

Ideologies¹ of English Language Education in Japan

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If English has not always been taught in Japan as a language of international communication, then why and how has it been taught? This paper discusses three non-communicative purposes which have motivated state-sponsored English education in modern Japan, together with their ideological underpinnings. They are: 1) English as a classical language; 2) English as an inverted image of Japanese; and 3) English as a set of arbitrary rules. It is argued that these motives are now archaic but still largely continue to determine methods of study. Finally, specific suggestions are offered concerning the implications of these ideological traditions for current efforts toward communicative reform.

これまで、日本において、英語は、つねに国際コミュニケーションのための言語として教えられてきたわけではないとすると、なぜ、どのようにして教えられてきたのだろうか。本稿は、近代日本において、公教育における英語教育の動機づけとなった三つのコミュニカティブではない目的と、そのイデオロギー的基盤を論じる。これらの目的とは、古典としての英語、日本語の逆イメージとしての英語、恣意的規則の集合としての英語、である。これらの目的はすでに時代遅れとなっているにもかかわらず、いまだに学習法の決定に大きく影響している。最後に、これらのイデオロギー上の伝統が、英語教育をコミュニケーションを重視するものに変えようとする人たちにとって、どのような意味を持つかについて、具体的な考えが示される。

Most readers of the *JALT Journal* would probably agree readily to the proposition that English as a foreign language should be taught primarily for the purpose of communication, though they would perhaps find it harder to agree on what precisely that means. What, then, does it mean to teach language for non-communicative purposes? At first glance, "for non-communicative purposes" might seem simply another way of saying "for no purpose whatever," but when particular cases and contexts are considered, it becomes apparent that there are indeed other valid reasons for teaching foreign languages apart from that of communication. This paper is particularly concerned with

the public purposes and aims associated with a national education system, rather than the personal motives and objectives of individual learners and teachers, a distinction developed by Holliday (1994a, pp. 69-91 & 1994b). If English has not always been taught in Japan as a language of international communication, then what has it been taught as? Three alternative motives put forward here are: English as a classical language; English as an inverted image of Japanese; and English as a set of arbitrary rules. After a necessarily brief description of the ideological traditions indicated by these headings, the paper offers a number of specific suggestions concerning their implications for current efforts toward communicative reform in Japanese schools.

Three non-communicative motives

English as a classical language

Two separate but related ideas are intended here by the term 'classical': first that English has been seen in Japan not so much as a neutral vehicle of international communication, but rather as a repository of especially valuable forms and meanings, in the same way that, in Renaissance Europe, Latin and ancient Greek were seen as superior codes to the vulgar tongues of contemporary culture, such as English or French; and second, and as a consequence, that English has tended to be perceived as a channel of one-way communication, that is, for the reception of Western ideas but not for the transmission of Japanese ideas to the outside world.

This approach probably originated with the shock of Japan's abrupt encounter in the middle of the nineteenth century, after a long period of isolation, with the economic and technological superiority of Western industrialist/imperialist states. Romantic nationalism, often articulated as a ruthlessly competitive Social Darwinism, was then the prevailing European ideology, and this provided a remarkably appropriate vehicle for Japan's own urgent desires to 'catch up' (Weiner, 1994, pp. 7-37). It should be recalled that a serious proposal was put forward at the time of the Meiji Restoration that, in order to speed up the pace of modernization, Japanese be abandoned and English adopted as the national language (Miller 1982, pp. 107-9). Not surprisingly this suggestion was not taken up, but it did reflect the primary purpose behind the gradual setting up of systems for English-language education in Japan—the construction of a route for direct access to the knowledge and skills of the world's then dominant industrial nations, Great Britain and the United States.

The most obvious evidence remaining within Japanese English-language education of the concept of English as a classical language is the

prevalence of *yakudoku* (translation reading) as a method of classroom instruction. Though often mistakenly rendered as 'grammar translation', recalling the dominant method of foreign language teaching in the grammar schools of nineteenth-century Europe with its focus on the isolated sentence, *yakudoku* more accurately reflects an earlier European scholastic tradition of classical hermeneutics, and in fact derives from methods of decoding ancient Chinese texts developed in Japan many centuries ago. In its most explicit version it is a three-stage operation, involving first a word-by-word translation of the target sentence, then a reordering of the words thus derived, and finally a recoding into Japanese syntax (Hino 1988, pp. 48-50). It reflects the classical assumptions in that it focuses more on understanding the valued contents of the translated text than on mastering the codes of the language itself, and in that it is concerned predominantly with the one-way transmission of ideas from the foreign language. *Yakudoku* undoubtedly constitutes a rigorous mental discipline that can be argued to have an educational value comparable to that associated with the study of Classics in post-Renaissance Europe. However, there is little doubt that it introduces marked distortions and inefficiencies (and not only in reading) if language learning is viewed in communicative terms.

English as an inverted image of Japanese

By this are intended two things: first, that modern Japanese ideology has often seen the world in dualistic terms in which English-language culture serves as its own negative image; and secondly and consequently, that much of the effort apparently dedicated to the teaching of a second language, English, may more accurately be seen as training in the use of the students' first language, Japanese. This may help to explain the greater educational weight that is often given in Japan to foreign-language study over native-language study, sometimes at the level of the curriculum itself and usually at the level of competitive examinations. Given that there is no convincing evidence of any intrinsic relationship between foreign-language skills and general academic ability, this imbalance may in part reflect the classical value assigned to English. However, it also suggests the possibility that in Japan teaching a foreign language may often function as an indirect, displaced method of teaching the mother tongue itself.

Even today Japanese ideology often retains the concept (which can again be traced back to German Romanticism) that a people's language is the embodiment of the spirit of the race or nation. In the 1930s the term *kotodama* (literally, language-soul) was used to appropriate this idea for

the purposes of ultranationalist propaganda (Miller, 1982, pp. 91-101). The term conventionally used within the educational curriculum and elsewhere for the native-language of Japan, *kokugo* (national language), can sometimes still carry an echo of this usage; *nibongo* (Japanese language) is something, perhaps something different, that outsiders learn. Viewed from the inside, the diversity of other languages and cultures is often simply collapsed into the uniformity of what is not-us, outside, strange—*mukō* or 'over there'. The world becomes a binary choice of us and them. The USA can stand for that which is not Japan. Non-European cultures and languages can be largely erased from popular consciousness—the term *gaikokujin* (foreigner) is frequently only used to refer to Westerners. According to this mythology, the Japanese and English languages can stand as opposites, as self and other. Thus, the study of English often can function not so much as a window on to a world elsewhere, but as a mirror reflecting back the Japanese self-image (Pinnington, 1986, pp. 3-12).

The practice of *yakudoku* in many ways reproduces this reflexive process. Its effect is to turn the foreign-language text precisely inside out; the focus of attention is only initially on the codes of the foreign language; most of the productive energy of the method is directed towards the recoded Japanese version. At the end of the translation class, students are left with a text in their native language to contemplate and review. Preparation for the translation exam will often come down to memorization of this recoded version; the original alien code will have been largely displaced from view; the effective educational content may be largely limited to training in the student's native language.

English as a set of arbitrary rules

By this is intended not Saussure's general concept of the arbitrary nature of the sign (Culler, 1976, pp. 19-23), but the way in which, within the education system, linguistic forms can be isolated from their semantic functions and assigned to be learnt as discrete items of knowledge. Such English-language knowledge in fact has come to have a special significance within the Japanese educational hierarchy, which can be explained at least in part by the ideological values of obedience and merit.

Unquestioning loyalty and obedience to authority were key qualities inculcated by the school system which developed under the Meiji Constitution following the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 (Gluck, 1985, pp. 147-56), and a residue of its Confucian ideology remains today. Even after the promulgation of the new education system after the war, the priority given by the Ministry of Education to the cultivation of 'public' values such as cooperation and diligence over 'private' values

such as self-expression or self-fulfillment, means that obedience has remained central during a period in which its value has increasingly been questioned or undermined in Western education.

Over the same period the desire to 'catch up' has helped to encourage a rigorously meritocratic and egalitarian sense within the education system, which is echoed in the uniformity of both the centralized school curriculum itself and the broader educational experience of Japanese children. True obedience shows itself best when the behavior required could have no other motive; and prior advantages in education due to wealth or background can apparently be circumvented if what is to be taught and tested represents a closed system of new information. These two ideological factors—obedience and egalitarianism—together have tended to encourage the teaching of English in Japanese schools as a complex set of formalistic rules divorced from their operational value within a communicative context. This is most visible in testing procedures.

The conventional nature of tests of English used both by selective institutions (principally universities and private high schools) in accepting new entrants, and within schools to measure achievement, gives the clearest evidence of this emphasis. What is generally termed *jūken eigo* (examination English) has often been characterized by the principle that the less generative a rule is, the more likely it is to appear on the test sheet. *Jūken eigo* exhibits a strong preference for lists of language items over discursive texts, for peripheral over core forms, and for linguistic knowledge over linguistic performance. *Jūken benkyō* (preparing for such examinations) tends to become the paradigm of all foreign language study. Even when the examinations themselves begin gradually to encourage more communicative skills, the habit of mind among students preparing for examinations is so strong that there is a considerable lag before study habits change. Law (1994, pp. 96-101) makes this point in more detail with reference to the case of university entrance examinations in English.

The non-communicative motives as archaic

The three non-communicative purposes in English-language education in Japan outlined above are not intended to be seen as worthless or pointless. They have clearly matched deeply-felt needs in Japanese society and have helped to direct and justify an enormous expenditure of money and time and energy into foreign-language education. As such, their effect has been positive in large part. Perhaps the worst that we can say about them is that, as ideology, they are characterized by a

significant degree of myth and self-contradiction. But then it would be disingenuous to pretend that the concept of 'English as a language of international communication' is itself entirely free of ideology. At the extreme, it can harbor memories of empire or dreams of hegemony, providing a thin disguise for the idea of 'English as the language of the world' (Phillipson, 1992, pp. 17-37).

However, the most telling argument against the three 'non-communicative' purposes is that the ideology that underlies them is now archaic, that it no longer addresses real social relations within Japan, or Japan's external relations with other states and cultures. The three ideologies have their origins in different historical moments: the notion of 'English as a classical language' derives from the early Meiji era; 'English as an inverted image of Japanese' corresponds most closely to the period of pre-war nationalism; and 'English as a set of arbitrary rules' best fits the reconstruction of the post-war years. But ideology does not fit neatly into discrete periods; it is often prefigured; it often leaves residues. Yet it is apparent that the non-communicative purposes outlined here no longer meet a felt need or provide an effective motivation among the generation of students that we now teach.

In the first case, the concept of English as a classical language, it is now beyond question that, by any economic or technological criteria, Japan passed the stage of 'catching up'. In addition, any cultural arguments for the superiority of the American or British way now look much less convincing than they might have a generation or two ago. From either perspective, the image of English as a repository of superior values is distinctly tarnished.

In the second case, the concept of English as a negative image of Japanese, the underlying dualistic view of the world on which this rests also looks increasingly irrelevant to Japan's real position in the international community. Even if we find former President Bush's heralding of a 'new world order' premature, geo-political realities have clearly shifted significantly in recent years. If the concept of *kokusaiika* (internationalization) recently in vogue in Japan still remains vaguely defined, it does seem as though Japan has now at last begun the urgent task of re-establishing its self-identity in a more positive relationship to Asia.

In the third case, English as a set of arbitrary rules, the use of English test scores as a gauge of obedience and merit, far from encouraging cooperation and equality, now looks distinctly unfair and divisive. As increasing numbers of Japanese families have the opportunity to live abroad and experience foreign languages as communicative resources, their offspring are clearly likely to inherit an enormous advantage in the

race for educational advancement. In addition, paying for the privilege of access to prestigious private and preparatory schools has for some time seemed to offer a better prospect for examination success than mere diligence. The recognition of the injustice of these arrangements will have an increasingly negative impact on the Japanese education system unless changes are made.

All three of the non-communicative purposes have by now lost much or all of their power to motivate. Yet they leave behind them a legacy—a set of teaching priorities and procedures which over time have become stiff and inflexible, and which now create considerable resistance to the introduction of new purposes and methods. This in itself has significant implications for the communicative reforms which are currently being encouraged by the Ministry of Education and attempted by many progressive teachers. For these reforms to be efficient and effective, they must address the specific issues of English-language ideology in Japan, and not ground themselves in theories imported from other cultural situations or in naive idealism.

Suggestions towards communicative reform

The ministry's new policy on foreign language education is formally contained in the new School Course Guidelines (*gakushū shidō yōryō*) for Foreign Languages promulgated in 1989, and introduced in junior and senior high schools in academic years 1992 and 1994 respectively. They make the fostering of communication skills and international understanding the fundamental aims of foreign language education; second, they define the specific objectives and contents of all the different stages and courses primarily in terms of linguistic behavior (forms of discourse or language activity) and only secondarily in terms of linguistic knowledge (lists of structures, words, etc.); third, at the high school level they introduce three new courses in Aural/Oral Communication (broadly focusing on informal conversation, listening comprehension, and formal speaking respectively), elective but with the directive that at least one should be taken by all students. (The Guidelines for English Language themselves are available in Ministry of Education [1989], and in an English version in an appendix to Ministry of Education [1994, pp. 98-115], while the new Aural/Oral Communication courses, in particular, are described and criticized in detail in Goold, Madeley & Carter [1993a, 1993b, 1994]).²

While welcoming the broad intent of these reforms we must note briefly a number of unresolved issues. First, within the Guidelines for Foreign Languages, the specific descriptions of the course contents for

particular years and subjects often seem to use concepts and terminology drawn from communicative theory in a mechanical and formalistic way, with little regard for the likely range of real communicative needs among Japanese school children. For example, the frequently employed term *genko katsudō* (language activities) almost always refers to the use of one of the 'four skills' in isolation, rather than to integrated or interactive uses of language. Second, despite an emphasis on pronunciation skills at junior high level and the specific directive concerning the Aural/Oral Communication courses at senior high level, the 1989 Guidelines have little power to require schools to give more weight to aural/oral skills. Given the intense pressure from competitive entrance examinations with their very different priorities, such reforms might easily prove merely cosmetic. Finally, it must be remembered that revisions in the Guidelines, welcome or otherwise, are only the beginning of a process where, even in a centralized education system like that in Japan, the real work of methodological reform remains in the hands of the schools and teachers themselves. In this regard, five proposals are now offered, in outline rather than in detail, which derive directly or indirectly from the foregoing discussion and which might assist in the transition towards a more communicative basis for English-language teaching and learning within the Japanese national education system.

A) On communication and grammar. Much of the thinking generated in Western ELT circles under the rubric of the 'Communicative Approach' is written in reaction to the previous dominant methodology, that is audio-lingualism or other forms of structuralism. The situation in Japan, however, is very different. Despite the efforts of, among others, Harold E. Palmer (see Yamamoto, 1978) it is clear that oral methods have never really taken a strong foothold here; as a method *yakudoku* lacks the structural focus of grammar translation; and *jūken eigo* is less about the core generative structures of the language, than about idioms and irregularities. In consequence, if current reforms wish to increase accuracy and fluency in spoken English, they will probably have to lend a much more sympathetic ear to the claims of structuralist methodology than is evident in contemporary American and European theory. Even the introduction of the oral sequence traditional in audio-lingual methods, of repetition and transformation drills followed by guided and free practice, might in some cases still represent a progressive step. Ellis (1991) arrives at a similar conclusion from a rather different standpoint.

B) On communication and conversation. In the present situation, it would be a mistake to interpret the concept of communication in a

narrow sense to mean merely oral exchange. Reading and writing are no less communicative acts than conversation (Hones & Law, 1989, pp. 6-8). In Japan, given the nature of the *yakudoku* tradition, the development and dissemination of alternative communicative reading methodologies is a vital step in the process of reform (Hino, 1988, pp. 52-3). A significant improvement in reading speed would certainly also assist more generally towards increasing students' momentum in processing and producing meaningful language sequences. This would seem to be a prerequisite for a breakthrough into effective spoken communication.

C) On communication and games. There is also a danger within the 'Communicative Approach,' perhaps due to the reaction to the behavioristic and mechanistic aspects of structural and audio-lingual approaches, of reducing the concept of communication to 'fun and games'. Learning can be fun but it will often be arduous. Games can be communicative but they are often highly formalistic. The existing traditions of foreign-language teaching in Japan have often seen themselves as a key element of a broader cultural study, and that is something that communicative reformers should be anxious to retain. There is a danger of a trivialization of the contents of language teaching occurring in the guise of methodological innovation. Language teaching in the public school curriculum ought to be able to justify itself in broader educational terms than mere utility.

D) On cultural content. However, it would be wise to reduce the emphasis in text books and other teaching materials on English as a reflection or repository of British and American cultural values, and instead put more weight on less culture-specific topics such as natural or social science or on the international role of the language in business, diplomacy, scholarship, sport, and the arts. The idea that effective learning of English must be accompanied by an understanding of Anglo-American culture can also be seen as a construct of Romantic mythology. In this regard it would be helpful if the range of English native speakers welcomed in Japanese schools could be broadened to include a more generous representation of those from outside England and the United States, and in particular native speakers of English from Asian nations such as Singapore or India.

E) On the roles of Japanese and foreign teachers. It may be necessary to rethink and rework the existing division of labor between native and non-native teachers of English within the educational system. As Hones & Law (1989, p.8) argue, that operating at present often seems to reinforce the conventional division in Japanese between *eigo* (English lan-

guage) and *eikaiwa* (English conversation) which only makes sense within the old ideological order, where English can only be fully understood via its alter ego Japanese. This has implications both for team-teaching operations in the school system like the JET scheme and oral English components in the college curriculum. Unless and until we see greater numbers of native-speaker teachers involved in teaching reading skills, for example, and of non-native speaker teachers seeing it as a primary duty to teach oral skills, it will be difficult to convince students that all are engaged in the same enterprise, and that communication skills are not marginal aspects of language learning.

Conclusions

Holliday's general discussion (1994a, pp. 160-78) of the challenges of creating communicative language teaching methodology appropriate to national education systems has a direct application to the situation in Japan. Current attempts to introduce communicative purposes and methods into school and university English classes seem likely to achieve a much higher degree of success if they start from an understanding of the nature of the ideology that underlies many of the practices that have become habitual in English-language education in Japan. At the same time, this will involve a recognition that communicative approaches are not in themselves value-free, but require an ideological underpinning that is genuinely internationalist and that must at least in part be consciously constructed.

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Notes

1. The term "ideology" is intended throughout more in the weak, neutral sense of a form of thought common to a particular society or social group, than in the strong sense of an explicit political philosophy or the pejorative senses of false consciousness or fanatical theory. On these distinctions, see Williams,

- 1983, pp. 153-7, and Gluck, 1985, pp. 6-9.
2. It should be noted that the in-depth analysis of the new Guidelines for Senior High School English in Goold, Madeley & Carter (1993a, 1993b, 1994) is to some extent confused by the failure to distinguish, in both citation and discussion, between the Guidelines themselves and the detailed commentary on them by the panel of educational experts commissioned by the Ministry included with the Guidelines.

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