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JALT2022 Plenary Speaker • Ryoko Tsuneyoshi

English and Intercultural Understanding in Japan: Elementary School English Reexamined

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With the recent reforms to the Course of Study in Japan, foreign language (English) was established as a subject in elementary school in the upper grades. In addition, Grades 3 and 4 are to practice what is called foreign language (English) activities. I point out that "foreign language" and "English" are used interchangeably in this process, illuminating the problematic assumptions that are being made. Such assumptions, it is argued, support a monocultural, monoethnic view of Japanese society, and thus present problems in trying to construct its multicultural vision. In particular, I argue that the framing of foreign language activities/foreign language as English disadvantages the major "foreigners" or ethnic minority groups in Japan (e.g., Koreans in Japan and Brazilians of Japanese descent), who are not associated with English-speaking countries. I argue that this and other related assumptions go against the goals of foreign language activities emphasizing international understanding and are detrimental to constructing Japanese society as multicultural, with people from various cultural backgrounds residing together in the community and society.

The Confusing State of Elementary School English Education

It is not difficult to notice that English has a special status among foreign languages in Japan (though the emphasis on English is not limited to Japan). The dominance of English is not surprising, given that English is often referred to as the language of the "international society," and is a core component of entrance examinations at various levels. In a series of amendments to the Course of Study, the elementary school curriculum for 5th and 6th grades now includes English as a subject. Elementary school English is still in a transitional stage, and its shape changes with every revision to the Course of Study. Such changes illuminate assumptions that Japanese society has of "English," some of which may be problematic.

First, in elementary school English, what is meant by "English" education is not altogether clear. To give an example, in the changes to the Course of

Study announced in 1998 (starting in 2002), it became possible to practice "foreign language conversation" as part of learning about international understanding (*kokusai rikai*) within the new Period for Integrated Studies in the 3rd grade and above. Here, "foreign language" was linked to international understanding, to exposure to foreign culture and language, and experiential learning of other cultures. However, as soon as this move was made public, the media started reporting that "English" is now starting at elementary school.

If using "foreign language" and "English" interchangeably—since English is certainly not synonymous with foreign languages—was the media interpretation, then this could be construed as bias. The reality is, however, that the terms have been used interchangeably everywhere, public documents included. It is common to find discussions only on English education, despite the fact that the title is "elementary foreign language education," and "foreign language activities," even in public documents. As the discussions become concrete about what to teach, it becomes clear that "foreign language" is largely, if not entirely, English. The first supplementary teaching material for foreign language activities from the government to elementary schools in 2009 was already named "English Note."

As noted above, elementary school English in the 1990s was situated as part of international understanding in the Period for Integrated Studies. However, in the revisions announced in 2008 (starting from 2011), foreign language activities became compulsory in 5th and 6th grade. In the Course of Study starting from 2020, foreign language in the upper grades became a foreign language subject (English). Thus, there is now foreign (English) language activities in the 3rd and 4th grades, followed by foreign language (English) as a subject. Both "foreign" languages are actually English courses, but one is "activities", and one is a "subject."

What distinguishes foreign language (English) "activities" and foreign language (English) as a "subject"? Judging from government guidelines, the former is speaking and listening, communicating with others experientially, while the latter includes writing and reading, and English as a skill.

In this revision, foreign language activities will be introduced from the middle grades of elementary school to familiarize pupils with foreign languages and to increase their motivation to learn foreign languages through activities focusing on listening and speaking. In the following grades (5th and 6th grades), depending on their stage of development, schools should introduce "reading" and "writing," advancing comprehensive and systematic subject learning, and to take care to connect to junior high school (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2017, p. 7).

The distinction may be confusing for teachers, especially elementary school teachers who in general do not have high English skills. In addition, there are many explanations issued by prefectures on the web, clarifying the difference between foreign language as a subject and foreign language as activities.[1]

Moreover, the interchangeability of "foreign language" and "English" without stating it explicitly makes it possible to switch meanings conveniently depending on the context. When foreign language activities are discussed in a context in which diversity is important, like being exposed to other cultures and languages, the term "foreign language activities" can be used as indicating multiple languages. When the context is about meeting global demands, or about acquiring skills in a certain language, however, "foreign language" can be dropped and replaced by "English."

The Irony of "Foreign Language" Activities in Japan

Using foreign language/foreign activities and English/English activities interchangeably has unintended consequences when seen from a multicultural viewpoint.

We have seen that the framework of "foreign languages" as part of the Period for Integrated Studies emphasized international understanding, "exposing" children to language and foreign culture. However, as soon as this period was established, all across Japan, foreign language activities became English activities, since it was possible to frame it that way, and children around Japan were seen engaging in English games and songs and exchanging simple conversations with an Assistant English Teacher (AET).

The irony of this was that, as foreign language activities which were supposed to expose children to various cultures and languages became, in reality, English activities, this went against the stated goals of the program in some ways.

For example, at the time foreign language activities started to be practiced in elementary schools, the author was advising a school district in the Kanto area which had a high number of ethnic minorities—Koreans in Japan and some Brazilians (Kaneko et al., 2001).

1 Here are some examples from Nara Prefecture (http://www.pref.nara.jp/secure/39251/2908setsumei_syogaikatu2.pdf) and Oita Prefecture (https://www.pref.oita.jp/uploaded/attachment/2031386.pdf).

Brazilian residents who had been introducing Japanese children to Brazilian culture and Portuguese using the Japanese language found that schools increasingly told them to use English to introduce their culture in foreign language activities, which had become, in reality, English activities. Since the Brazilians did not come from an English-speaking country, ironically, opportunities to introduce their culture to Japanese children narrowed—despite their importance as a major newcomer population in Japanese society.

The foreign residents who were best able to cope with this new emphasis on introducing their culture in English were those who spoke English. *Who were these foreign guest speakers who were fluent in English?* Those who came from English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United States, and Australia, as well as those who came from countries that were former colonies of English-speaking countries, or those who had studied abroad in an English-speaking country.

A case in point was a time when the author was an international education advisor for the school district mentioned above, and schools started to look for a Korean in Japan who could introduce their culture in the English activities. The teachers soon found that it was extremely difficult to find a Korean in Japan who spoke English. The only person in this category they could find was a Korean in Japan who had gone abroad to an English-speaking country.

Lessons Lost

What is described in the section above suggests that in the process of advancing English without a multicultural outlook, there is a danger that elementary school foreign language activities (and language as a subject) could overlook crucial lessons, perhaps the most important lessons related to "exposing" Japanese children to different cultures (Tsuneyoshi, 2018; Tsuneyoshi et al., 2011).

In the first example, by requiring the Brazilian guest speakers to present in English, the fact that many major "foreigners" or ethnic minorities in Japan do not originate from English-speaking countries, and the reality of their importance in constructing a Japanese multicultural society, were overlooked. Brazilians of Japanese descent are a major group of so-called newcomers, and Koreans in Japan are a major oldcomer population. Neither group originates from English-speaking countries.

In the second example, since most Koreans in Japan attend Japanese schools, and the English ability of Japanese is generally low, it is to be expected that, generally, Koreans in Japan and Japanese nationals who have attended the same Japanese schools would have similar English abilities.

The problematic assumption behind the above-stated examples is that they imply that "foreigners" can speak (or should be able to speak) English, suggesting that foreigners are visitors who come and go, and are not long-term members of Japanese society. The multicultural vision of Japanese society, in which ethnic minorities and long-term residents who are different from the majority live side-by-side with the majority Japanese as equal neighbors, gets lost in this process.

Another disturbing aspect of the new emphasis on speaking in English to introduce foreign culture is that because of the extremely limited English skills of the Japanese children, the guest speaker cannot explain much in English. Thus, talking about topics such as ethnicity and religion is extremely difficult, if not impossible, using elementary English. In favor of such "difficult" content, easier material such as showing items, singing, and playing games in English, and so on, is what has become prevalent during these foreign language (English) activities, especially since "exposure" and experiential activities are emphasized.

Conclusion

In this short piece, I have tried to shed light on some of the challenges linked to elementary school foreign language (English) and foreign language (English) activities in light of constructing Japan as a multicultural society. In some ways, foreign language and foreign language activities seemed to add to the problem of the dominance of a monocultural, monoethnic view of Japanese society rather than adding to the solution.

Elementary school English, as it is constructed at the moment, seems to support the image that "foreigners," especially those that "look" foreign, are outsiders, coming and going, communicating in English, not in Japanese. In effect, it seems to favor short-term "visitors" from English-speaking countries, disregarding the fact that the vast majority of "foreigners" in Japan who live for extended periods as residents, and ethnic Japanese in Japan, have their origins in non-English speaking countries.

The responsibility, of course, is not in the language itself but in the way it is used. It remains to be seen whether the future of elementary school English will develop to support a more diverse vision of society.

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JALT2022 Plenary Speaker • Karen Hill Anton

Crossing Cultures: A Personal Journey

Karen Hill Anton

Setting out as a teenager to uncover the world beyond my New York City neighborhood, my cross-cultural journey began more than a half-century ago. In the decades since, my worldwide travels have been as much a journey of self-discovery as geographical and cultural exploration. The process of learning from and embracing other cultures has been for me a transformation, one in which I have gained a wider view of the world and my place in it. I think of this as the reward for living and learning cross-culturally. In my talk I will share what I have learned and what I have found of value in transcending the limits and limiting labels of identity, nationality, and ethnicity. By chance and by choice, and with a sincere desire to cultivate connection, my journey has culminated in Japan. I accept that with my urban sensibilities and cosmopolitan outlook in my rural community, I will always stand out. Still, having lived with my family continuously in the countryside of Shizuoka Prefecture since 1975, I will share what I have learned about fitting in. This talk will be illustrated with personal vintage photographs. My narration will include the insights and faux pas that highlight my experience of acculturation.

A Lifelong Journey of Crossing Cultures

I traveled to Japan in an unconventional way: I drove here, overland from Europe. Along with my husband and then 5-year-old daughter, we toured most of western Europe before driving border to border across Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. We would later take public transportation to travel through Pakistan, India, Thailand, and Nepal. We were on the road for one year before arriving in Japan on June 1, 1975.

It was fascinating to cross boundaries between countries and realize one of the first lessons of crossing borders and cultures: There is no sharp line that separates one country from another the way it is viewed on a map. Rather, the change is gradual. Traveling overland, I saw the West literally blend into the East.

Many people have asked me if it was difficult traveling with a child, but we had no difficulties whatsoever. While some people might be concerned their child was missing school, we felt our daughter was learning lessons she might never learn in school. And I hope the most important one is that all people are basically alike. Not in their cultures, surely, but certainly in their humanity. I hope she learned that most people are kind and helpful, and that the world we call Earth is a wonderful and exciting place, full of endless lessons. Settling in Japan, I would come to embrace the reality that I too had embarked on a lifelong journey of learning. Although I was not always aware or prepared, in time, I would come to accept those endless lessons as a gift.

I had the opportunity to share my acculturation experiences with the readers of my "Crossing Cultures" column in *The Japan Times* (1990-1999). Men and women, newcomers, and longtime residents were eager to know about this New Yorker's experience of living and raising children in the Japanese countryside. Especially, they were interested to