LANGUAGE TEACHING IN BRITAIN AND JAPAN: A PERSONAL VIEW

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Abstract

This article expresses the author's personal experiences and feelings concerning language learning and teaching in a variety of contexts in Britain and Japan. Along with this, some of the contemporary criticisms made of language teaching in both countries are reviewed and discussed. Although the language teaching process in Japan is generally viewed in a critical light, it is suggested that there are a number of ways in which improvements might be made.

Introduction

In England we have a method that for obtaining the least possible result at the greatest possible expenditure of time and money is perhaps unequalled. An English boy who has been through a good middle-class school in England can talk to a Frenchman, slowly and with difficulty, about female gardeners and aunts; conversation which, to a man possessed perhaps of neither is liable to pall. Possibly, if he be a bright exception, he may be able to tell the time, or make a few guarded observations concerning the weather. No doubt he

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> *could repeat a goodly number of irregular verbs by heart; only, as a matter of fact, few foreigners care to listen to their own irregular verbs, recited by young Englishmen. (Jerome, p. 249)*

So wrote the English humourist Jerome K. Jerome in 1900 of language teaching in England. Certainly he wrote with tongue in cheek but there is much that rings as true today as it did then in his words, and not only in Britain. How, one wonders, would Mr. Jerome have viewed Japanese language teaching systems?

In this article I intend to outline and discuss three language teaching contexts with which I have had some experience and I shall follow on from this by making a number of remarks and observations that will, I hope, be of some relevance with regard to language teaching in general and to the numerous debates that surround it. The three contexts I will deal with span two countries, three languages (English, French and Japanese), two levels (secondary and tertiary) and two roles (student and teacher) and are based on my experiences. Like virtually all my contemporaries I learned French at school in England (in my case, for seven years); I also have taught both French and English at secondary schools in England. I have also studied Japanese at university level in England and have been teaching English as a second language in Japan in recent years. I feel it is fair to say that I have had a reasonably broad, if not necessarily deep, experience of the language learning/teaching process at different stages and in various roles.

At present, two of these language learning/teaching processes, those of French at schools in England and of English at all levels, especially in schools and universities, in Japan are coming under much scrutiny and a great deal of criticism, not from humourists intent on amusing their readership but from serious people disturbed at what they perceive are grave inadequacies (e.g., Wordell, 1985; especially Hansen, 1985:145-168). Briefly stated, the criticisms suggest that

these systems are unproductive, even counter-productive, and waste time and resources while failing to provide students with the necessary tools for communicative competence. Although it is outside my current scope, it is depressing to note that teachers of other foreign languages such as French in Japan suggest that the picture for English is, relatively speaking, rosy when compared to that of other foreign languages in Japan (Ozaki, 1985:2). The third of these processes, that of Japanese language learning in the United Kingdom, has as yet not been subjected to any close analysis or scrutiny. Indeed, judging from my own contacts with those involved in the teaching and learning of Japanese in the United Kingdom, there is little real criticism of the methods being used. In fact, the overall impression one gets is that the students who do study Japanese there do generally emerge with a fairly high level of communicative competence, able to read, write and speak Japanese by the time of graduation. More to the point, perhaps, is the fact that such students emerge expecting to be able to read, write and communicate in the language they have been studying.

That there is no groundswell of criticism of the methods in use can be partially attributed to the fact that, to all intents and purposes, these methods appear to be working. In addition it should be noted that this is a small-scale enterprise: Japanese is not taught until university level, and then only as a major course at four institutions, with five others offering Japanese courses as subsidiaries of other courses, usually Chinese. Because it is so small-scale, it is not infrequent that students eventually become teachers in the institution where they first studied, which in itself will make them less inclined to wish to alter the methods used. Furthermore, being small-scale, there is no incentive for an industry peddling new methods to develop. On the contrary, in Japan at the present time, one is only too aware of the enormous competition developing to sell books and methods: when one wishes to sell new methods and textbooks, one necessarily has a

vested interest in exposing the ills, real and imagined, of old methods and systems.

Despite (or because of?) the lack of analysis of teaching methods in England, students do graduate able to use Japanese competently, yet they suffer at least some of the disadvantages frequently cited as reasons for the general malaise of oral English in Japan. The United Kingdom is far from Japan, fares are high and few students have much money. Thus real conversation practice is rarely available, especially since there are relatively few Japanese in Britain, and those that are there tend to be working for companies. There are not the armies of native speakers willing, for a fee, to spend an hour or two a week discussing the weather, Tokyo Tower or anything else that will fill the time, that can be called upon by the Japanese here. Certainly many of the students from the United Kingdom have not attained fluency in Japanese at graduation (due to logistics, there is more of an emphasis on the written than on the spoken word in the courses on offer) but they have become equipped with the tools that will enable them to achieve proficiency should they need to. A student landing in Japan straight from graduation would by no means be a fish out of water, unable to function in the new environment.

One might, justifiably, ask the question, why do such students manage to learn a language and to acquire competence in it, even if they cannot have much practice speaking it while they are learning, when their Japanese counterparts seem to be failing, despite far greater opportunities, to do the same? And, to broaden the subject a little, why is it that some students of one foreign language, Japanese, in the United Kingdom are able to learn that language when the vast majority of their fellows prove totally incapable of coming to terms with the language of their nearest neighbour, France, which they learn in school and which provides, due to its proximity, far more chances of actually using the language in real situations?

A General Outline of Problems and Criticisms

A major factor here is the overall context in which the language is studied or learned. The point has frequently been made that the social context and the general level of expectation held by the society in question towards the whole language learning/teaching process is an important factor in whether students learn or not (Strevens, 1978). A society which, as a whole, is guided by the outlook that its students will be able to learn foreign languages creates expectations which its students are more likely to fulfil. Conversely, if students are surrounded by a general attitude that language learning is next to impossible, they will not acquire the mental set that will help them learn. Rather, they will live down, as it were, to those expectations that say they will not learn. That Scandinavian countries tend to produce good speakers of English could be attributed in part to the fact that expectations are high. It is not because any greater amount of time is spent on English than is the case in, for example, Japan. When expectations are high everyone responds, not just the students. Teachers motivated by the belief that the learning of a language is possible/probable are mentally better prepared to help and encourage their students to learn. Those whose approach to teaching focuses on such points as drilling lists of irregular verbs into their students are probably not going to be overly interested in the actual processes of communication.

Japan's Foreign Language Learning Ethic

It hardly requires a great degree of perception to realise the general ethic within Japan: The level of expectation is not high, neither among teachers nor students. Indeed, the society in general seems to have a vast complex about the whole subject of language. This affects not only social attitudes to English (and other foreign) language

learning, towards which the Japanese manifest inordinately self-deprecating views, but also the ways in which their native language is regarded. I am constantly struck by the way so many Japanese I meet tell me that Japanese is difficult, so difficult indeed that even the native speaker has a hard time mastering it. As a consequence, so the general theme goes, those who master it can hardly be expected to find the time or energy to pursue the study of other languages. Such attitudes have, rightly, received their fair share of criticism from Western writers in recent years, the most well-known being the assault made by Miller (Miller, 1982). It is unfortunate that Miller manages, in pursuing his attack, to descend from valid criticism to polemic, thus undermining his overall position. It is not really possible to assess any language on a hypothetical scale of difficulties but I would suggest that, simply on the grounds that children of all societies seem to master their mother tongues with a seemingly similar speed, there should be no differences, for the native speaker, in the ease or difficulty of the mother tongue.

What seems to happen with frustrating regularity in Japan is that, once one has spoken a very few words of Japanese, one will be told one is good at Japanese. A common series of observations then flows from this opening gambit, with the Japanese person concerned making various remarks about his/her own inability to master any English and ending with the view that the foreigner who is speaking Japanese must indeed be someone of great intelligence. Such an attitude clearly expresses the underlying ethic towards language learning; it shows an extremely low opinion of the capacity of Japanese people to learn other languages. It also, at the same time, illustrates a concept of what people who do learn foreign languages are like: of great ability, intelligent and, therefore, outside the norm. The implication is thus that those who do speak foreign languages are, in some way, outside the normal and accepted parameters of group consciousness and this is, of course, for a society such as Japan

in which group ethics and consciousness are emphasised to a great degree, bound to stifle rather than promote the ability and enthusiasm to learn foreign languages.

The basic, underlying expectations towards foreign language learning in Japan are not high. This has not been helped by Japanese history in general, for the country does not have a very active history of language learning. It is worth pointing out, for example, that throughout the first 1,300 years of Japanese contacts with Buddhism there was no systematic attempt to develop a linguistic study of Buddhism. Even though Japanese Buddhism was of the Mahayana school, no Japanese monk or scholar tried to study the lingua franca of Mahayana Buddhism, Sanskrit, systematically. Despite the long history of contacts with China, Japanese Buddhist monks as a rule did not have any knowledge of the Chinese language even though the texts they chanted in their temples often were in Chinese script. Moreover, most of the monks who went across to China to study were not well-versed in Chinese, which led in itself to a number of errors in interpreting Chinese Buddhist teachings. It was not until the Meiji era that Japanese scholars began to undertake a linguistic study of Buddhism and, at first, they were obliged to go to the West and study under Western scholars such as Max Muller. In other words, there is no real history of language learning in Japan that could act as a counterweight to the contemporary low-expectation ethic that shackles the language learning process.

Given this historical and social background, it is not therefore surprising that most people end up with poor memories of language learning and no ability to speak. This leads on to a brief look at attitudes to English learning in Japan. Few pupils would seem to express a real liking for it. Indeed, Steinberg reports an oral survey in a school class in which almost all her students responded simply "*kirai*" ("I hate it") and she quotes a teacher's survey in the Chugoku region which reported 78% of schoolchildren interviewed as disliking

English (Steinberg, 1985:99). I have often asked students in Japan about their attitudes to learning English at school and I have yet to find one who has expressed a liking for it; I really wonder whether a dissatisfaction number of 78% was not too low!

The prime cause of dissatisfaction and dislike is the heavily grammar-oriented syllabus. Students are not only predisposed to believe that English is difficult but have their conceptions reinforced by what they are taught at schools. With an excess of sentence analysis and the like, an impression of difficulty is created which the students find hard to escape. They learn rules of grammar but get no encouragement that what they are doing is going to open up channels of communication. One student of mine stated, in an essay, "there was no end to learning English grammar patterns; it was just like algebra!"[1] He reported that he never, until he came into contact with foreign teachers at university, had contemplated that English was a means of communication, largely because no-one had ever made him aware of such a fact. It appeared to him, as to other students, that English was yet another cog in the examination and assessment system, a means of grading and testing so as to sort out who would go to which university. English was used in a somewhat algebraic way to help sort out who had assimilated the formulae, rules and theorems that they had been asked to learn from those who had not. In this, there seems to be little room for the student to express his/her own feelings or to take part actively in the learning process.

One thing that I found, to my surprise, to be both novel and useful in developing students' enthusiasm is to actively give encouragement for good work and for any work that represents effort and an attempt to communicate. One of my seminar students remarked that I never used words like 'bad' in my assessments of students' essays; rather, I used only words that implied shades of good. All the class agreed that this did not lead them into delusions of brilliance (Japan-

ese students are always very honest on such points) but did encourage them to work harder, because they felt they were getting some return for their efforts. Their previous experiences had generally been of critical assessments that deterred them from further effort. To some, encouragement was a new phenomenon and I have had the experience of students becoming quite emotional because they have had no real experience of being praised before. Yet it is precisely this lack of encouragement and praise that many students complain about. Recognition is, naturally, an important part in the stimulation of learning.

In contrast, the stress placed on grammar and on the use of English as a means of testing serves to place emphasis on the technical errors that students commit rather than on the communicative content of what they say or write. Discouragement rather than encouragement is what tends to emerge. Students then retreat behind the barriers that say "English is difficult", barriers constructed by prevailing social consciousness rather than by actuality, and lose heart rapidly. The fault in this whole process is not one of teachers alone or of the education system as it now stands: Students themselves are partially to blame, too. I find that students do have a too rapid tendency to surrender to the ethic that tells them that English is really too hard to speak. Without trying in the first place, they are liable to give up and admit to an inability that society and the sytem presupposes them to have. With more emphasis placed on communication and greater feedback from teachers, perhaps students would acquire the motivation necessary to improve their learning.

Similar Factors in England

There are many similar factors in England, in particular with regard to the learning of French. The English do not have a great reputation as linguists, a failing broadly covered up by the emergence of English as the major international language. There is an almost proud refusal to learn other languages (a characteristic assimilated to a perhaps

greater degree by Americans) coupled with a "let them learn English" attitude that fit snugly into the old Empire mentality and has never quite been eradicated. Most British people make little or no effort to speak another language and, as often as not, appear proud of their inability or refusal to do so, prefering to rely on the time-honoured technique of, when trying to deal with foreigners, speaking louder and slower in English. Perhaps it would be accurate to say that British people are smugly pleased at their inability to function in other than their own language and at their failure to have learned what they were taught at school.

It is probably unfortunate that the language usually taught at schools in Britain is French. There has been a long history of distrust, hostility and outright warfare between the two nations which has resulted in a generally contemptuous, not to say downright derogatory, attitude towards the French, their language and all their customs. This hardly serves to make French seem appealing to English schoolchildren, especially when one takes into account the different accent required, which only tends to heighten the alienness of the language. Of course, it could be argued that, with this anti-foreign language ethic, few languages would be palatable to British schoolchildren, certainly not German, although Dutch might be reasonably neutral!

If the mental set of schoolchildren in Japan and Britain is largely preconditioned against successful learning, then I would like to add a further disadvantageous factor. In both countries the most common time to start the study of a foreign language is when the child changes school, moving up to a higher grade. It is probably not the best time to give the child the cultural experience, or shock, of meeting a foreign language for the first time. Children moving from the upper levels of one school, where they are the most senior and biggest children, to the lower levels of a senior school, where they immediately become the smallest and weakest, are bound to feel some emotional discomfort. If

they are thrust into the maelstrom of a new school with all its different forms of behaviour and status, they will not be in a particularly receptive frame of mind to deal with a new language. In fact, it is hardly surprising when children react against the language in question; I can easily see how, in such a situation, the new language could become the symbol of all that is wrong and disturbing about the new situation and environment. Students are not likely to enjoy their studies in such circumstances. I realise that the rationale of the system is not based on letting students actually enjoy what they study but it might not be a bad idea to look more closely at the time when the foreign language learning process is started, divorcing it from the teething problems associated with the changing of schools.

The use of the word 'enjoy' in the previous paragraph opens up another area in which language learning in Britain and Japan can rightly be criticised, and an area in which something to cure the malaise may be done. The debates currently raging in Britain over the failures of school language teaching point very definitely at the rigid adherence to grammatical structures and the overuse of grammar as a road into language, with the target language being taught as a *subject* with rules to be learned, examinations to be passed, tenses to be mastered and so on, rather than as a living means of communication used by other human beings. A sample example of opinions being raised at present may be quoted from the letters page of the Education Supplement of the *Guardian* newspaper:

> Present teaching methods and the prevailing attitudes to foreign language learning in Britain are based upon the mistaken assumption that language should be taught as a subject rather than as a means of communication. (Sweeney, 1985)

This is nothing radical or new, merely one of many letters on the subject that have appeared recently. The whole field of French studies in Britain is under siege, as it were, from

commentators and participants alike, with the "subject, not means of communication" charge in the very forefront of all criticisms.

I will add a few personal observations here. Cultural stereotyping, manifest in most French textbooks in use in schools, helps to underline the oddities, as it were, of the French, to subtly inform the British schoolchild what he/she already has inferred from social attitudes, that the French are different, over there, across the water and not really to be communicated with. In the textbook I studied at school we met a "typical" (i.e., caricature) French family. Monsieur Dumesnil smoked a pipe and bibbed a little wine while Madame seemed always to have a *baguette* under her arm and Raoul, the son, wore the inevitable beret. There was a dog, too, introduced in a way that confirmed the British prejudice that foreigners (especially the French!) do not treat pets properly. The whole text was heavily grammar-weighted. After five years I, like my peers, could dutifully put verbs in the subjunctive but was unable to communicate with a French person. But then no-one ever seemed to consider that communication was part of the process anyway. Later, after having spent some time in the francophone world, I began to teach French in schools in Britain but I found that the grammar-oriented structure in use provided me with few outlets to suggest that French was a means of communication at all: Not only were the pupils ill-prepared for such an outlook but the other staff were committed to the grammatical approach to the exclusion of all else.

A compounded problem, which is beginning to arise in Britain, is that the study of the native language, English, has begun to change in recent years, with grammar being excluded from the classroom. As a result, few pupils learn what nouns and verbs are any more (modern terms include 'naming words' and 'doing words') so that the grammar-oriented French teacher finds him/herself having to explain grammar itself prior to teaching the (already culturally

unwilling) pupil how to conjugate verbs and so on. This merely serves to heighten the apparently alien nature of French and to work against its acceptance.

Language Teaching at the University Level: A Case Study

At this point I would like to alter the focus of my inquiry and examine an aspect of language teaching/learning at the tertiary level in the United Kingdom, as well as an aspect of the same process in Japan. It should be borne in mind that recent debates have suggested that not all is well in the language learning process at school level in either country overall. Nonetheless, a reasonable number of students do opt to do further language studies at university in England, whether to study French or another language. One can reason that, no matter what the system is, there will always be a small percentage who can learn languages with facility and who will thus learn French (or whatever language) as much despite as because of their teachers. In addition, for English people, France is close at hand, close enough to allow those sufficiently keen to get as much conversational practice as they wish. There is still, however, a high fall-out rate: Of the 90 pupils who started studying French at school when I did only one went on to study it at university and possibly only three or four managed to have any competence at all in the language.

When one examines Japanese learning at the tertiary level, a number of different factors come into play. Schools do not teach Japanese at all in Britain. As a result, the student has neither had the discouragement of a rigourously non-communicative learning system to colour his/her impressions, nor has he/she had the chance to become interested in Japanese. In fact, to wish to study Japanese at all requires that the student takes steps to find out where this can be done, what entrance requirements exist and so on -- information rarely available at schools, which, because they do not teach

Japanese, tend not to encourage students to study it at university level. [2]

Some special motivation seems to be necessary in such a situation and, at present, the number of students that make the move into this new area is rather small. This is partly, too, because the number of institutions offering Japanese courses is small and they are limited for space and numbers of places. At present there are four universities (London, Sheffield, Oxford and Cambridge) that offer full Japanese courses and, of these, Oxford and Cambridge only have minimal intake, with the first year students at Oxford studying for a year at Sheffield. Five other institutions (the universities of Leeds, Durham, Newcastle, Sterling and Edinburgh) offer Japanese as a subsidiary course, usually in the Chinese department. To all intents and purposes, Japanese teaching is confined to London and Sheffield, with about 20-30 students currently in the first year course at each place. In all there are less than 60 students of Japanese in the first year course of all the institutions mentioned and less than 150 students studying Japanese at tertiary level at all. This is a small figure and one could, justifiably, argue that it is too small to provide any real evidence on which to draw worthwhile conclusions about language teaching. The smallness of the number in itself points to this being a highly committed minority, with all the resultant stimuli and motivations that flow from this. Self-selected minorities have stronger motivations for working than do majority groups who have been produced by the inertia that is a major factor in determining the course of study that most students pursue.

When I studied Japanese at London (at the School of Oriental and African Studies), there were 20 students in my year. Of these, ten were full-time degree course students, four were officials of the British Foreign Office studying Japanese prior to taking up appointments in Tokyo, two (including myself) were studying Japanese as part of a doctoral

course in Japanese Buddhism, and four were studying other aspects of Japanese culture for which they required some knowledge of Japanese. The ten full-time students were on four-year degree courses and the other ten were doing the first year only of that course. Of the degree students, three were married to Japanese people and were studying to improve their own knowledge of the language, two had lived in Japan and wished to return there after learning the language formally, and the rest were talented linguists who had become bored with learning European languages and wanted to extend their linguistic knowledge elsewhere. In other words, all those who were studying Japanese had some form of commitment and strong motivation to make the efforts required to learn the language.

The universities concerned demand evidence of linguistic ability, with success in advanced level examinations at school essential. Along with this, a more general capacity for study and an ability to deal with various areas concerning Japanese studies is required. The prospectus issued by London University, in which entrance requirements are given, states that candidates need to show broad general intellectual capacity (University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1985:25). One has to be able to deal with a wide range of topics concerning Japan, not just the language itself – one studies not merely the language but the culture as well. This is an important point, for it makes it clear that Japanese is not solely perceived in linguistic terms but is viewed as a cultural complex about which students must learn if they are to successfully master the language itself.

For those with other than the highest levels of motivation the London course is so intense as to discourage. In the first year, the four least motivated students decided to leave because the heavy workload gave them no free time. In the first year, starting from absolute beginnings, one learns 1,000 *kanji* at the rate of 50 a week (apart from the first five weeks, when one learns the *kana* syllabary). At the same time, one

has over 20 hours a week in the classroom as well as vocabulary to be learned outside. The first weeks of the course demand a weekly total of 24 hours in the classroom spread over five days (plus two hours extra spent in lectures about the history of Japan). The daily structure was along these lines:

10 a.m. Study of grammatical points (new ones each day)
11 a.m. Verbal drills using structures learned in the previous class
12 p.m. Language Laboratory: tapes using more drills concerning the points already learned that day
2 p.m. Conversation class building on these structures in groups of five students
3 p.m. *Kana/Kanji* writing class (5 *kana* a day at the start)

After five weeks, there were slight changes in structure with fewer conversation groups and less Language Laboratory but, in their place, more classes on reading and on rendering Japanese into English. One was expected to learn vocabulary lists as well as *kanji* lists and, on top of this, to read about Japan.

This is a full-scale commitment and those who were not prepared to put in a good 35-40 hours hard work each week were liable to find themselves falling behind rapidly. But, at the same time, we were stimulated by achievement and encouragement at our ability to use Japanese and communicate. In the morning of a day, for example, we might learn the past tense form of adjectives (e.g., *muzukashikatta*) and ways to use this tense; the next classes on the same day would teach us how to insert this form into our conversation and in the conversation class we would use it to communicate in an encounter with a Japanese person, which we could then describe as *muzukashikatta*. After 10 weeks of such study, I was able to hold my first real (if slow) Japanese conversation and, by the end of the year, I was able to read a full-length book in Japanese on my own. All the students involved were able to communicate with Japanese people.

For those who continued into the second year and beyond, additional courses involving literature and, later, other languages of the Far East such as Chinese and Mongolian could be studied. The staff involved were both English and Japanese (four English and five Japanese, three of whom were full-time). The Japanese were all tenured members of the university with all the rights and benefits that English staff have. Other departments dealing with the languages of the Far East also have this balance: The Chinese Department at Leeds, for instance, has five British and four Chinese members of staff. As a rule, the British members deal mostly with the structure of the language and the Japanese with practical applications (conversation, *kanji*).

Of course, this is an intense course using committed students. The onus is definitely on the students to do the work and to attend (no registers are taken at universities in the United Kingdom). Also, after the first weeks it is expected that the students will themselves make the effort to obtain Japanese conversation practice. At the end of the second year, all students visit Japan for 2 months for a special language programme.

The Japanese Context: Possibilities for Improvement?

What I feel this case does show is that integrated courses in which new skills are taught frequently can work well when there is a good programme of reinforcement and where the motivation comes from the students. Japanese universities do not, however, run on these lines. Even courses that are considered to be reasonably integrated, such as that described by Hansen (Hansen, 1985:158-167), have to battle against the problem that the students themselves are either not motivated or that they have many other classes to attend as well. Even when the time devoted to English on the timetable is greater than for other subjects, it still remains one subject for which the student has to obtain credits as a means to final graduation. Because of this, most students enter

university with the same mental set they had at school, with English seen as something they must do to get a qualification. It remains, thus, a subject, not a means of obtaining information or communicating. One can hardly demand that students who have countless other courses to follow should devote themselves only to English homework and studies yet, as my example from London seems to suggest, this would be the most effective way to achieve results.

An additional problem concerning Japanese students is their acquired passivity. The process they have undergone at school, in which facts have been taught for them to assimilate, has prepared them for a passive role in the classroom. The teacher has the active role and is expected to 'provide' all the equipment necessary for the study at hand. Yet there have to be two people in the process, the teacher and the student; if a student will not make any effort, even the best teacher will find it hard to teach. One has to start, as a rule, by educating students out of the patterns they have acquired at school and into the traditions of partnership and mutual seeking after knowledge that motivate much of Western scholarship.

What Can We Do?

An ideal solution would be a greater amount of specialisation and less compulsion: Those who really do wish to learn English at their universities should be able to do so while those who are doing so simply because they have to do so, in order to gain necessary credits, should be allowed to study something else. This would remove the least willing elements from the class and enable those who want to, to get on with their studies. In addition, more regular, shorter classes would be in order. At present, most universities in Japan have long classes, often as long as 100 minutes in duration, with the students meeting (often in classes of 50 or more) once a week. In both numbers and duration, this is excessive for

both students and teachers. The most enthusiastic student can lose concentration after an hour or more; and how often do teachers find their own energies fading and the last ten or fifteen minutes of a class vanishing, in terms of effectiveness? Everyone would be better off meeting more regularly, for shorter periods. In Britain university classes last an hour and there is little wastage in this period. Is there any real reason, apart from timetabling convenience, for classes to be longer? The more students in a class, too, the less likely is there to be much success. This is particularly so in Japan, where students have a natural reticence to speak in front of their peers. The larger the class, the greater the reticence seems to be.

Smaller classes that meet more often would naturally yield some improvement but this is probably asking too much, too quickly, from the education system here. It presupposes that the sytem is truly committed to enabling Japanese students to become good users of English and that there is enough of a commitment in the system for it to reform itself. Although overnight reforms (or even 'over-decade' reforms!) cannot be expected, I feel that, in the long run, they will have to be made. What concerns me more, in the short term, is how we can make the most of what we have currently got, and how we can most effectively work with the situation as it stands. Here I think that probably the most useful move would be for more emphasis to be placed on the cultural complex surrounding the English language. Students need to be informed, regularly, that English is not a subject but a means of communication used by countless millions of people in many nations as a native tongue, and as a way of communicating by other people who did not learn English as their first language.

As I have pointed out, students who study Japanese in the United Kingdom study the culture that surrounds it and are expected to be interested in it, taking courses in Japanese history, religion and so on. This not only gives

valuable insights into the culture that spawned the language but also helps remove the language from the level of subject (which makes it unpopular) to that of living entity. By making English a living entity by means of showing aspects of Western culture and history to students it is possible to make the language assume the status of a real entity in which the students can participate. Instead of being discouraged by excesses of formalised study, students can be shown how to appreciate and enjoy English.

In this, one needs a broader scope than that of an English language teacher alone. Recently, voices have been raised in debate in language journals in Japan over the subject of the professionalisation of language teaching, with some writers demanding that only qualified, specialist EFL teachers be hired[3]. I would like to point out that those who teach Japanese in England are not, for the most part, specialist langauge teachers but people who have studied aspects of Japanese society and culture. Their expertise and understanding of Japan is as valuable to students seeking an entree into Japanese language as are the techniques of the language specialist. In the context of Japan, the Japanese professor with a knowledge of American or English literature could be as valuable to his department and students as is a native speaker or specialised teacher of language, as long as the system is able and prepared to accommodate the use of culture as a learning/teaching technique. Calls for greater specialisation and for more 'professionalisation' seem to be moving the emphasis away from, rather than towards, the broad perspectives that are needed.

What surely is needed is increased cooperation between native speakers who teach in Japanese universities and their Japanese colleagues. We need a wider field, not the possibilities of a narrower one. In the long term such increased cooperation, through shared research and coordinated programmes, is vital, while in the immediate present individuals can act to ameliorate the situation without, and this is a very impor-

tant point, creating a sense of fear in their colleagues. Everyone who does work in Japan is no doubt aware of the possibilities of emotions such as fear and distrust arising where people of different countries and attitudes work together (or, to be more accurate, work in the same department or institution).

Those who seek direct and radical reforms may merely create a reverse reaction: More can be achieved by quiet example and personal action in the classroom than by lobbying in meetings. If individual teachers can encourage students to shed their culturally imposed barriers to the learning of foreign languages and can help bridge the gulf between teacher and students, then this might help other teachers to do the same. There is the potential for all involved to realise that the teacher and student have to work in tandem and that the teacher can act in an effective way simply by encouraging rather than, as is the norm, discouraging students. It is not beyond the bounds of the imagination to foresee a future in which teachers will introduce foreign languages as enjoyable systems of communication within the potentialities of their students, rather than as abstruse and difficult algebraic sytems designed as barriers and certainly not aimed at producing communication or enjoyment.

Currently I use the classes I teach at Kobe University of Commerce in this way as much as possible, especially two classes called 'Language Seminars' that some first and second year students take. In these classes I attempt to give the students some interesting input, using aspects of Anglo-American culture through which to teach English (alternatively, it could be said that I am attempting to teach foreign and comparative culture through the use of English). Whichever way it may be perceived, I think that the students do feel that they are doing something other than 'just' learning English and this seems to fire their enthusiasm. They do quickly realise that there is potential for a foreign language beyond the examination process (to emphasise which point

I do not give any examinations in my courses). At first, students find it hard to follow all that goes on because instruction is entirely in English but, once they understand that they are not being criticised for errors and are not being judged, they relax and surmount the barrier that has previously told them that they cannot understand English. In a matter of weeks they begin to dismantle the barriers to learning that have been so carefully constructed during their school years and, by the beginning of the second year, I am able to speak for half an hour at more or less normal speed on some aspect of culture and find that the class has understood what has been said. This in itself raises confidence levels considerably.

By presenting interesting courses and by introducing, in an enthusiastic way, the cultural aspects surrounding a language, it is possible to overcome the students' reluctance to believe they can master English. Slides are useful: A slide show seems to fuel enthusiasm more than almost anything else and gets students responding in English. Students begin to assimilate the language almost unconsciously as they begin to see themselves participating in a class not about English but about, say, England. Students alter their perceptions, too, in dropping old concepts of the teacher-student divide and cease to view me as a remote 'sensei' from whom all information is to be received, and start seeing me as a person with whom they can communicate and cooperate. In turn, what most stimulates me in teaching in Japan is the tremendous friendship and feedback I receive from my students. I know also that my staff colleagues are aware of the whole situation and that they generally are sympathetically disposed towards my methods. For any hope of wider reforms I know that I can have far more effect through this action by example than through thumping the table at staff meetings and the like.

Conclusion

In this article I have outlined some of the criticisms lodged against language teaching in Britain and Japan and have described one specialist language programme in London that does achieve results. This is a specialised programme and, as such, cannot provide full answers to the problems of more general systems but it can offer some useful lessons. I have also made some tentative remarks about the ways in which improvements can be made in the system in Japan as it now is, as well as suggesting areas in which reforms should eventually be made. Students can be helped to feel that foreign language learning is not just a chore and not just a means to make them unhappy. It is my experience that students do respond well to encouragement and that they can come round to the view that English is enjoyable. They may even look forward to their classes! If such attitudes can be achieved, then the journey towards competence is radically shortened. Importantly, too, the teacher's enjoyment is heightened, so that fresh energy will be generated throughout the whole process. The attainment of competence does lie within the student's grasp when students realise that they are being asked to do something that is perfectly feasible and even pleasant. Until any major and radical reforms are introduced to alter the focus of the system as a whole, this is the area in which the most effective progress can be made and it is something that can be worked on at this moment.

Notes

1. This quotation has been taken from an essay written by a student in a seminar I taught at Osaka University but its tone reflects the mood of remarks made both orally and in writing to me by many of the students I have taught in Japan.
2. This information was conveyed to me by Dr. P. Francks of the Chinese Department, the University of Leeds, England. All the data and remarks in this section are based on my own contacts with

staff and students at institutions in Britain that teach Japanese and cover the years from 1979 to the present.

3. For example, in *The Language Teacher* (newsletter of the Japan Association of Language Teachers), there has been a spate of letters in the Opinions section on this issue, starting with Redfield (December, 1984), with a response by Shishin (February, 1985) and responses to Shishin (e.g., Gay, April, 1985). As I have indicated in this article, I feel that this debate is somewhat of a red herring: The emphasis on qualifications seems to reflect a disturbing concern with form rather than essence and tends to reinforce rather than reform the contemporary, and widely criticised, formal system of teaching English in Japan.

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