

# Is English Really Necessary For Everyone: Japanese voices raised in opposition

*Robert W. Aspinall*  
*Shiga University*  
*Brian Cullen*  
*Nagoya Institute of Technology*

**PAC3**  
at  
**JALT**  
**2001**

**Conference**  
**Proceedings**



**International**  
**Conference**  
**Centre**

**Kitakyushu**  
**JAPAN**

**November**  
**22-25, 2001**

Because of the very nature of their job, language teachers are pleased when they see students successfully mastering a foreign language and become frustrated when they see other students falling short of their true potential in foreign language acquisition. English teachers in Japan, who usually focus on the day-to-day efforts of their students to improve their English language skills, understandably regard successful acquisition of these skills as an unqualified 'good thing'. Many of them would also probably argue that it would be unfair to confine this 'good thing' to only a small minority. However, there is a significant body of opinion in Japan that would disagree with this sentiment. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the work of two major Japanese scholars who are arguing that the Japanese people should cease their headlong rush into English language immersion.

外国語を習得した学生の姿を見るのは、語学教師にとって嬉しいものである。常に学生の英語力を向上に取り組んでいる英語教師は、学生の高い言語習得の際には無条件に「良い事柄」として考慮されるべきである。大多数の人は、これら「良い事柄」を少数のみに限定するのは不公平であると主張するだろう。しかしながら、日本にはこのセンチメンタルに反対する、大きな団体がある。本論文では、日

本人は向こう見ずに英語に没頭するのは止めるべきだと主張する2人の日本人学者の説を紹介し、それについてコメントをつけた。

**B**ecause of the very nature of their job, language teachers are pleased when they see students successfully mastering a foreign language and become frustrated when they see other students falling short of their true potential in foreign language acquisition. English teachers in Japan, who usually focus on the day-to-day efforts of their students to improve their English language skills, understandably regard successful acquisition of these skills as an unqualified ‘good thing’. Many of them would also probably argue that it would be unfair to confine this ‘good thing’ to only a small minority. Wouldn’t it be nice if as many Japanese people as possible could master English and receive all the benefits, joys and advantages that such mastery is said to bring? While there are many—both Japanese and foreign—who would answer ‘yes’ to this question, there is also a significant body of opinion in Japan that would answer in the negative. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the work of two major Japanese scholars who are arguing that the Japanese people should cease their headlong rush into English language immersion.

Professor Tsuda Yukio of Tskuba University and Professor Suzuki Takao of Keio University have

published widely their opinions that “English Worship” is a serious fault of the Japanese people. The devotion of many Japanese to the English language and to Western culture has led to a devaluation of their own language and culture. In spite of its position in the world as an economic giant, Japan still has a collective inferiority complex in its dealings with Western countries. Tsuda and Suzuki are calling for an end to the worship of all things Western and to a greater emphasis on respect for Japanese culture and language. This paper will focus on two recent books which outline in detail their theories on these matters. (These books are listed at the end of this paper.)

## **Suzuki Takao’s theory of the Japanese people’s attitude to the English language**

### *Historical Background*

During the Edo period Japan had almost no contact with the outside world. When this period ended the Japanese state found that it needed to communicate with powerful foreign nations, and it did so through the medium of the English, German and French languages. (After the Second World War, German and French declined in importance.) In world history, the language of a powerful nation is often forced upon the people of a less powerful nation, a process that often breeds resentment among the subject population. However, in the case of Japan, outside languages were seized upon

by the elite of that country as a way to further national development. The teaching of foreign languages was under the control of the Japanese themselves rather than of an alien, colonising power. Knowledge of Western languages became indispensable for Japan's economic and military growth, and this led to the glorification of these languages by the Japanese people. People who were proficient in these languages were given a special status, as were native speaking foreigners who were brought to Japan to teach.

The downside of the Japanese glorification of Western languages was the development of an inferiority complex about their own language. Over the years some Japanese leaders have suggested replacing Japanese with English and others have suggested replacing Kanji with Romaji. The most recent time when this was seriously considered was during the American Occupation of Japan after the Second World War.

Suzuki draws a distinction between *heteronomous* (sic) civilizations (dependent on receiving advanced knowledge and technology from abroad) and *autonomous* civilizations (where goods and knowledge are self-produced). He says that today Japan is in a period of transition: in terms of things and money it is autonomous, but in terms of spiritual matters it is still heteronomous.

### *Suzuki's Suggestions for Reform:*

1. Japan has been too concerned with taking information from the outside world. From now on it should focus more on expressing its own opinions and values to the world. So the future purpose of foreign language learning should be to help Japanese people express their own ideas to foreigners.
2. There should be more diversity in foreign language teaching. For example, if all the information Japan derives about the Islamic world comes from American or European sources this may create problems in relations between Japan and Islamic countries. Therefore some students should be encouraged to study non-European languages. (Before World War II Japan sent only 12 ambassadors abroad. Today it has about 115.)
3. At present, in English language lessons there is too much emphasis on the history and culture of Britain and America. This should be excluded from language lessons, as should 'English for international understanding'. The purpose of English lessons in senior high schools should be to learn how to speak about Japan in English. At university, English should be learned from English translations of Japanese texts.
4. English should be an optional subject. Only those who really want to study it should take it.

Ordinary Japanese people do not really need the advanced skills of international communication.

Suzuki adds that reform of foreign language education is difficult because university staff will always defend their own departments.

### *The Dangers of Self-colonization*

Suzuki urges Japanese people to overcome their introverted lifestyle and their psychological state of self-colonization. He argues that it would be a tragedy if Japan just became a “small America”. It would not only be good for Japan to resist this, but it would be good for the cause of cultural diversity worldwide. Japan is no longer a small, backward country. It is now a great country but its people still have the psychological conditioning of a minor power. Suzuki believes that this situation is a real tragedy for Japan.

### **Tsuda Yukio and *Eigo Shinkou* in Japan**

The title of Tsuda’s book, *Eigo Beta no Susume*, can be translated as “A Recommendation for Bad English”, but it is the sub-title, “Let’s Get Rid of English Worship”, that provides the focus. In Tsuda’s view, *Eigo Shinkou* (English worship) is a form of sickness afflicting Japan. This sickness is evident in the ubiquitous nature of English in Japan, even in situations where it is totally unnecessary. All of society is afflicted, but the worst

offenders are young people, the mass media, academics, companies, and government offices. This sickness arises because Japan keeps reliving the defeat of the Second World War and inducing self-colonisation. As a good example of this sickness, Tsuda cites the proposal to adopt English as a second official language.

Another example of *Eigo Shinkou* is found in the obsession with *Yaku Ni Tatsu Eigo* (useful English). *Yaku Ni Tatsu Eigo* (YNTE) is generally contrasted with the English taught in high schools and the English studied to pass university entrance exams. The ideology of YNTE assumes that this education English is not useful. This incorrect notion perversely leads to the commercialisation of education and lowering of standards as universities transform themselves into *eikaiwa* schools. Education should not be viewed simply as a tool—it should enrich us spiritually.

Another serious problem of *Eigo Shinkou* is the manner in which it glorifies the native speaker (*gaijin shinkou*). Following the ideas of Chomsky, this is sometimes justified by people who claim that the native speaker is needed to judge whether an English utterance is right and wrong.

### *Who buys and sells Eigo Shinkou?*

Tsuda claims that women are the main consumers of *Eigo Shinkou*. Many Japanese women feel that they can have more equality with foreigners and become willing

accomplices to foreigners in the crime of *Eigo Shinkou*. However, Tsuda believes that these women are actually sending a subconscious message to Japanese men. They want Japanese men to be stronger and to treat them better.

The main vendors of *Eigo Shinkou* are *chishiki-jin* (people of knowledge.) These are people with ‘knowledge’ of foreign cultures, who spread this knowledge through books or the mass media. Most of them portray everything foreign as good and everything Japanese as bad. For example, Tsuda criticizes Rinbo (Hayashi Nozomu), the author of ‘igirisu ha oishii’ (England is delicious) claiming that Rinbo is blind to any of the bad points of England. Tsuda claims that Rinbo is simply reinforcing tradition and the status quo. By talking about the great traditions of England and even everyday matters such as fish and chips in a very elaborate style, he is trying to reinforce his own upbringing and status. Similarly, a *chishiki-jin* who encourages worship of the United States is usually trying to boost his own reputation through association with something more powerful.

### *Criticizing the acceptance of English as an international language*

For many years, Tsuda has been a strong opponent of linguistic imperialism. In this book, he reiterates his argument that it leads to unfairness in international

communication. English speaking countries have a huge advantage, especially in expressing opinions, and they can control international meetings while non-English speakers face discrimination and domination. Tsuda also criticizes the concept of international or world English(es) claiming that Japanese English, Indian English, and other varieties will never really be accepted. Instead, world Englishes will be swallowed by US/British English.

Instead of embracing English blindly, Japan should lead an international movement to protect language rights. English domination is leading to the destruction of the world language environment in the same way that American consumerism is destroying the physical environment, and it is the duty of a major country like Japan to protect the language rights of smaller countries.

Although some people say that “English is only a tool,” and that it poses no threat to identity, Tsuda reminds us that language, culture, thought, and psychological structure are all deeply linked, so it is not simply the replacement of one language by another. We cannot truly express ourselves in another language and the current international situation leads to a serious denial of human rights.

### *Escaping from Eigo Shinkou*

Tsuda believes that being bad at English is natural for Japanese and not something to be ashamed of. On

the contrary, Japan was never a colony and the people are very homogenous, and having a single universal language is a blessing that should not be thrown away. Indeed, *Eigo beta* (being bad at English) is much better than *Eigo Shinkou*. For if we think about it, the worship of English arises because Japanese people are scared of English. This fear leads to love in the same way that a hostage may have more sympathy for the hostage-taker than for the people trying to carry out a rescue. It is far more important to have pride in yourself than to speak English, and Japanese people must choose their own position in the world, rather than be coerced into some other position through fear.

To get away from *Eigo Shinkou*, Tsuda gives some very specific measures for both the Japanese government and for individuals. The Japanese government must:

1. Abolish compulsory English education at university.
2. Introduce a variety of languages at JHS/SHS/University.
3. Improve the accountability of *eikaiwa* schools through regulation.
4. Introduce more specialized English in university which is suited to the students' area of specialization instead of general English.
5. Introduce *Nihongo* (Japanese) as a required subject at university; this should be taught by ex-English teachers.

Individuals must:

1. Communicate with foreigners in Japan in Japanese.
2. Have pride in *Nihongo*.
3. Use English only when necessary and avoid being used by English.
4. Remember *Eigo Beta* is better than *Eigo Shinkou*; you can feel more positive about yourself.

## Conclusion

In the long-term, the role of English in Japan and the role of Japan in the world are important questions of Japanese identity which must be addressed. The development of this identity will have deep implications for the education system of Japan and for language teachers working within it. One of the major questions to be answered is whether English is really necessary for everyone. Rather than leaving this debate to those immersed in *Eigo Shinkou* or to the ultra-nationalists of Japan, it is important that this becomes a more widely debated issue in English education circles. Tsuda and Suzuki have been developing their ideas for many years and are not isolated writers. While their ideas draw on much of the current international debate on linguistic imperialism, they also represent some ideas that are uniquely Japanese. Many foreign teachers in Japan are unaware of the strong feelings against the unchecked spread of English which are held in certain quarters

of Japanese society. It would be a good thing for our profession if more teachers had a better understanding of Japanese attitudes towards a language that is simultaneously an object of yearning and an object of fear.

### Resources

- Suzuki T. (1999). *Nihonjin ha naze Eigo ha dekinai ka?* [Why are Japanese People no good at English?] Iwanami Shinsho.
- Tsuda, Y. (2000). *Eigo Beta No Susume: Eigo Shinkou ha mou suteyou.* [A Recommendation for Bad English: Let's Get Rid of English Worship] Wani no New Shin sho.