

## JAPAN

### *Significances and Possibilities of Linguistic Auditing in Japan*

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#### 1. Introduction

Many companies, institutions, nonprofit organizations and administrative offices in Japan are now realizing the dramatically expanding demands from diversified linguistic environments brought about by globalization. Major issues facing these organizations include: how to acquire and utilize English as an international language, how to guarantee learning of Japanese as an International Language to an increasing number of foreigners, how to promote plain Japanese which helps non-native Japanese speakers obtain broader access to information, and how to provide learning opportunities that motivate learners of languages other than English and Japanese. Each institution has a unique set of linguistic needs according to its type, size, place, vision and management style.

Clearly this broad range of organizational linguistic needs, poses an important challenge for managers and educators. Companies will need to hire and train people with different linguistic competencies and allocate them effectively. As linguistic environments and needs become more diversified, so too must more careful and long-range management strategies be employed to address these developments. CEOs and Human Resource Departments must consider not only how to teach which language to whom and to what degree, but also how to arrange linguistic human resources collaboratively to meet these organizational linguistic needs.

Principles of linguistic auditing (Reeves & Wright, 1996; Kostor, 2004; Honna et.al. 2006) can provide strategic views and step-by-step schemes to resolve such key issues. At the same time, there is much room to discuss the ways to adjust theories to apply to actual linguistic and managerial cultures. With continual elaboration of theories and concepts of linguistic auditing, various kinds of organizations would be able to review their conventional response strategies objectively and to have opportunities to examine the possibilities of future transformations.

## 2. Research Background of Linguistic Auditing in Japan

Linguistic auditing can be defined as a variety of evaluative and information-gathering approaches to assess linguistic responses at the organizational level. Intelligent organizations need to clarify the current and predictable linguistic needs within the organization and to build clear visions and plans to respond to them. The simplified process of linguistic auditing is composed of five stages: first, analyzing linguistic needs, second, assessing present linguistic competencies, third, proposing programs for resolution, fourth, monitoring programs, and fifth, evaluating outcomes and offering feedback.

Even though most institutions, as of now, have not been introduced to the theories of linguistic auditing, their current responding strategies remain inherent to some aspects and procedures of linguistic auditing. Therefore, examining current linguistic response strategies, even if they were made on ad hoc bases, can be instrumental to developing useful and applicable theories of linguistic auditing.

Hereafter, the beneficial strategies and problems within the above mentioned five stages are examined. Compared to the language learning of formal education, adults' language learning and corporate in-house language training tend to be excluded from academic discussion and analysis. Unfortunately, there is limited research regarding corporate perceptions and responses toward linguistic needs. The data, represented here and compiled by the Research Group of Linguistic Auditing at the Aoyama Gakuin Research Institute, Tokyo, is based on in-depth interviews at human resource departments and language schools who provide training to business people.

## 3. Current Responses toward Linguistic Environments

### 3.1 Transition of In-house Language Training

Within the lifelong employment system, especially during the decades of Japanese economic prosperity, many companies provided or supported language learning of employees as a part of benefit programs. Learning opportunities were available to anyone motivated to register for classes. However, recent, severe economical conditions have required companies to restructure this open system, thus resulting in fewer opportunities for language learning.

In addition, several weaknesses can be pointed out within this system. First, language learning courses were prepared without concrete objectives and practical applications for use in the workplace. Second, courses for higher levels, for specific purposes and for languages other than English, were relatively limited. So advanced learners were unable to find suitable courses. Third, competent busy workers found it

difficult to join those classes due to time constraints. The traditional Japanese system is now undergoing a gradual process of transformation, and as a result many companies are seeking ways to challenge these difficulties on one level, yet still providing learning opportunities to motivated clients as well.

To guarantee that people remain motivated to learn languages, and to maximize their achievement, many Japanese companies need to review their language training system as a whole. Frameworks of linguistic auditing would help to reveal advantages and disadvantages of current linguistic responses. They are examined here according to the five linguistic auditing steps.

### 3.2 Linguistic Needs Analysis

The stage of needs analysis has been peripheralized and underdeveloped. Usually, in-house language training is outsourced to language schools. Sales managers, who have similar roles as consultants and arrange all language courses, and instructors from a contracted language school often find mismatches in regard to perceived linguistic needs between actual learners and supervisory employee who recommended or encouraged them to improve linguistic competencies.

Tactics and enthusiasm for needs analysis vary depending on the person in charge. Sometimes rigorous evaluation is used. Before the actual classes begin, people from a language school usually visit the client several times to hear their expectations. Then they offer desirable course designs. These occasions and procedures would provide good opportunities for needs assessment; however, they are often considered just a part of traditional Japanese styles of sales promotion, *eigyō*.

Occasionally, enthusiastic clients provide bundles of official and non-official documents and email to the contracted language school to examine linguistic needs in detail, or invite the contractors into their office to observe what kinds of linguistic needs potentially exist. However, they are unlikely to agree on strategies at the organizational or department level; therefore, if the person in charge changed, the methods of needs analysis would also change, rendering past data irrelevant and inaccessible for future analysis.

There are two main problems here. First, there is no portfolio in regard to the methods of linguistic needs analysis. Second, there is no function to supervise the tactics of needs analysis and linguistic management as a whole. If people in human resource departments share the principles and a package of methods, or if they can receive supervision from trained linguistic management specialists, i.e. linguistic auditors, from the third party, these problems can move toward common resolution.

### 3.3 Assessment of the Current Linguistic Competencies

The language assessment tools are limited in variety even for English. Many companies adapt the TOEIC Test as a single assessment tool of the workers. Due to the Japanese companies' tendency to model an operation after previous models; the TOEIC Test has practically replaced the previous one, the STEP Test (*Eiken*). This shift came with the focus on practical communicative competence of English in business settings.

Recently several major companies in Japan have set the TOEIC Test scores as conditions for employment and promotion. According to the survey conducted by The Institute for International Business Communication, the presider of the TOEIC Test, among 345 companies who have adapted this test and joined this survey as respondents, 186 companies (53.9%) refer to the score for employment, and 64 companies (18.6%) set it as a condition for promotion. If we add the companies who are willing to set it as an indicator of the near future, 70% and 48% rely on or are willing to rely on the TOEIC Test as an assessment tool for employment and promotion respectively.

That is to say, in spite of the diversification of linguistic environments and linguistic needs, assessment tools are extremely limited. Although the developers of the TOEIC Test continue to make improvements, it is impossible to address all linguistic issues within a single test. It cannot be always relevant for practical use at the actual workplace. Moreover, as it is settled as a condition for promotion, the main purpose of getting a higher score has become the goal of study. Many business people and university students take the TOEIC Test as an unofficial certificate of employment or path to promotion. If they want to improve specific language skills, they seek other ways to fulfill their needs.

Hence, it would be safe to say that the TOEIC Test presents a somewhat misleading assessment—as a matter of fact there are no actual assessment tools of English in Japan thus far. Of course, with thoughtful management, the TOEIC Test can exert good quality as an assessment tool in certain settings, but to respond to diversified linguistic environments, several tools ought to be developed. Comparison between several tools and a combination of some of them put a meaningful assessment into practice.

### 3.4 Responding Strategies for Linguistic Needs

In-house language training affects the linguistic capacity of individuals directly and of organizations indirectly, therefore it is always the main issue for

personnel managers. However, there are various strategies to respond to perceived linguistic needs, such as arranging interpreters, creating multilingual signs and displays, creating a multilingual database and distributing it on the intra-net, and so on.

Generally speaking, Japanese organizations tend to react only when a fatal linguistic problem occurs or an immediate linguistic need arises. Many Japanese companies, except major multinational companies, tend to rely on personal linguistic abilities. In the system of lifelong employment, workers know their colleagues' personal interests and hobbies as well as linguistic competencies. When a non-Japanese-speaking customer has a concern, then a certain person, no matter to which section he or she belongs, will be called to respond to the customer's request.

We can consider this traditional responding way as a good model of networking and cooperation. Everybody does not have to have the same quality of linguistic competency. To the contrary, networking among different linguistic competencies is more necessary. The weakness of the traditional Japanese way is impromptu application. Planned allocation of linguistic human resources and an appropriate appraisal to their linguistic contributions are important issues germane to linguistic auditing.

### 3.5 Program Monitoring

Once language training courses were launched, companies failed to develop systematic monitoring processes. According to several language schools, the maximum monitoring intervention from clients up until now has been the requirement of an attendance sheet. In regard to other linguistic strategies, such as multilingual operations at the customer service level, there have been no monitoring systems. The hope is that linguistic auditing will serve as an invaluable catalyst to introducing improved monitoring practices.

### 3.6 Evaluation and Feedback

Without the culture of monitoring at in-house language training programs, the cornerstone of evaluation rests solely upon the TOEIC Test score. As previously stated, the TOEIC Test does not always guarantee linguistic competence in the workplace context. As long as holistic procedures from needs analysis to evaluation go unheeded, business people in Japan are left to negotiate a double-standard of linguistic competencies.

#### 4 Possibilities and Visions of Linguistic Auditing

One of the main problems of the current linguistic responding strategies at the organizational level in Japan is that there is no function or section in place for reviewing overall linguistic environments, or for considering organizational policy and its impact on linguistic needs within and across it. A set of conceptual frameworks will be valuable to initiate them to be aware of diversification of linguistics needs. We have examined that even 'simple five steps' would be a useful tool to abstract advantages and disadvantages of the status quo. Other indicators should be developed as a package of linguistic auditing tools.

For example, one of the metaphorical indicators to classify the multiplicity of linguistic needs would be supply-push and demand-pull linguistic needs. Corporate accountability which promises that corporations inform clients about their products and management to stakeholders can be an example of demand-pull linguistic need. Potential markets which will be accessible by linguistic efforts can be an example of supply-pull linguistics need. And the emergency level would be another indicator.

In addition, three issues should be included in the development of linguistic auditing. First, rigid ethical principles and guidelines have to be organized in a meaningful way. Linguistic auditing will be valuable to be conducted by either the third party or an inner entity as a self assessment tool. Since language is equal to information and corporate assets, mutual trust between organizations and linguistic auditors is a critical issue. Well-designed ethical principles help to resolve this issue. Then, secondly, training programs and materials need to be developed. People who use the concepts of linguistic auditing for self-assessment can select a part of the whole idea. But people who are going to apply it at the organizational level will be unable to avoid affecting others. Therefore, they need to understand in its entirety linguistic auditing as a so-called linguistic management specialist. Thirdly, actual case studies need to be accumulated, shared and analyzed to elaborate theories and concepts. The description of case studies enriches the theory and contents of linguistic auditing.

The road to completing a comprehensive holistic design of linguistic auditing may be long and challenging. As linguistic environments continue to diversify and place more demand on organizations to adapt and act collaboratively, linguistic auditing becomes a more viable road worth taking—and especially if language diversity is to flourish.

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