English Language Education in Japan: Problems, Progress and Prospects

Peter McCagg*

1. Introduction

First, at the risk of underestimating the audience's knowledge of English language education in Japan, let me mention some basic facts about English language teaching and learning in Japan.

English is a required subject in junior high school(grades 7-9). English is a subject on the country's college entrance exams—both the national and public universities and (with one interesting exception I will discuss below) the nation's private colleges and universities—and this means that any senior high school student (grades 10-12) with college aspirations takes an additional three years of English. Hence, all mainstreams college freshmen in Japan have studied English formally for six years. Until recently, the Japanese Ministry of Education required an additional 8 units of English study at college.[1] Even though this requirement has been eliminated, colleges, for

* International Christian University, Japan.

1) In 1989, the Ministry of Education revised it's University regulations and eliminated categories for specific types of credit. This change has freed schools to adjust there english and other foreign language courses.

the most part, continue to require at least some English Language study, and some, like ICU, require a great deal of English language study.

Outside of the formal school system and running from pre-school to adult continuing-learning centers, English language teaching and the attached industries is big business in Japan. A recent article in the New York Times reported that Japan's English language "industry" is approximately a five billion dollar (US) a year business.[2] Five billion dollars a year. Despite this enormous outlay of time, energy and cash, the most common lament in all the years I have lived and taught in Japan is communicative purpose. This, boldly and most broadly stated, is the "problem."

Let me confess at the outset: Much of this paper is based on my direct, personal experience as an English teacher in Japan. This may sound like (and, of course, it is) an easy way out and a less than scintillating way to trace the development of English language education in Japan over the past twenty years. However, as I hope to demonstrate, my own personal experiences mirror rather closely developments in Japan and can provide an appropriate framework for this paper in which I attempt to consider in an appropriate framework for this paper in which I attempt to consider in greater detail, the problem, the progress, and ultimately the prospects for the future in this field.

2) Tanikawa Miki. "difficult Lesson: Learning English." New York times supplement: Education Life pp. 33, 34. July 14, 1996.

2. Problems

I would suggest that, of the multitude of obstacles to learning English in any foreign context, the four most serious problems for Japanese English learners 20 years ago were poorly trained foreign, or native English speaking teachers, native Japanese speaking teachers whose own levels of English were insufficient to provide good models, a poverty of opportunities to use the language or hear it being used in typical and natural situations, and a problem that is more difficult to label,but concerns the stereotypical Japanese ethos about the role of language in life in general, and the stereotypical attitude toward the purpose or value in learning English in particular.

I first arrived to teach English in Japan in August 1975, more than 20 years ago, Teaching English for me, initially, was simply a vehicle to get to Japan. I was a fresh college graduate with a BA in East Asian Studies. My specialty: Modern Japanese History and Literature. I was more knowledgeable about the Meiji Restoration and the work of the famous Japanese novelist and essayist, Natsume Soseki, than I was about what to do in an English language classroom.

While the goal for the program I was to teach in was simple to articulate—prepare the students to take regular university classes taught in English—just how I was supposed to help them reach that goal was almost completely opaque to me. Seeking advice from the then director of ICU's Freshman English Program[3] about what to do, what was expected in the way of assignments and student progress, what texts there

might be for me to use, I was told that there were no texts for the classes I was going to teach—expository writing—that I should, "You know, teach the usual things: topic sentence, introduction, body, conclusion, that sort of thing."

So there I was. My EFL preparation while at university consisted of a hurriedly arranged one-term, twice weekly evening supplemental class, where, as I recall, my main project was a poster picture of three or four fish each one smaller than the next about to ve swallowed by the bigger fish.

The poster was my response to an assignment on how to teach the comparatives bigger than and less than. I was, in short, like many other foreign English teachers in Japan at that time, untrained and scared as I walked into my first class.

The resumes of the other foreign English teachers at ICU in those days in one important way read much like my own. There was the Ph.D. student majoring in Chinese History, trying to earn enough money to continue his studies, and his wife; the wife of a Mathematics professor, an English Literature major (perhaps our most qualified teacher), a French Literature major. None of us, as I later learned, had even heard of TESOL much less belonged to the organization. None of us were trained EFL teachers. Most of us held only BA degrees, and those in fields that, for the most part, were not particularly relevant to teaching English to non-native speakers. And this was at what is probably the best well-known university for

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3) In 1986 and 1987, after nearly ten years of preparatory work, ICU significantly revised its English language curriculum and changed the name of the program from the Freshman English Program to the English Language Program.

English language education in all of Japan. The situation in other parts of the country, if anything,was even more dismal. The general attitude, only slightly exaggerated here for effect, seemed to be: Any foreign looking face will do.

For a number of years in the late 1970s, I appeared on a TV program designed to teach English to Junior High School students broadcast by Japan's public television giant, NHK. Some of the programs were recorded on location at rural junior high schools in various outlying parts of Japan. This part-time job afforded me an opportunity to meet a large number of Junior High School English teachers from Hokkaido in the north to Kyushu in the south, and I was able to both observe them in the classroom and spend time outside of class with them. Almost without exception, the language used to communicate on these trips was Japanese, so poor was the English teachers' ability to communicate with me in English. Their classes were conducted entirely in Japanese, and the few English words that were used were difficult for me to understand because frequently they were uttered in katakanago, or English words rendered in Japanese phonology.

In those days, in the countryside of Japan, I was an oddity. For most of the students, I was their first encounter with a real live foreigner. Most of the students had to muster their courage to utter the familiar greeting: *haro.* Beyond this, communicating in English was virtually impossible. This is not surprising, nor is it likely a unique story in the annals of English language education in other Asian countries.These children had essentially no opportunity to be exposed to the language as it is used to communicate. There were classroom

tape recorders used mainly to paly music and simple (and generally awkward) dialogs. There were TV programs of the sort I was involved in which were beamed into many junior high school English classes. But these, too, frequently distorted naturalness in order to stretch a grammatical point. At sessions to edit the TV scripts for the show I appeared on, when I would question the use of a particular expression in the proposed context, commenting that I wouldn't say it that way, I was routinely asked whether or not I could say it that way, the writers and directors anxious to squeeze multiple example of the focal grammar point into the script. The result was scripts chock full of the grammar point of the week, but not used in ways that sounded natural.

With only their teacher and their English class, and the few educational shows broadcast each week available as sources of input, the situation was a prototypical example of an acquisition-poor environment. It should not be surprising that the level of English learned by most people under these conditions was quite low. The failure of the school system and the universities even to teach the Japanese how to speak English left the field wide open for language entrepreneurs. The huge number of language and culture centers offering instruction in English, the variety and number of self-study books promising English proficiency in a matter of days or weeks, all attest to the general level of dissatisfaction.

In the 1970s there was a genre of argument going around that the Japanese, in fact could not learn English. Some suggested that the Japanese ear was different, that Japanese heard as music what others hear as noise. Others suggested

that Japanese oral tracts were incapable of making English sounds. While these arguments may have comforted some, they are in fact rather alarming. Fortunately, they are easily refuted by looking around the English speaking world where hundreds of thousands of Japanese descendants speak English natively. Still there existed, and there exists to this day, a sense on the part of some that Japanese are just not hook at learning English.

3. Progress

I would argue that much has changed in Japan since the late 1970s—much that has affected the state of English language education in this country. In the time and space allotted, I cannot discuss all these changes, but I would like to look closely at two areas that have influenced thinking on language learning and teaching greatly, and one that has expanded opportunities for using and being exposed to English. In the former category are the development of what is today called the Japan Exchange Teaching, or JET, Program, and what, for lack of a better name, might just be referred to as the professionalization of the English language teacher in Japan. In the latter category is a society that is far more mobile than it once was and which has access to a myriad of technological means for interaction with English speakers around the world.

4. Introducing a foreign element into the mix

In 1977, the japanese Ministry of Education (Monbusho) started an experimental program in the country's senior high schools. Nine native English speakers were invited to assist the regular (Japanese) height school English teachers. It may seem ludicrous to think that nine individuals could have much of an impact, but the program grew. And it grew despite the numerous complaints and difficulties it created for all involved—with the possible exception of the students, of course. In 1994, there were over four thousand assistant teachers across the country officially sponsored by the Monbusho and a substantial number of others sponsored by local school districts.In contrast with the approximately 60,000 regular (Japanese) secondary school English teachers, the number is still small, but the JET program has expanded tremendously; its effects have expanded as well.

In Mitaka City, where my university is located, I was asked to help establish a city-wide native English speaker in the classroom program for the seven public junior high schools starting in the mid 1980s. The first year, the program was a 14 hour program. Two hours for each of the schools. Not even enough hours for the assistant teacher to visit all the English classes. (Each public junior high school in Mitaka has between five and eight classes of English). In the second year of the program, the number of contact hours jumped to 60, and from there to 120 the next year, and to over 200 in the fourth year of the program. In just a few years the assistant teachers were visiting every class every week. This same pattern was being

repeated across the country.

Little by little, the Japanese English teachers have had to adjust—unhappily in some cases, gratefully in others. The introduction of these untrained native English speaker in the classroom created dilemmas for the Japanese English teachers. What were they to do with this person? How could they cover the material if they had to incorporate elements into the classroom designed to cater to their assistant. And since, particularly in the early years of the program, the assistant teachers perhaps only visited a school once or twice a year, and saw a group of students but one time, what could they expect to accomplish?

The benefits of the introduction of these people was not to be measured in andy immediate English language gains. The benefits were more subtle. The mere presence of the native speakers, most who arrived with no Japanese language skills and little of any know ledge of the Japanese culture, forced English teachers to speak English themselves at least some of the time in class. More important than this even, the existence of the raw foreign recruits in the community required dealing with their needs and problems on a daily basis. For many English teachers, the assistant teacher was their first experience dealing with a foreigner. For the students, the foreign assistant was, in most cases, the first foreigner they had ever seen. Even one visit a year was a memorable moment and may have sparked motivation where before little existed. One benefit according to Minoru Wada, former Curricular Specialist for the Monbusho, was that school children could begin to overcome their fear of foreigners.[4]

5. Professionalization of the field

The language teachers at ICU today are a much different group of people than those I found when I first arrived in 1975. Again, my own experience seems to have been a typical one,at least in some ways. Despite being ill-trained as a teacher, uninformed about language learning and the nature of language, somehow, I not only survived those early days in the classroom, I ended up becoming interested enough in teaching language to decide to return to school to learn something about what I had been doing for four years by guess and by gosh. Between 1979 and 1984 I was a graduate student in languages and linguistics. In 1984 I returned to ICU, the proud possessor of a shiny new degree and a pocket full of ideas about how to teach English. I found a department that even then was shifting away from hiring faculty wives and recent college graduates simply because they could speak English. Today, the minimum requirements for being hired as an instructor in our program are a Masters Degree or its equivalent in TESOL, or a related field, teaching experience in an English for academic purposes environment and evidence of having made contributions to the field either by presenting papers at conferences or by publishing the results of research efforts. The faculty level positions in our department all require a doctorate in English, linguistics, or a related field. We have become a much more

4) Some of the statements in this section are based on comments made by Minoru Wada, Monbusho Curriculum specialist, in an interview with Virginia LoCastro which appeared in The Language teacher, Volume 12. Number9, August 1988.

highly and much more specially trained group.

Looking around the rest of the country as well, one can notice (especially as the economy has put a pinch on some borderline English enterprises) a pronounced drop in the image of the English teacher in Japan as the "world traveler," the untrained, but ambitious speaker of English trying to make a living on his or her wits. Instead, the country's universities and language school, even, are filled with English teachers who have been professionally trained. This has speeded up significantly the introduction of current thinking on teaching methodology into the country.

6. Opening the doors

Japan has traditionally been known as an insular country—an attitude fostered most enthusiastically by the Japanese themselves over the years. This attitude may still remain in some quarters, but the rate at which young Japanese are traveling and living overseas continues to accelerate despite the recent downturn in the nation's economy. And in the other direction, colleges from around the world trying to cash in on the power of the yen went on an expansionary boom in this country over the last 15 years. Again, a weakening economy has begun to separate the wheat from the chaff, but foreign university campuses have become a lasting presence in this country.

It seems that virtually every Japanese university now has some study abroad program and at ICU approximately one

third of the entering students have already been abroad for more than one month—many have lived abroad for years by the time the arrive at university. In the 1970s ICU had junior year exchange programs that accommodated about one tenth of its student body. Today, that percentage has not changed much, but an expansion of the types of programs in the last 10 years has opened up additional study abroad opportunities lasting from six weeks to nine months which allow approximately one half of all ICU students who have no previous experience overseas, to live and study in an English speaking country during the course of their undergraduate career. Everywhere we go to establish a new overseas English program, and our programs currently exist in the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australis, and New Zealand, we find other Japanese universities exploring the same sorts of opportunities for their students. It has become difficult, in fact, to find quality English language programs in desirable places that are not already over populated with Japanese students.

The doors to Japan have been opened in another significant way. Always at the technological cutting edge, Japan has entered the information age traveling full speed ahead. For the past 15 years or so, since the introduction of stereo television sets, Japanese stations have broadcast foreign movies, sporting events and, more recently, even their own news programs in Japanese on one channel and in English on the other. These simulcasts provide a rich source of listening practice for those English learners motivated enough to tune in.

In the past two years or so, Japanese universities have embraced the internet as a means for enriching teaching and

for exposing students to a wild world of information on any subject that tickles their fancy. Space does not permit going into details here, but the presence of computers and the introduction of internet connections have had a visible impact on ICU's student body. And, like other Japanese universities, ICU now offers instruction on research and writing via the internet. At the graduate level, courses which use e-mail for students to communicate with professors at foreign universities are beginning to appear. To accommodate the growing demand, each year the number of computer terminals around campus increases and each year the lines to use those that are hooked up to the "net" lengthen. Access to English speakers, or perhaps I should say English writers, native and otherwise is now, literally, at the fingertips of our students. The introduction of this technology, will, I believe directly address two of the key factors in Bernard Spolsky's mnemonic formula for language learning, opportunity for use and motivation to take advantage of those opportunities.[5)]

7. Prospects :Dawning of a Communicative Age?

As with foreign language teaching pretty much everywhere, I suspect, as the experts and publishing gurus (to use a Mark

5) In his 1989 book book, Conditions for Second Language Acquisition, Bernard Spolsky suggests that one way to grasp the scope of SLA phenomena is by referring to the mnemonic formula: Kf=Kp + A + M+ O, where Kf stands for knowledge of language at some future time, Kp stands for current knowledge (both linguistic and O represents the opportunities that exist for the learner to use the language.

Clarke term) propose the latest and guaranteed-to-be-successful teaching methods, little by little the word spreads throughout the teaching community, the heavy wheels of educational bureaucracy turn, and Lo and behold, several years later teachers are more or less using some of the "new" techniques or methods. And in every case,the degree to which and the clarity with which the new methods get implemented depend on the teachers' educational and cultural backgrounds, their openness to change, and their own language ability. In Japan "new methods" seem to reach the hinterlands about 15 to 20 years after they first show up in the professional journals.

In the late 1970s, the principal teaching method used in Japan's secondary schools was Grammar Translation, or more accurately, perhaps Translation Reading. (See below.) At ICU, the 1970s, the methodology was a combination of pattern practice, a remnant of the Audio-Lingual tradition and something that did not really have a name yet, but which has come to be known in the last 15 years or so as "Content-Based Instruction." In the early 1980s ICU dropped it's last ties to the audio lingual era and introduced a "Communicative Strategies" component into its curriculum, about 10 years after Dell Hymes coined the phrase communicative competence.

Almost twenty years after years after the concept first was articulated, the Japanese Ministry of Education's English language guidelines called for teaching "Communicative English" in the secondary schools in 1989. Today, more than twenty-five years later, teachers and textbook writers are struggling with ways to introduce communicative activities into their texts and classes.

Discerning just what the Monbusho meant by the guidelines has spawned a mini-industry itself. The Language Teacher, one of The Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) main publications has dedicated several volumes to interpretation and discussion of the guidelines,and numerous articles on the topic have appeared both in JALT's other publication, The JALT Journal and in The Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) main publication, JACET Bulletin.

A brief sample of the guidelines may give some of the flavor of this important document—important because it forms the focus of so much curricular planning energy, and because all the Monbusho sanctioned high school textbooks must reflect the new guidelines, or else risk not receiving the Ministry's approval. The guidelines for Oral Communication A (There are three levels of oral communication,A,B,and C, in the guidelines.) state that students ought to aim for "learning to use the skills of listening to and speaking English in personal, everyday situations at home, in school, and in society, and to express oneself simply and promptly," To do this, "It is desirable to be guided by the purpose and the situation of the talk and in the choice of appropriate language."[6] Just what is meant by simple expression or appropriate language is up to the textbook writers and teachers to decide.

Here again, my own professional life has intersected with the Japanese English language teaching world at the secondary

6) Quotations are translations by Richard Good, Christopher Madelely, and Nigel Cater of the Guideline Statements as printed in their article "The New Monbusho Guidelines", The Language Teacher, Volume 17, Number 6, June 1993.

level. Since 1991, I have been associated with one of the major Japanese textbook publishers, working with a team of university and high school "experts" to produce a series of Monbusho-approved high school English texts. I have had the opportunity to see first hand how the guidelines are interpreted. And again and again, I have observed how the pressures of appealing to the current high school teachers, accommodating their wishes and in some cases limitations, and making a profit have affected the sorts of passages and dialogs and exercises that ended up in the texts. I suspect that many impartial observers would look at the new texts and ask—with good reason—just how they differ from the pre-communicative age texts in the country.

Last November(1995) in an informative review of the purposes of teaching English in Japan, Graham Law (JALT Journal, Volume17, Number 2) suggested that the drive to teach English for communicative purposes begs the question: What is teaching English for non-communicative purposes. Law identifies three non-communicative motives that have dominated the English teaching scene in Japan: English as a classical language, English as an inverted image of Japanese, and English as a set of arbitrary rules.

Teaching English as a classical language, Law suggests comes from seeing the role of English in much the way Latin and Greek were perceived in Renaissance Europe, as a vehicle for the one-way transmission of culture. Stretching back to the Meiji Era(1867-1912) English has been viewed as a way for Japanese to get information about life outside Japan, but not as a way to communicate things about Japan to the outside

world. The practice of yakudoku, or translation reading where the goal is first, accurate translation, then rendering of the text into good Japanese, and finally understanding the valued contents of the translated text, typifies this approach. the focus is not communicating in English but on understanding and appreciating the contents of the foreign language text.

Law's argument regarding English as an inverted image of Japanese suggests that English is more a way of reflecting on what Japanese is not than on what English is. The consequences for methodology are very similar to the first non-communicative purpose above.

English as an arbitrary set of rules, Law claims, is intimately tied with the country's college entrance exams,and the values of obedience, merit and egalitarianism. Specifically, the extent to which a student can learn English as an abstraction, will determine how well he or she does on the entrance exams. Every student has an equal opportunity to demonstrate his or her douryoku or tireless efforts to master the "arcane" rules of a foreign language. The idea is that all start out at the same point, zero knowledge, at the start of middle school (seventh grade) and those that accomplish the most, memorize the largest number of grammar rules and idiomatic phrases, do best on the entrance exams and enter the best schools.

8. Conclusions

Introducing communicative language teaching into this

tradition is a challenge for those of us who teach English in Japan. I am largely in agreement with Law's analysis. I believe that the cultural history that underlies foreign language education efforts in Japan significantly affect the ways in which communicative language learning will ultimately be interpreted and implemented.

Having said this, I believe that the foreign language learning landscape in Japan today looks vastly different than it did 20 years ago. As outlined above, significant numbers of Japanese have significant amounts of overseas experience by the time they graduate from college. At ICU we are seeing a new breed of young, highly fluent and articulate English speaking Japanese apply for our instructor teaching positions. ICU's graduate program in English language teaching is attracting students with higher levels of English ability. These students go on to teach in the nation's junior and senior high schools, gradually raising the level of English proficiency among the ranks of teachers. Together with the impact of the JET program, junior and senior high school students are being exposed to more fluent teachers, more highly trained teachers, and they have access to increasingly sophisticated technological links to the world through audio, video and computer technologies.

Room for improvement is still vast, but fewer Japanese will be able to claim that they don't speak English because they lacked opportunities to learn it, I believe that as the country fully enters the information age, as its young people continue to flock overseas for significant portions of time, as well trained and fluent Japanese teachers of English enter the junior and senior high schools, more of the cultural barriers to

learning English will weaken and more and more people will see value in English for communicative purposes. I believe the stage is set to address one final area that needs to be improved—motivation.

Why should all Japanese be forced to try to learn English anyway? Do all Japanese really need to use the language? Obviously not. If they did,they would learn it better. In the absence of genuine need for many Japanese, one must find ways to foster more positive motivation, more enthusiasm for learning the language. I believe that the Japanese would be better served by a system that permitted greater choice. Allow students to select their foreign language in high school. Over-emphasis on english is not only one-dimensional, it ignores a real need in Japan for speakers of Chinese, Korean and other Asian languages.

Secondary teachers and students alike implore the universities to change the focus of their entrance exams, or to drop them altogether. To leave things as they are contributes to emphasis on the old teaching methods and the old goals, declarative rather than procedural knowledge, and worse to widespread negative feelings about learning english at all. Here and there voices of change and even real change itself can be observed. This year, Tama University has decided not to include English as an entrance exam subject for some of its students. Their belief is that success will come easier by accepting students who desire to learn the language at college, rather than accepting those students who have exhausted themselves preparing for the exams.

Teaching English for communicative purposes should help

more Japanese students learn English. Ultimately, however, I agree with a statement made a long time ago by John Schumann.[7] "[W]hether we use the audio-lingual method, the cognitive code method, the Gattegno method, the Asher method, the Curran method, the suggestopedic method or an individualized method, we will achieve equally unsatisfactory results in the long run because language learning is not a matter of method, but is a matter of acculturation..." I quoted this same passage at a large symposium on english teaching in Japan several years ago, and I was asked by one teacher in the audience, couldn't I say anything more positive to cheer teachers and students up. I replied that I did not find the opinion a discouraging word. We cannot ignore the facts as we perceive them. I believe that the solutions to the language learning problems in Japan are to be found in the developments outside the classroom that have made English learners, but it is moving in that direction.

7) Schumann, John 1978. "The acculturation model for second language acquisition", in R.C.Gingras (ed.) Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Teaching. Washington D.C.: The Center for Applied Linguistics. 27-50.