37-75 Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Foundation, New York 1990
- China Post, Illegal Americans Total Around 2,000 (Aug 2, 1993) p. 15.
- Chen, Su-chiao *The Spread of English in Taiwan: Changing Uses and Shifting Attitudes*. Taipei: Taiwan: The Crane Publishing Co., Ltd. Chen, 2001.
- Cinel, Dino *From Italy to San Francisco: The Immigrant Experience* Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1982.
- Dave's ESL Café Job Discussion Board <http://www.eslcafe.com/jd2/index.cgi> (2001)
- Johnson, Chalmers "Political Institutions and Economic Performance: The Government-Business Relationship in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan" in *The Political Economy of the New Asian Industrialism* by Frederic C. Deyo (pp. 136-164) Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Lai Tse-han, Ramon Myers, and Wou Wei. *A Tragic Beginning: The Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Lutz, Jessie Gregory *China and the Christian Colleges: 1850-1950* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971
- Park, Robert *Race and Culture* Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1950.
- Rubinger, Richard "Introduction" in *An American Scientist in Early Meiji Japan: The Autobiographical Notes of Thomas C. Mendenhall* by Thomas C. Mendenhall University of Hawaii Press, 1989

Sanchez-Alonso, Blanca, Those who left and those who stayed behind: Explaining emigration from the regions of Spain, 1880-1914 *Journal of Economic History* vol. 60 (3), pp. 730-755 (2000).

Yans-McLaughlin, Virginia *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics* New York: Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Foundation 1990.