

JAPAN

Challenging Issues in English Language Teaching in Japan

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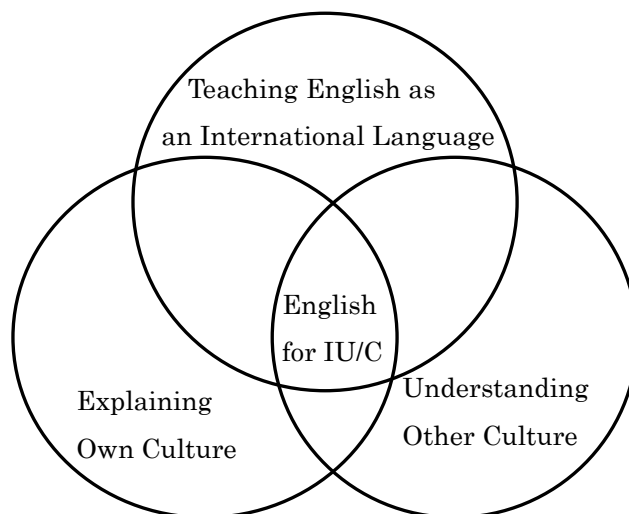
1. English Language Teaching as a Part of International Understanding Education

The aim of Japan's English language teaching (ELT) in public education is to develop a working command of this global language and nurture international (and/or intercultural) awareness on the part of our students. That is why ELT is definitively considered as part of a larger endeavor of international understanding education. Truly, the Department of International Education in the Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education is in charge of ELT in the organizational structure of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT).

Apparently, ELT for this goal is composed of three important elements (see Diagram 1): (1) teaching English as an international language, not as an American or a British language, (2) explaining our own culture, and (3) understanding other cultures. In implementing this framework in Japan's ELT, two challenging issues are noticed

Diagram 1

Three Elements in Teaching English as a Language for International Understanding and Communication (IU/C)



Issue 1 concerns English as an international language. The new guidelines for the English programs in the primary and junior high schools the MEXT issued in 2008 did not characterize English either as an Anglo-American language or an international language, although it was repeatedly stated at meetings of the MEXT committee in charge of ELT that English was important as a school subject because it was an “internationally common” language. In Japan’s ELT, it is important that we fully recognize various logical deductions stemming from this point of view on English.

Issue 2 is about English as a self-expressive language. Japanese people generally see international understanding as learning about other cultures. Therefore, awareness training in explaining Japanese ways of life explicitly is frequently ignored. Unfortunately, Japan's ELT is inclined to reinforce this tendency by putting much emphasis on reading about foreign cultures, mostly those of the U.S.A. and the U. K. Thus, children are often instructed to send Christmas cards to friends overseas, but are rarely told to write Japanese New Year’s cards or summer cards in English and to explain Japanese ways of life.

With a clear understanding of English as a language for wider communication, it has now become obvious that an end should be put to this practice and a new track be prepared. A new approach is in order if English is to be taught for self-expression and mutual understanding across cultures. Due to space and time limitation, I will jot down some notes on Issue 1 here.

2. Japan’s Proclivity for Native Speaker English

Actually, the conventional objective of Japan’s ELT program is unrealistic. Implicitly and explicitly, it calls for students to acquire “native-like” proficiency in English regardless of the extremely limited roles allocated to the language in Japanese society. Behavioral acculturation is also presupposed as a natural consequence, because “English reflects the cultures of native speakers.” Students are often told that “when you speak English, you have to think in English.”

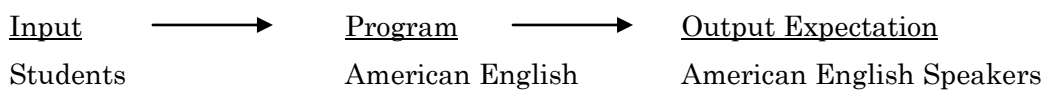
This “nativist” goal should be held largely accountable for the present low achievement of English abilities by Japanese students. It more or less creates the social pressure that dictates: Do not speak English until you can speak it like an American. One result of this pressure is Japanese students’ passive attitude in using this language as a means of international and intercultural communication. They are ashamed if they do not speak English the way native speakers do.

Given an Anglophile goal as their guiding light, Japanese students of English cannot accept their limited proficiency as natural and still good enough for

communication. They also look down on non-native varieties of English used by other Asian speakers. In a novel by a popular author, a Japanese Government official assigned to the Republic of the Philippines laments: “Three years here means ten years at my age. I went to Canada to brush up my English. Now it's almost useless. Here I have to hear their strong accented English and I'm afraid I'm bound to pick up that trill soon.”

Japan’s present, unrealistic English language teaching model is illustrated as follows:

Japan’s ELT Model (Present, Unrealistic) (American English Speaker Model)



The model assumes that Japanese students learn American English and become American English speakers.

3. Proposed Initiatives for Improvement and Reorientation

In view of the situation, if there is to be innovation, there has to be enlightenment. Indeed, English is now a multinational and multicultural language. This is the fact that Japanese students should be prepared to take into consideration if they are to learn English as a language for international and intercultural communication.

Actually, as the spread of English progresses, it has to be emphasized again and again that non-native speakers surpass native speakers in number. For example, many Japanese business people report that they have more opportunities to use English with other Asians rather than with Americans or Britons in their business interactions. Indeed, English is solidly established as a primary Asian language.

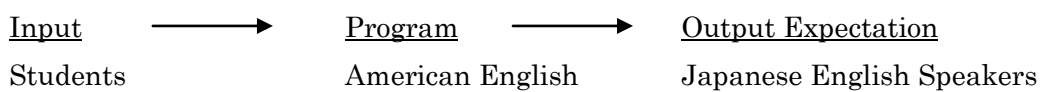
At the same time, a noticeably larger number of teachers than before are gaining knowledge that English has become a “variegated” language. Everyone who speaks it speaks it with an accent. As Americans have American English accents and Britishers British English accents, so do Indians Indian English traits and Filipinos Philippine English characteristics.

The concomitant result is that English is increasingly de-Anglo-Americanized, and diversified in many parts of the world. This inclination is further driven by the fact that many people in the world are not learning English to assimilate themselves to the Anglo-American norms of behavior, but to acquire a working command of the language

of wider communication and whereby to express their personal opinions and conduct business beyond the national boundary.

Consequently, it is necessary to assess Japan's ELT model given earlier in terms of the present role English plays as a world language. It is *not feasible* and *not desirable* to expect to produce American English speakers in the Japanese public education system. The traditional model has to be modified to adjust to this reality, as is shown below.

Japan's ELT Model (Modified, Realistic) (Japanese English Speaker Model)



(Notice that the new paradigm does not deny individuals all their rights to learn to be able to command American English. It only insists that America English Speaker Model is not appropriate as a pedagogical model in Japan's public education system.)

Given American English as a sample for acquisition, Japanese students are expected to produce Japanese English, not American English. Theoretically, any variety may be offered as a sample as long as it is internationally accepted and understood. But giving multiple varieties might confuse teachers and students as well. Furthermore, the focus in the new model is more on the output than on the program. For this output expectation to be widely supported, it is important that the idea of world Englishes should be well understood in Japan's ELT and it should be properly introduced in the process of positively evaluating Japanese English patterns as good as American English patterns.

4. A Paradigm Shift

What is to be obtained right now is a paradigm shift in ELT in Japan. The question to consider is: Which model is legitimate, American English (AE) Speaker Mode (traditional and unrealistic) or Japanese English (JE) Speaker Model (modified, realistic)? For criteria on which to evaluate these models, "feasibility" and "desirability" are proposed.

Both the present and modified ideas recognize that it is unthinkable to expect to see Japanese students developing the ability to speak English like Americans. On the contrary, the two ideas agree that the goal is attainable if it aims at production of Japanese English speakers in Japan's ELT. The difference that lies between the two perspectives concerns the desirability factor. The present idea maintains that AE

Speaker Model is desirable and JP Speaker Model is not, while the new idea is intended to encourage the shift of these inclinations.

The definition of Japanese English is difficult to describe here. Suffice it to say that it is the kind of English patterns covering phonology, vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, which many students of average and above-average grades can produce after six-plus years of training in school. They should be advised that what they are learning or have learned can be a useful means of multinational and multicultural communication. It should be the basis on which to build up further layers of knowledge and skills of English for vocational and professional purposes.

The collective energy and time spent by a majority of 120 million Japanese who compulsorily studied English for some six years is truly enormous, and should not be wasted. Japanese students should be encouraged to take advantage of the outcome of their educational experience. One way to achieve this is to recognize that Japanese ordinarily are expected to speak Japanese English, not American English.

As a matter of fact, Japanese English can be an important utilitarian language. It is part of various Non-Native Speaker Englishes used in many functions in many parts of Asia and the rest of the world. More often than not, these varieties constitute the most useful language of initial contact among many international travelers and business persons.

Standards of acceptability and correctness are not absolute but negotiable. The bottom line is mutual intelligibility. Comparative studies indicate that there are more common features than differences among these varieties (Jenkins 2000, 2005). This flexibility reflects the strength of the English language and should further be promoted. In extreme terms, the paradigm shift is facilitated by understanding that American English is neither feasible nor *desirable* as the goal that Japanese students are expected to strive for, while Japanese English is both feasible and desirable for them to obtain.

Actually, once Japanese teachers and students of English discover what possibilities this international language can give them, they gradually come to understand the concept of English as a multicultural language for international communication and develop confidence in Japanese varieties of English. This is witnessed in the results of a series of workshops on the present English language situation conducted for teachers and students.

After attending a seminar, one high-school teacher wrote (Honna 2008: 158-9): "I was once amazed at Vietnamese students' enthusiasm in trying to communicate in English, and wondered what made the difference. I have now realized that we had a wrong view of English. We will feel more at ease if we know that the important thing is

to communicate in Japanese English, and build up and maintain a friendly relationship with different people. Teachers of English are to blame for the stress with which Japanese people speak English, because they are not tolerant toward students' grammatical mistakes and limit their freedom to speak. Such a stress involved in speaking English will be minimized if teachers appreciate the fact that a student has communicated in English. The first step will be to change teachers' concept of English."

5. Concluding Remarks

Events that are indicative of a change in traditional Japanese attitudes toward English are occurring in the business sections of Japanese society. Participants in in-service seminars, provided by blue-chip companies during or after their work hours, generally report that knowledge of English as a multicultural language really helps them understand what they can do with English at international settings. It further motivates them to work harder to improve their abilities for more effective communication.

Once Japanese business people recognize the legitimacy of Asian varieties of English, they become interested in learning why Asian people speak English the way they do. Consequently, the stigma long put on indigenized Englishes and other EIL varieties is wearing itself out in some important sections of Japanese society. Most likely, these changing attitudes can give impetus to proposed initiatives for reorientation and improvement in Japan's ELT practice.

Diffusion presupposes diversification. Specifically, an international language has to be a multicultural language. This principle is essential in recognizing English as an intermediary language. Japanese students can contribute to this cause by using the language as Japanese English. And all of us, who know more about English as such, should devise effective ways to explain the idea so that our students can have a better understanding of the language they are learning as well as enriching as a means of communication across cultures.

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