
Asian Literacies

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This article is about alphabetic, cultural and technological divides in Asian standards of English. There are forms of Asian Literacy that are inherently different from Western forms of literacy. This article identifies some features of contemporary Asiatic literacies that are historically and culturally at variance from English. The technological revolutions in information that are transforming knowledge-based economies in Asia and the Pacific Rim are impacting on how these literacies operate.

Making meaning is a universal human intention, and in that respect people from Asia are no different from any other humans on this planet. The syllabics, writing systems, vocabularies, and grammars that pertain to Cantonese and Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, and other languages of Far East Asia are, however, different in nature from the stem of Indo-European languages with which most migrants to Australia are familiar. So what are the implications of Asian literacies for teachers of English?

Current technological, cultural and literacy practices in the Far East described in this article show how Far East Asian people approach English, and to explain why literacy testing that has become popular in recent years in Australia, Canada, the US and England is not practiced or relevant to most of Asia. The implications for teachers of English is to widen their understanding of literacy so as to include a richer understanding than one that is limited to definitions of literacy dominated by Western pedagogic, or current testing practices in Australia.

Indeed, Asian literacies are by-passing conventional norms of Western literacy and inventing new ones, leaving the educationally orthodox practice of basic skills testing rather as a grammar-oriented vestige of the last century, than as an indicator of new knowledge skills or proficiencies pertinent to intellectual advancement in the knowledge management and information age that this century has heralded.

Introduction

Education is one of many human endeavors that are subject to the varied forces of globalization. The presence of English as a desirable global language is not in dispute. Another feature of globalization in English education is a convergence of western educational practices for reasons that are similar and often political across English-speaking countries.

One example of this is basic skills testing that is practiced in primary and secondary schools in English speaking countries. Another example is grappling with global standards in English, as enunciated by such tests as the International English Language Testing System

(IELTS), Teaching of English in Commerce (TOEIC) and Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Given the increasingly global use of English as a standard language of communication, leaders of such English speaking countries, from President George Bush to Prime Ministers Tony Blair and John Howard, to name but three, are interpreting a conservative and rather retroactive public opinion in education. This is illustrated by their prioritized expenditure on basic skills testing and privatization of education on the one hand and their running down state resourcing in education in terms of staffing, salaries and research and development on the other.

Asian countries are not immune from these same political vacillations, but literacies are approached from an entirely different basis. For the purposes of containing this discussion, Japan, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan and South Korea are identified as countries geographically limited by this discussion. Features of contemporary Asian literacies are enumerated.

Defining Literacy/Literacies

Literacy is a heavily contested site, as has already been flagged by reference to basic skills testing. Writers in the field have acknowledged that

Constructing critical literacies captures the locality and diversity of current approaches- approaches that have often been in theoretical, practical, and political contest with one another. (Luke and Freebody, 1997)

Literacy can be defined in many ways, and many politicians in the west like to see literacy as a skills-based issue, one in which the absence of skill (however that skill may be defined) is seen as a problem, a deficit. Others prefer to examine the social context of any literacy, and post-modern approaches ask questions of critical literacy, that is questions of power, gender and presences and absences in any given text. What also cannot be denied is that the debate about literacy has altered and is continuing to modify notions of canonical literary value, so that faculties of English, which have traditionally been located in a values-based, Leavisite reading of literature, have come under severe attack by many readers. These wish to level the notion of text across lines less contained in whatever literary, aesthetic, timeless, universal etc value any given text may have (Lankshear, 1997), and deconstruct Euro-centric, dead white male supremacies of text in favor of a more level playing field of text across the globe, time, form and gender.

In approaching my preferred definition of literacy, a disclosure seems appropriate. I was born in the middle of Europe (Switzerland), and after the first 16 years of my life my family moved to Australia, where I completed my education at several universities, taught foreign languages and English in four high schools over 18 years, and then moved to pre-service teacher education in two Australian universities for five years.

That first continental migration experience in many ways prepared me for my next one, which was, in 1999, to move to Japan where I have been teaching Asian university students ever since¹. In my fifth year of teaching here, I feel further authorized by the sum of this life experience in my studied, worked and lived background to make the remarks which follow.

A definition of literacy that works across the East/West divide

Literacy is the act of making meaning from any text. It is an act of interpretation and understanding. It is an act of making sense of any printed, electronic, audio or visual text, and the act at once creates personal meaning for the reader. As any linguist knows, much interaction or communication is indeed non-verbal, but visual and contextual. The quality and detail of any literacy depends on the reader's thinking and decoding capacity, which in the final analysis does come down to an ability to use language to convey meaning. That language may be graphic, may use non-verbal cues, but ultimately is located in linguistic and cogitative proficiency to name and react to the feelings, ideas, and concepts that are being communicated. This rather lame definition does not exclude notions of critical literacy, but is stated deliberately in such a way as to be cross-cultural, inclusive, and universal.

Silent versus spoken culture

Little understood, but largely significant, is the fact that Far Eastern (Japanese) culture is predominantly defined in unspoken forms of communication, silence, eye contact, bodily movement, and facial expression. So much so, that silence in learning groups has been one of the most contrasting features with that of Western culture, that is, a chattering world.

This is a significant reason why eliciting answers in large groups of Japanese audiences is difficult, as they are used to silent absorption of messages, rather than interactive responses in learning situations such as schools or universities which might be the typical Western situation. In fact, a room's silence can carry multiple meanings: quiet anticipation, approval, disdain, disapproval, absent understanding and so on. So silence is one of the most defining literacies in Japanese places of learning. The Chinese do not exhibit the same silences, but Koreans would locate themselves somewhere in between.

Table 1: Silent versus Talking Culture

Far Eastern literacy characteristic	Western literacy characteristic
Silence	Talking
Eye contact avoided, used only rarely	Eye contact sought
Heavy reliance on body language	Body language only one indicator, subject to confirmation by other means, usually verbal
Ideas gradually convincing by their inherent value after reflective consideration	Ideas often convincing by the volume, tone and repetition of transmission, rather than their inherent value
Implication for teachers of English: to be more sensitive to and aware of non-verbal cues	Implication for teachers of English: to strive for balance between verbal and non-verbal cues, so as to have a broader, more inclusive range of assessing communicative ability.

Dominant Far East Asian Literacies in the New Millennium

Print formats

A remnant from the previous millennium, printed information will continue to play a role, albeit decreasing, in this information age. There are several indicators of this. The actual

number of newspapers sold, letters sent and postage stamps licked is decreasing, as the internet, e-mail and advanced telephony is rapidly making communication faster, cheaper and more effective. Commodities of this millennium are partly the same as those of the last millennium, but on closer examination the new commodities of the 21st Century are growing quickly and are also increasing economic market share. These are the commodities of knowledge, of money, of travel, of communicating, of computing. They include financial bill paying services, banking and travel. Reading newspapers are increasingly available on the net. Computer-assisted outlets such as EFT's, electronic registering and booking services are contributing to the steady decrease in paper-based and postage dependent envelopes and formats. The ubiquitous availability of fax machines, while still many of these are reliant on paper, further contributes to a decline in the need for postal services. While on-line purchase rates have been less than widely predicted, there is nevertheless an increasing number of people who use the net as a preferred way of gaining information, making a purchase, saving time and traveling distances and exchanging valuable information.

The Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs in Canberra estimates that one million Australians are leading expatriate lives in 2003. Of 10 families that were given immigration visas to Australia in 2002, 6 were Asian. That means about 60,000 migrants are from Asia on an annual basis, and have been so for several years. The Department calculates that based on current migration levels, the percentage of Asian-born people living in Australia will reach 7.5% by 2041.² Of course, the number of people living in Australia who are of Asian descent, though not necessarily born in Asia, is far greater, and can reasonably be assumed to approach 20%, give or take extents to which people identify with, absorb and practice the cultural practices and languages of their parents, grandparents and ancestors.

The implication of this for English teachers is to carefully read the statements of liberal tolerance of cultural and religious differences that underpin the multicultural policies of Australia, so as to ensure an equal and harmonious existence for all Australians within a diverse society. This is easily said, but quickly compounded by different perceptions of gender, history, politics, color and so on. Australia, with the exception of Aboriginal people, has had a reasonable success with its policy of pluralism, though at times in its relatively short history (1901–2003) it has been punctuated by racism and other forms of discrimination.

Japan prides itself on having the largest newspaper and magazine consumption per population than any other country. I am not sure how accurate this assertion is, but I can testify to the fact that newspapers are indeed widely available and closely read, more so than in Australia. Notwithstanding this claim to dead tree consumption compared by population density to that of other countries, even Japan is experiencing a drop in newspaper circulation, due to the rise of electronically transmittable media.

The implication of this for teachers of English is to be aware that you have a generation of people who are habitually updating themselves electronically, arguably more often and more instantaneously than people who prefer to hold a newspaper which by definition does not carry breaking news. So we have more informed clientele, though often that clientele has only read the headline, or saw the picture, lacking the background story or depth to the many factors that make any story newsworthy.

The capacity of journalists in Japan to influence public opinion is also greater than in

Australia, probably because ideas are respected more without first finding a need to satirize or ridicule the author with comments *ad hominem*. Having said that, it is a feature of newspaper circulations in many countries this century, that in fact they are in decline. The penetration of broadband is at such a rate that the private ownership of PCs and Notebooks in Japan, once seen as statistically behind the Western world, is rapidly improving. It is fair to say that the uptake and use of information technology in Japan, written, recorded, video and digitalized, is foremost in the world. A secondary question, how critically and analytically that same information is digested, I will leave for readers to decide.

The Alphabetic Divide

One may think that with such a healthy magazine and newspaper range and availability as exists in Japan, such media would be widely available in a range of languages. Think again. The dichotomy between East and West may be nowhere more clearly seen than in the alphabetic divide. The energy that is given in Japan to translating books into Japanese has to be seen to be believed. Three examples will suffice.

Naturally, translating fiction titles such as the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling are a publisher's bonanza in China and Japan. Of no less popularity is the translation of self-help books, such as *Rich Dad Poor Dad*, (Robert Kiosaky), which again are sitting next to many similar self-help titles in Japanese in any bookshop. But what surprised more was that when it comes to books with a specialized market, such as academic books, translators are often given the task of rendering an English text into Japanese at enormous effort.

One example of this is *500 Nations, a History of North American Indians* by Alvin Josephy, which was published in 1996, but which teams of translators are working on to render into Japanese as much as seven years after original publication. The same effort goes to the video series being prepared for NHK broadcast. Some of these translators enjoy the work for its own sake, doing it as volunteers, so as to make non-Japanese cultures more accessible. It is a historical truism to say, as many have, that Japan is the last country to be opened to the outside world. Its insular nature and geographic position is one reason for this. The oriental/occidental dichotomy is another.

Another example is a book I used for teaching Oceanic Studies called *Cultural Atlas of Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific* by Richard Nile and Christian Clerk. I bought this book in Sydney for AUD 12. One of my Japanese colleagues had been a contributing translator for the Japanese edition, which is selling for more than AUD 300 in Japan, that is, more than 25 times the purchase price of the original. This is a glossy B4 size hardcover that contains 240 pages most of which are color illustrated. The Australian-purchased volume had been printed in Spain by Reader's Digest in 1996, while the Japanese language edition had utilized a Japanese printer in Tokyo, and appeared in 2000. Naturally, divergent print-runs would account for some of the price difference, but the real difference, I feel, lies less in the book's example of globalization, than of the tendency to bring everything back into the mono-cultural norms of Japan. This is what is meant by the alphabetic divide: although the number of Japanese actively studying English (as defined by sitting for English tests) is among the largest of Far East Asian countries, the sheer multiples of tens of millions who cannot read English and who can only read Japanese still means that what is not Japanese is on the other

side of the (unread) cultural divide. This alphabetic divide is so immense that it contributes to the accentuation, rather than the bridging of the East-West dichotomy.

By the way, I suspect that a Chinese language edition is not available, suggesting there that it may pay the reader more to learn English, so as to be able to avail themselves of the original.

The point is that huge effort is expended to convert the occidental into Japanese. This energy, if it were spent on educating Japanese speakers to learn English, would promote global objectives in education to a greater extent. So there are industries and efforts to maintain the alphabetic divide. What is the implication of this alphabetic divide for teachers of English? There are many, but I will confine the discussion to two.

Overcoming alphabetic gulfs. The first question is for a teacher of English to ask him/herself if they are mono, bi or multilingual. If the answer is anything other than the first, they will bring to their work some understanding of the difficulties for learners of English as a second language. Yet such bi or multi-lingual teachers may still be located in an Indo-European tree of languages, and are thus relatively immune from the alphabetic divide. Now if you are Thai, Cantonese or Mandarin, Japanese or Korean in ethnic origin as a teacher of English, you will have experienced various manifestations of the alphabetic divide and you will therefore be more sensitive to learning requirements designed to overcome gulfs of alphabet, of calligraphy, of reading and writing.

Secondly, if you are a native English mono-lingual speaker, please do not discriminate, consciously or unconsciously, against English as a second language learners who are approaching their task from behind the alphabetic wall of Asian calligraphies. This means being particularly tolerant to a passage written by an Asian student that is clear in meaning, but which may show less than grammatical perfection. Meaning must precede conformity to grammatical orthodoxies, not the other way round.

The Alphabetic Divide and Electronic Dictionaries

Second only to the spread of mobile phones in Asia among learners is the availability of variously priced electronic dictionaries. These are priced from under AUD 100 up to more than AUD 500. Some include one or two dictionaries, others more. Some allow for the searched word to be heard, others allow exchange of language by memory chip. All are manufactured for the Asian user wanting to learn English. Their design is not encouraging for English speakers to learn Japanese. All of them are bi-directional, that is Japanese-English, English-Japanese. They have become phenomenally popular in the last five years, so that today virtually every student of English has one. They are a status symbol only secondary to the mobile phone, a Louis Vitton handbag, a Chanel perfume, a Hermes scarf or a daggy and daggily worn pair of jeans.

There are several dictates that have shaped their popularity and operation. One is the languages that they are available in. Another is the bi-directionality of their use, or their one-directionality. While many English Japanese dictionaries are on the market, many are not user friendly as they assume a high level of kanji³ familiarity. That is, they have been purposefully designed with an Asian primary user, and have not been conceptualized from the standpoint of a native English speaker wishing to learn an Asian language⁴. Only in the last year have

dictionaries arrived which allow initial translations into hiragana or katakana⁵, or into other languages such as Chinese/Japanese, French/Japanese, or German/Japanese.

Table 2: Electronic Language Aids Available (Dictionaries and translators using electronic storage and retrieval with or without voice assistance)

Japanese-English Dictionary	English-Japanese Dictionary
Chinese-English Dictionary	English-Chinese Dictionary
Korean-English Dictionary	English-Korean Dictionary
English- Japanese (Quicktionary Handheld-scanner)	Available only one-way, as from English to Chinese Traditional and Chinese Simplified. No Korean
English-Japanese Computer based Translation software (low accuracy-rate)	Japanese-English Computer based Translation software (low hit rate)
Dictionaries retrievable on the Net via computer (wireless ready) or mobile	If you use a computer with a Japanese operating system, you can load English software onto it and use it. To do so is a cost-incentive.

Implication for English teachers: where possible, allow the use of electronic dictionaries and mobile phones in classrooms. (Mobile phones access language translation sites and dictionaries). In any Japanese university today (there are 715 in 2003), more than 95% of students of English have an electronic dictionary, a mobile phone or both.

Table 3: Electronic Aids not Available

Chinese Japanese-dictionary (from 2003)	Japanese-Chinese dictionary (from 2003)
Korean- Japanese dictionary	Japanese-Korean dictionary
Japanese to English Quicktionary not available. No bi-directionality	If you buy a Japanese MP3 reader and software in Japan to download music from the internet from a computer using an English operating system, it won't work.
If you use a computer with an English operating system, you will not be able to load Japanese software onto it unless the software is stand-alone, especially designed for that purpose: it is cost-inhibitive to do so other than load Asian script-reading ability	

Implication for English teachers: realize that such aids may not yet, or are only just becoming available in the language of your learner. This means that your teaching must have the flexibility to allow those students who can use gadgets to do so, without discriminating against those who can't. Focus on the quality of outcome. Do not focus on the equality of method by which they learn, as different people have different ways, different means, and different economic priorities. You cannot discriminate against a person who is using no dictionary, a book-based dictionary, an electronic dictionary, a mobile or a computer. In the literacy fields, the means justify the communicated ends.

The mobile phone: a new literacy

The ubiquity of the mobile phone has risen arguably nowhere more quickly than in Asia, especially South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan. In 2002 it is an exceptional circumstance that sees any one of my students without such a communication device. To some extent it is

fashion, to a large extent convenience and versatility (especially compared to the costs of conventional telephones that plug into a wall). To most people, even ardent internet users, a mobile is handier than a computer or PDA (personal digital assistant). A mobile today in the Far East is a utility as indispensable as food, as necessary to sustain your social environment as air, as basic as talking. The mobile defines the social circle in which you move, by number, by frequency, by location and by activity. It is common for students, especially talkative ones, to spend \$AUD 200 a month on calls, though most would be around 50 to 100.

Outside Western Europe and Israel, Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea are the leading Asian countries in mobile phone penetration. There is a lot of market discussion concerning G3 and broadband, but Japan's example of up-take of the mobile phone ranks among the highest in the world (I have only seen Iceland as outstripping Japan's mobile ownership per 1000 head of population).⁶

The mobile phone penetration in Japan exceeded 50% of the population by 1999. Actually, other countries are also passing that mark, but more recently and fewer in numbers than one might assume (Finland and UK stand out as having passed the mark, while others, notably the USA, China and India, have not as yet).⁷

The rapid advent of the mobile has added several significant literacy dimensions. Just as a fax is faster than a conventionally posted letter, the mobile too has several advantages over the conventional landline telephone: it offers more privacy, it is convenient in all sorts of places, it has the benefit of e-mail or sms or short messages, you can retrieve internet data such as maps, weather, tickets etc. The mobile is just as useful for work as it is for private business. You can keep in touch faster, and know where people you want to meet are earlier than by any other means. The presence of the mobile spells a literacy that enables living without as heavy a reliance on printed text as was the case last century. It is true that SMS depends on textual skills, but here too simplifications are making such messages easier and easier. The mobile phone more than any other distinguishing feature separates the under twenties generation today in Asia from the under 20s generation 20 years ago. It is a social revolution rivaling the use of computers.

Implications of mobile phone ownership for English teachers

One of my quieter yet diligent students one day was brooding over a worksheet I had handed out with her mobile active in her hand. I walked up, thinking that she was checking her e-mail or phone messages only to find that she had accessed an internet based English-Japanese dictionary as an aid to completing her class task.

Teachers must be susceptible to the idea that the mobile if used for educational rather than social reasons, is in fact a valuable adjunct to the classroom, just as wireless ready laptop computers also can access your internet-based course outlines and support material that help the student achieve your course objectives. In my university students surf the net, write their assignments and store their assignments on the university server, in drop-boxes and in teachers' folders. Using Blackboard (an electronic bulletin board software in English and Japanese), they can read the syllabus, check assignments, join discussion rooms, and so on. All features of e-learning. The notion of students writing to their teacher via e-mail is one that is also increasing in popularity.

The implications are that as communication becomes easier, out-of-classroom e-learning

also is increasing as a significant adjunct and support to the in-classroom learning, some of which may indeed be e-learning (wireless-ready) based or supported. The next generation of telephony, as its supports video and other media channels, will further expand this aspect of e-learning as an adjunct to what happens in the classroom in non-electronic ways.

Video games

The advent of Sony Playstation 2 and the Microsoft Gamebox, Nintendo hardware and innumerable handheld video games has been so intense, so sophisticated and so competitive in the last five years, that the availability of a large range of games for such devices are producing a generation of “gamers”, young people who are fixated by the challenges contained in these games. People who can play them for hours, exploring the software writers’ most elaborate intentions, are people who enjoy the creative, analytical, explorative pioneering aspects of gaming.

This is a group of game users who are in love with software, and software writers, because of the software’s ability to provide thrills and spills, gains and losses, points and lives, cyber-based riches and virtual, vicarious experiences of love and warfare, gamesmanship and strategy, planning and, of course, winning and losing. While players in English can access players via the net around the globe, such practice is relatively small in Japan, again due to language difficulties. Although the designers of Playstation 2 allow dual language use for the models available in Japan, and this indirectly actually supports second language learning.

Critics propose that this generation of “gamers” is producing a class of social recluses, of monitor-fixated individuals whose grasp on the cyber world is greater than on reality. Certainly, asking junior high school students what they enjoyed doing most on the weekend in Japan, many will say spending three to six hours gaming was their favorite pastime. But “gaming” also has a flip side. It is a new kind of fiction, a participative way of shaping the destiny of the characters, plots and themes that are under the control of your fingers, keyboard functions and software options.

The message for teachers is this: if you can’t beat it, join it. The same happened to the advent of color TV in the 1970s. It was anticipated that students would lose learning skills as passive reception of cathode ray tube emissions took over. It was feared that TV violence would repeat itself in real life at an exponential rate. The same arguments are now being applied to young people who immerse themselves in extensive, time-consuming internet-based or advanced software gaming. “It can’t be good for them, what they do does not meet our syllabus objectives.” Maybe so. The clear implication for English teachers is to adapt some of the gaming strategies to learning and teaching strategies so that every participant wins. Television did and does momentarily take away interest from the classroom. So does serious and not so serious gaming. Teachers coped with the advent of black and white and color television just as you can cope with the advent of other interfering or complementary telecommunication devices, including gaming.

So why not reform the syllabus by incorporating some gaming strategies?⁸ Why not incorporate and adapt the creativity, adventure spirit and problem-solving skills inherent in gaming and set tasks that mirror that kind of engagement? Make our students imaginary software writers, speculating on stories, choices, configurations and solutions to a range of dilemmas. In this broader definition of text, it is the ideas more than the form that guide

engagement.

Teachers who have grown up themselves outside this game generation risk alienation of their students if they choose to ignore what clearly preoccupies a large number of young people. So rather than be concerned, for example, with the form of the poem, short story or novella, now is the time to hop on the band wagon of young people's concerns. Creative software writers have, for example, made much of *The Lord of The Rings* films that have ideally lent themselves for computer-based adventure software variations.

The Digital Revolution: Computer Assisted Literacy

Technological innovations in the last few years have seen HDTV (High Definition Television), digital imaging and digital video, proliferation of satellite access options virtually around the globe, and cable, the ability to download TV, music, radio and songs through the internet via MP3, the Apple I-Pod and of course the increasingly ubiquitous DVD diffusion, which distributes both old, recent and hot of the press feature films around the world.

Alphabets

One can emphasize differences or look for common ideas: while most of Europe could be said to be under the influence of the tree of Indo-European languages, one can equally well say that Asia has lived under the influence of Chinese-originating pictograms or Kanji. On a simple level we can talk of two different literacy systems. In fact the differences cannot be overstated, and the shades of meaning between different Asiatic languages surpasses the shades of conceptualization and meaning that differentiate European languages.

Just look at the number of alphabets that prevail in Asia today. In Japan, it is officially four: Hiragana, Katakana, Kanji and Romaji. In South Korea, it is three: the Korean alphabet, Chinese characters and Roman characters. In Hong Kong and China, there are two major languages (Cantonese and Mandarin) with more than 50 official minorities, including Tibetan, and not counting any Western letterings or languages.

There are some simple guides for the use of these alphabets in Japan. But there are also just as many instances where those rules are creatively bypassed, interchanged, substituted, altered and modified in the practice of daily spoken and written communication. The letterings which appear on notice boards, railway stations, shops and businesses are so creative, that considerable time is spent in the interpretation and decoding of messages. The proliferation of alphabets and letterings is such that most businesses revert to having pictures of their products alongside the lettering, so as to facilitate communication. Indeed, many averagely educated Japanese have only a limited grasp of the up to 40,000 different kanji, and so reliance on the first two alphabets and a limited, say 2–4,000 kanji vocabulary, suffices for most people.

English literacy in Asia

Many Asians struggle to grasp that there is not one key English language. Some think it is English from England, because of the fact that the language spread from those isles in colonial days. Others believe that American English is the most preferred English, due to their understanding that the American economy is the world's dominant one. Few Asians

understand that there are multiple forms of equal status forms of English such as African English, Canadian, Australian, Asian English.⁹ The standard of English literacy in Asia is a vexed question, often misunderstood, misinterpreted and with false conclusions. To discuss this, four useful terms emerge: the cultural up-take of English, the learning of English, success at English, and use of English.

Cultural up-take of English

Any non-English-speaking country's readiness to be open to the reception, absorption and internalization of English is closely related to its own cultural self-consciousness, its need for English, and the level of satisfaction with its own cultural forms of literacy. Historically and actually, Japan is the last country in Asia to open its doors to the West, and consequently it is no surprise that it is also the slowest country for developing English language skills by comparison with other nations, if you look at average scores.¹⁰ But by numbers of candidates, Japanese people are the largest. This is partly due to the seriousness and economic imperative with which Japanese understand the global relevance of English for their business success, and partly TOEFL success by Japanese matches their learning style and learning culture. By the way, TOEFL is geared mainly at Asians eyeing university entrance in an English-speaking country, most commonly America. Further, there has been a recent marked decline in TOEFL candidature for a range of reasons, test difficulty being among them. Also, more appropriate alternatives are becoming available.

Table 4 is interesting for several reasons: firstly it shows that by number of TOEFL candidates, Japan is by far ahead of any other Asian country, South Korea being a far second. The same applies to TOEIC according to international comparative figures released in 2003 by the Daily Yomiuri below.¹¹ Yet by score ranking Japan is very low. One reason is that the large number of candidates depresses any average. Another is that many Japanese do not undertake this test voluntarily, but are pressured by their teachers, universities, bosses, companies and collegial rivalry to sit. All of those are hardly ideal motivating factors for achievement.

Please note that TOEFL figures are available for Asian countries only, while TOEIC figures show that there is a beginning interest in European and non-Asian countries in this globally relevant test. The obvious implication for teachers of English is that they are professionally obligated to become familiar with these test instruments as they are growing in relevance. A huge publishing market supports these tests both directly and indirectly, and this also is a growth market for English teachers.

Learning English in the Far East

How is English learned in the Far East? In many ways, some good, some bad. Sadly, the worst methods of English teaching are ensconced in the Japanese education system. There are several reasons for this. One is that the system is test orientated, and proficiency in those tests is aimed at mastery of form, of grammatical control, rather than, for example, spoken English. Another reason concerns the qualifications and experience of the Japanese teachers of English, many of whom have never been abroad. Another reason is that Japanese teachers of English prefer to instruct in Japanese, as they have a natural shyness to speak English for fear

of making mistakes.

A further reason is the cultural preference for non-audible communication forms, by preference studying texts, and writing. Only in recent years is this changing as the use of tape

Table 4: Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), 1998–1999

Rank	Country	People sitting TOEFL	Average Score
1	Phillipines	92	584
2	India	30,658	583
3	Sri Lanka	57	571
4	China	70,760	562
5	Nepal	71	560
6	Indonesia	87	545
7	Pakistan	6274	542
8	Malaysia	218	536
9	South Korea	61,667	535
10	Vietnam	531	530
11	Hong Kong	9,427	524
12	Bangladesh	3,885	515
13	Myanmar	867	515
14	Thailand	15,054	512
15	Taiwan	32,967	510
16	North Korea	336	510
17	Macau	556	506
18	Japan	100,453	501
19	Afghanistan	153	493
20	Cambodia	102	488
21	Laos	49	466

Table 5: Teaching of English in Commerce (TOEIC), 1997–1998¹²

Rank	Country	People sitting TOEIC	Average Score (Max Score 1000)
1	Malaysia	1,079	668
2	Switzerland	3,412	640
3	France	45,285	632
4	Italy	2,337	599
5	Brazil	2,121	570
6	Mexico	7,576	532
7	Colombia	1,344	526
8	China	3,529	502
9	Thailand	27,330	487
10	South Korea	405,822	480
11	Taiwan	11,462	475
12	Japan	862,509	451

recorders and CDs in classrooms is becoming a substitute for the teacher using his/her own voice.

Another is the misuse of Assistant Language Teachers—ALT's—(native English speaking young graduates brought from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US and England) for one or two years in junior high and high schools. The ALT's come to learn about Japan, to earn some money, and to broaden their horizons. They are asked to parrot simple forms by way of modeling spoken English, which are rather Pavlovian and a less successful teaching method. In less successful moments, ALT's are used a bit like animals in a zoo, for their exhibition value, as a curiosity. In more successful moments, ALT's can be wonderful cultural ambassadors for their home country.

Jukus or cram schools are widespread and costly in Japan. Their purpose is to assist students pass their vital exam, that are aimed at entering junior high school, and other exams of entering high school and university. Because they are exam focused, they are text focused, and a wide cry from communicative skills, oral skills in English that are never tested. By way of partial defence, in most English speaking countries the oral proficiency of school students is also the least assessed.

There are private tutors, often university undergraduates, who will go to school students' homes and help them with English. Not the spoken variety, the test-passing variety. In addition, NHK radio broadcasts twice a day a nationwide English learning program, with explanations in Japanese. Newsagents abound with publications produced in the hope that they will sell. These magazines come with CDs, translations, contemporary articles of newsworthy English with translations. They do command a market, otherwise the publishers wouldn't be in it.

The implication for English teachers is that many learners are acquiring English language proficiency outside the classroom, through home study, or privately assisted study, or resources provided outside the classroom. An analogy is computers. Most young people acquired computer skills outside of schools. This means that if schooling wishes to maintain relevance, teachers must be open to, aware of and understanding of multiple paths to literacy in English.

Success at English

Unfortunately success at English is seen as having achieved a deliriously high score in the TOEFL or TOEIC. I say unfortunately because such success does not, in fact, mean that a person with such a score standing in front of you will actually be able to string some successful communicative sentences together in English. They may, or they may not. Success is defined not in terms of being able to talk to an English native speaker, but in educationally orthodox terms of having mastered the written forms of English which in turn is expressed in a numerical, quantitative fashion.

At senior level, of course, success at English means capability at communicating and negotiating in that language to the advantage of your business. Many Japanese believe that if they follow a particular blueprint textbook, one semester course, that they will master English in a fixed timeframe, like three months. They equate learning a language with a skill like changing a tire on a car. In fact, speakers of multiple languages know that language learning

is a yearlong, never-ending process, not a one product=instant success story.

Use of English

Many Japanese will have studied English intensively. But their ability in everyday situations to actually use English is very limited due in part to the fact that less than 2% of people living in Japan in 2003 are non-Japanese. So success at English falters through lack of use, application and repetition. Yes, films are available on video and DVD that are in English, but they are all available with Japanese subtitles or with Japanese dubbing. So reinforcement of the use of English, available in more multicultural countries, is not available to many.

Redundant Literacies

In Seoul two years ago I bought some industrial archaeology: beautiful writing brushes, made from a variety of animal hair (goat, horse, dog and donkey) of different thicknesses, held in place by a range of stems, bamboo, porcelain, wood, etc, and all hanging from a small hook on a specially made brush rack. I say industrial archaeology because the art of penmanship is in rapid 21st Century decline. Calligraphy, especially important in the rules that govern the strokes of the radicals and lines in Chinese pictograms (of which most people say they are conversant among some 3,000–to 6,000, while scholars are familiar with a wider range of up to around 40,000), is captured electronically, and the order of strokes in the writing of kanji letters is superfluous for those who use keyboards, can choose the kanji of choice, and who have the rudiments of kanji from elementary and junior high school. No wonder many young Japanese confess to a low level of kanji literacy: as a creating skill, as a practice of strokes, sequence and style, such writing is in decline to the same proportion as computer generated writing is increasing.

The older generations lament the passing of a cultural form and practice. The younger generation feels freed of the burden of the many complexities and ambiguities of kanji characters. There is no doubt that kanji is an art form. There can also be no doubt that it is going the way of the computer just as the Roman alphabet has seen a simplification of reproduction from the quill to ink to pen to biro. As a handheld writing device in the 21st Century, surviving media are the pencil and the biro. The brush and the pencil and the biro are yielding to the computer in all but their artistic respects.

What are the implications of this overarching trend? The Chinese government has already simplified their Kanji characters for official use. The forces of globalization in respect of alphabets means that the trend will inevitably lead to simplification of textual expression so as to become more successful at communication and the conveying of meaning. While artistic calligraphy will persist in Asia, the practitioners of this art form will inevitably decrease as the mechanization of the new knowledge machine, the computer, simplifies the use, number, range of kanji that is made available in the Far East for common daily use.

An analogy with English, though not as far reaching, is the dominance of Microsoft Office in the extent to which spellings and grammatical structures are automated, standardized, homogenized and made uniform.

Multiple Literacies

So what does all this mean? Firstly, it means that many people in the Far East aspire to English as a way of advancing their career options and they thirst for a life understanding that can satisfy their ambitions. Culturally, the same students vie English spoken environments as desirable. As an end goal in itself. Because of the abundance of alphabets, kanji, and grammatically different conceptualizations, achievement or success in English can be differently defined, assessed, or valued.

But the ultimate thirst, the ultimate satisfaction is seen as the ability to communicate with English native speakers, because they are seen to emanate from a lifestyle to which Eastern Asians aspire, rightly or wrongly. Hollywood has a lot to answer for. So do people like Brad Pitt, Arnold Schwarzenegger or David Beckham, because they are the super-real heroes who are admired for all they represent, chief of which is wealth, popularity and lifestyle appeal. They are defining success and desire in ways that are powerful engines motivating the learning of English.

By way of Conclusion

What are the implications of Asian literacies for global literacy capability?

The first is to overcome the alphabetic and cultural divides best by concentrating on meaning and placing grammatical sophistication in English among second language learners second.

The second implication is the exponentially increased relevance of multi media and multi technologies in the promotion of English language learning. There has to be an increased readiness for teachers of English to allow any means of language learning techniques.¹³ This places a double obligation on teachers. Not only to allow and be tolerant of different learning strategies, but also there is a burden of responsibility on the same teachers to acquaint themselves with the features of much of this multi-media stuff. Because not only can they then assist English language learners, but they can develop their own understanding of language learning so as to better benefit their students and the quality of their own teaching.

Finally, as David Crystal says so well in his chapter on global English, dialectical and linguistic variations dictated by geographic origin contribute so truly to what Australia, America and Canada each professes to be, a multi-cultural, liberal country which encourages an educational atmosphere that tolerates difference. It is possible that language is becoming simplified, but never, ever, dumb down the ideas, which are the powerful fulcrum in which this century will transform itself by those educators who have the vision and the courage.

Notes

1. As Professor of Intercultural Studies and Director of the Centre for International Relations in Tomakomai Komazawa University, Hokkaido, Japan, from 1999–2003, I was active in the recruitment of students from Asia to Japan, and this activity saw me visit China, Hong Kong, South Korea on several occasions, as well as visiting countless Japanese schools and examining English as authorized by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. From April 2003 I was appointed Vice Dean in the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Asian Studies and professor in the Graduate Division of

- Global Business Communication at the Nagoya University of Commerce and Business, Nagoya, Japan. My PhD was in Reader Response theory and English curriculum for Australian schools, completed at UWS in 1996, while lecturing there in educational philosophy.
2. Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs homepage at www.immi.gov.au/kits/thefacts/booklet6.htm.
 3. Chinese letters.
 4. Canon is the only brand that has attempted to write an English manual for these dictionaries. All others are Japanese only.
 5. Hiragana is the basic Japanese alphabet, while katakana is the Japanese alphabet for any foreign word, in English or any other language.
 6. TNS Global E-Commerce Report, 2001; TNS A-P-M Commerce Report, 2001.
 7. International Telecommunications Union, Cellular Mobile Subscribers, Japan, Mobile Subscribers Per 1000 Population.
 8. In Nagoya University of Commerce and Business, we have a professor of gaming strategy. This is not just in relation to software development, but also game theory, risk management and gambling. Such teaching has become popular from Cupertino to Japan, and represents a growth industry.
 9. David Crystal, Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language, 1996.
 10. Statistics for TOEFL, 1998 (June)–1999 (May).
 11. Daily Yomiuri, June 18, 2003.
 12. Source, The Institute for International Business Communication.
 13. The one exception is translation software used to remit slabs of texts into another language, which is still, concerning Asian languages and English, truly awful.

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