
Japanese Attitudes to English:

Towards an Explanation of Poor Performance

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Many theories have been suggested to explain the failure of Japanese English education to produce a larger number of proficient users of the language. Through an examination of past and present English language policy, this paper argues that any attempt to isolate the cause of this phenomenon must move beyond linear modes of analysis and take into account more socio/psycholinguistic factors. It is suggested that attitudinal factors have had a large influence over how and why English has been disseminated in Japan. It is concluded that the most recent curricular reforms stressing communicative English abilities will prove to be unsuccessful without first addressing widely held negative attitudes and discriminatory practices affecting Japanese English language speakers. To that end, the author proposes that any curricular reform must also include greater attention paid to prestige planning.

Introduction

For many years, Japan has been held up as a poster child for industrialized countries that have been largely unsuccessful in regards to English language education. The performance of Japanese learners across the major English proficiency tests bears out this fact. Scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) have consistently been lower than those of other Asian countries. In fact, in 2000, only Afghanistan, Laos and Cambodia had lower average scores than Japan (Voigt, 2001). Japanese TOEFL (The Test of English as a Foreign Language) test-takers have also displayed comparatively poor ability (Sawa, 1999). Taken on its own, this lack of success in mastering English is not very intriguing. However, if the context in which this failure has occurred is taken into account, one cannot help but be somewhat stupefied.

It has been estimated that the private English Language Teaching industry in Japan generates more than 1 billion U.S. dollars annually (Voigt, 2001). To put that number in perspective, the size of the same industries in the United Kingdom and the United States—the countries where the most foreign students come to study every year—have been estimated at 3 and 2.1 billion dollars respectively (Language Travel Magazine, 2003). English language study has also been made a primary focus of policy-makers and politicians in Japan. The JET Programme initiated in 1986 and currently employing over 6000 native English language speakers in public schools throughout Japan seeks as one of its fundamental goals to “improve the communicative (English) ability of Japanese students” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000). Moreover, changes to the national curriculum implemented in 2002 have hastened the

introduction of English language study from the first year of junior high school to the first year of elementary school. Other initiatives have included the introduction of study abroad scholarships for students along with English-medium (immersion) high schools. At the same time, overseas training opportunities for teachers and in-service professional development programs have also been expanded.

Despite these attempts at improving English language ability, the Japanese have enjoyed no greater success in mastering the language and in fact, some data even suggest that English abilities in Japan are on the decline (Mulvey, 2001; Monbugakusho, 2002), which begs the question “How and why can this be so?” There has been no shortage of theories.

One of the most interesting explanations is that Japanese cannot speak English because they have an innate physiological inability to do so. It has been claimed that the unique working of the Japanese brain prevents them from acquiring English (Clark, 1998). Other explanations that have been bandied about include personality traits such as shyness, conservatism and a high sense of embarrassment at making mistakes (Hughes, 1999). It has also been suggested that the Japanese are poor English learners due to the linguistic distance between English and Japanese (Hughes, 1999). Another favourite target has been the education system. Clark (1998) believes that the poor and incorrect pronunciation of Japanese English teachers, and a flawed methodology which concentrates on “conscious” rather than “acquired” learning accounts for the poor English language proficiency of Japanese students. Others have blamed the Japanese methodological tradition of grammar-translation and the focus put on language analysis rather than on communicative use of the language (Helgesen, 1994). Koike and Tanaka (1995) suggest that geography is one of the main culprits. Being an island nation, the Japanese historically had very little direct contact with speakers of other languages, and therefore the opportunity for direct communication with speakers of other languages was minimal. Due to this lack of contact, the Japanese did not develop the skills of non-island countries in learning other languages.

As the preceding paragraph illustrates, there is no dearth of theories postulating sources behind the inability of the Japanese to master English. However, the problem with these theories is they make the mistake of seeking to neatly compartmentalize cause and effect. That is, there is an attempt to simplify a very complex issue by narrowing a multitude of variables to one prime source to determine a sole, linear cause. In adopting such a stance, these explanations fail to take the bigger picture into account and ignore the myriad factors and forces that have conspired over many years to bring English education in Japan to its current state of affairs. If the field of Applied Linguistics has contributed anything to the social sciences, it is the fact that language issues are far more complex than previously thought. In short, there are no easy answers to complex questions.

Seen as a whole, explanations for why the Japanese have not been able to learn English well point us towards a greater truth about English language study in Japan. Surely, the very fact that so many people (Japanese and non-Japanese alike) believe that Japanese students are poor English speakers has had an influence on how English language study has been perceived at the individual level. Indeed, research done in psycholinguistics has shown that self-perception of one’s abilities has been identified as a key factor in determining whether an individual learner succeeds or fails in mastering another language (Gardner, 1972; Foss and Reitzel, 1988).

Such being the case, any argument which seeks to explain why Japanese people can or cannot speak English well must move beyond linear modes of thinking which seek to take us easily from cause to effect. The issue of Japanese lack of success in becoming competent with English is best viewed within the multifaceted context of history along with identifiable social, and cultural events that have shaped the attitudes prevalent today. This short paper is a preliminary attempt at such an analysis. Rather than focusing on one event, characteristic, or policy as an explanation, the arguments put forth here will revolve around attitudinal and motivational factors which have impacted how and why Japanese have studied the English language.

The Formation of Attitudes

Historically speaking, the study of English in Japan has been primarily viewed as a means to learn more about knowledge created in foreign countries. The main objective behind the study of English has not been to engage in dialogue with the outside world through the exchange of ideas and opinions, but rather, to use English as a sponge to soak up the knowledge created outside of Japan. Support for this argument can be found in Suzuki's popular book, "*Nihonjin wa naze eigo ga dekinai ka*" (Why Can't the Japanese Speak English?) wherein the author sets out to determine the factors contributing to the inability of Japanese people to use English effectively. He argues that since rejoining the international community during the Meiji Era toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Japanese have concentrated on deciphering foreign texts as a means of advancing the modernization of Japan, but have focused little attention on articulating Japanese views and ideas to the rest of the world. Shuji (1999) summarizes the argument beautifully in saying that the Japanese inability to speak English is best attributed to the "exclusive emphasis on reception rather than transmission." (p. 6). Koike and Tanaka (1995) have made a similar case in summarizing the history of foreign language education in Japan. They state: "... we could say that the purposes of teaching foreign languages ... were practical and cultural. Understanding advanced cultures and technology were the first and foremost requisite to the island people of Japan" (p. 19).

The affinity for translation as a means of learning about the outside world has doubtlessly had an impact on how foreign languages have been disseminated in Japan. By relying on experts and academics to communicate the thoughts and ideas of the outside world, Japanese people have rarely been given the opportunity to see the need for real time communicative exchanges. Language study, then, has tended toward formulaic processes which stress decoding and deciphering skills. By way of illustration a brief look at the history of translation in Japan follows.

In documenting the tradition of translation back through Japanese history, Koike and Tanaka (1995) introduce two monks who traveled to China in the 9th century and became familiar with the Shingon and Tendai sects of Buddhism. Although specifically instructed by their Chinese mentors to spread their new found knowledge in Chinese upon their return to Japan, the monks disobeyed this decree. This act of defiance is claimed to have set the standard for how future Japanese experts and academics who studied or lived abroad disseminated their knowledge after returning home. It is difficult to imagine, however, that the monks could have followed their instructions even if they wanted to. After all, the number

of Chinese speakers in Japan at the time could have probably been counted on one hand. Nonetheless, the importance of translation in disseminating knowledge gained in the sciences and technology abroad should not be underestimated. In fact, it can be said that were it not for highly developed Japanese translation skills, the rapid modernization of Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would not have been possible.

Over the years, curricular policy has also reflected the importance placed on translation skills in so far as grammar-translation has long been entrenched as the dominant methodology in Japanese schools. Since its formation in 1872, the Ministry of Education has included English as a subject to be studied from the junior high school level onward, although the hours of mandated study have varied considerably over the years (Ike, 1995). Likewise, university entrance examinations have also focused predominantly on the translation of elaborate, difficult and often archaic passages from English to Japanese and vice-versa over this period (LoCastro, 1996; Watanabe, 1996; Clark, 1998; Bond, 2000). Compliance by teachers in adopting and using this methodology has been virtually assured because their effectiveness has been (and remains to be) largely measured by how their students fair on these examinations.

The point here is not to discuss the merits and demerits of one language learning methodology versus another. Rather, I would like to suggest that the long history of translation has undoubtedly had an impact on Japanese attitudes towards foreign language study. It is not difficult to imagine that many Japanese people believe they are incapable of mastering even basic communicative skills in English because they have never been required to do so. One need only look to the present translation industry for further evidence of this fact.

Thousands of translation houses operate throughout the country, many of them promising accurate Japanese translations of everything from Charles Dickens to medical journals in mere hours (Hughes, 1999). However, a close examination of the hierarchy within the translation industry reveals some interesting insights, which reflect deeply entrenched views concerning English language speakers.

In order to satisfy the huge market demand, jobs abound for those with advanced English reading and translation skills and one would expect that in a society so dependent on translation the actual translators would be well-compensated for their skills. However, this is not the case. English to Japanese translators in Japan tend towards one of the most vulnerable segments of the employment market: predominantly part-time, young, and female. Not surprisingly, it follows that they are also poorly compensated for their skills. Why is this so? Inoguchi (1999) may provide some insight in his analysis of foreign language speakers in Japan. He states:

“... The people who attain fluency in foreign languages are accorded low social status. In terms of civil servants, it is those who pass specialist examinations, not the exams for high-level posts, who are given jobs requiring some use of foreign languages and their status and pay are comparatively low” (p. 9).

It can therefore be concluded that proficient English language speakers face discrimination in the workplace, and in fact, examples of discrimination based on advanced English proficiency can be found throughout Japanese society.

For example, children of Japanese parents temporarily posted in English speaking countries (*kaigai shijo*) often face bullying, slurs and ostracization upon their return to

Japanese schools on account of their English language skills (Minoura, 1996; White, 1998). Another example is provided by Scholefield (1997), who refers to Japanese university English literature professors bragging about their inability to speak English. Historically as well, negative attitudes towards English language speakers have been prevalent. Hughes (1999) points out that as Japanese nationalism rose during the first half of the twentieth century, English speakers came to be viewed in a negative light to the extent that the term *eigo-zukai*, English-user, became pejorative. Even further back is an example from the early nineteenth century. At this time, European empire making and imperialism were rapidly expanding around the world. Due to the growth and expansion of the British and Russian Empires into Asia, the Bakufu government of the time ordered six interpreters to become literate in English and Russian. The interesting part is that: “They were not, however, permitted to become literate in these languages, as the Bakufu was concerned about the possibility that they might be influenced by Western thought and religion, and that they may transmit these ideas to others” (Ike, p. 3).

Bearing these facts in mind, it is no surprise that more Japanese people have not become proficient speakers of English. Who would aspire to become a fluent English language speaker if after reaching this goal one could expect to be disadvantaged by discriminatory attitudes and low-paying jobs? While it has been argued that in most countries the ability to speak English affords one access to power and prestige (Pennycook, 1995), this has clearly not been the case in Japan.

Yet, many Japanese openly express that progress as a nation depends largely on the collective ability of the people to communicate in English (Inoguchi, 1999; Shuji, 1999). Inoguchi (1999) writes: “Competence in English, the lingua franca of the world, is indispensable in order to achieve a bright and lively future for Japan” (p. 11). The educational reforms discussed earlier in this paper reflect this belief and signal a clear desire at the policy level to improve English language competence. However, one cannot help but wonder if this belief is more *tatema* (what is said) than *honne* (what is meant). In many ways, the commitment to improving English language education has been full of bluster, but substantively lacking in substance.

It has been almost twenty years since the Ministry of Education pledged its commitment to making English language education more communicative. In the time since this memorable declaration, however, little has changed. In an exhaustive overview of Ministry of Education approved textbooks the only ones authorized to be used in public schools—it was found that the Ministry does not approve textbooks which reflect its commitment to develop students’ communicative abilities (Gorusch, 1999). Rather, most textbooks stress reading and writing over reading and listening. McConnell (2002) found a similar pattern in his research on the JET Programme. It is also curious to point out that the JET Programme, while framed as an important initiative in improving the communicative abilities of Japanese students by employing native English speakers as Assistant English Teachers (AETs) in Japanese schools, does not require that participants have either teaching qualifications, or teaching experience. Surely, if JET framers were serious about improving communicative abilities of students, they would hire qualified teachers to help to achieve this aim.

At the same time, it should not come as a surprise that recent initiatives to overhaul foreign language education pedagogy have been slow to show progress. The history of

grammar-translation as the centrally mandated dominant methodology goes back some one hundred and thirty years. By comparison, it has been less than twenty years since curricular changes stressing communicative skills were introduced. In relative terms, this is rather a short time. Moreover, only since the bursting of the bubble economy have Japanese leaders truly recognized the need for communicative English skills as more than simply empty rhetoric. However, it should also be noted that the most recent reforms do not represent the first time that policy-makers have made a commitment to a more communicative approach to language teaching.

One of the most interesting stories, by virtue of its timing, involves the world-renowned linguist of his time, Harold Palmer. Despite the surge in nationalist, anti-Western attitudes in the first half of the twentieth century, the Japanese government invited Palmer, who specialised in the teaching of foreign languages, to come to Japan in 1922 in the hope that he could improve the state of English language teaching (Koike and Tanaka, 1995). He was provided with public funds to establish the Institute for Research in English Language Teaching in Tokyo. His research and ideas stressed the importance of the oral-aural method in the teaching of English and criticized traditional grammar-translation based methodologies as ineffective. Palmer felt that the traditional grammar-translation method was a poor way for students to become proficient English language learners, especially with regards to speaking and listening skills (Scholefield, 1997). Palmer's influence on ELT was significant because "his method and techniques were disseminated to a number of progressive schools throughout the nation" (Koike and Tanaka: 17).

However, his ideas were never able to replace the grammar-translation methodology and soon fell out of favour. Moreover, following the outbreak of the Pacific War, English language education was drastically cut back as it was viewed as the language of the enemy and its learners as spies (Koike and Tanaka, 1995). Not surprisingly, the government did not look kindly upon Palmer's Institute for Research in English Language Teaching and it was abolished. Following the war, Palmer's legacy was largely forgotten and grammar-translation reasserted itself as the dominant methodology.

Following World War II, US funded organizations like the English Language Exploratory Committee (ELEC), established in 1956, also played a large role in attempting to introduce more communicative, alternative methodologies. ELEC consisted of 22 powerful Japanese academics and business leaders and its aim "involved a radical change to English language teaching methods in Japan and the re-education of English teachers" (Scholefield, 1997: 16). The organization attempted to enshrine an oral approach which "stressed situational and natural practices with emphasis on the communication of meaning" (Scholefield: 17). ELEC was responsible for the in-service training of more than 10 000 teachers and the publication of 130 textbooks based on its beliefs. However, little changed at the classroom level as both teachers and students were generally unreceptive to the idea of abandoning the grammar-translation methodology (Koike and Tanaka, 1995). Due to waning interest in its work and minimal real impact at the classroom level, ELEC was eliminated in the late 1960's and grammar-translation remained as the dominant methodology.

To conclude, in view of past attempts to displace grammar-translation in English classrooms, one should be cautious in holding out too much hope that the present push to develop communicative skills will be successful. The challenge is especially great in view of

the resistance of many Japanese teachers to abandoning grammar-translation.

Most JTEs (Japanese Teachers of English) learned English through the grammar-translation method and as a result, this is the methodology which they feel most comfortable with as teachers. Even if a teacher wished to change their approach to teaching and adopt a more communicative methodology, a large commitment to independent, unpaid study would be required since this knowledge is not supplied during the two weeks of teacher training that is required to become a certified English teacher in most parts of Japan. Due to this reality, JTEs have very little choice but to teach using the grammar-translation methodology because it is the methodology with which they are most familiar. Moreover, as LoCastro (1996) states: "The Ministry of Education is promoting the adoption of the CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) approach, yet many of the teachers themselves still do not have a high level of communicative competence in the language" (p. 42). As a result, the curricular goal of making English language classes more communicative cannot be met and grammar-translation will perpetuate itself as the dominant approach.

How To Change Attitudes

Haarmann (1986) argues that language planners have traditionally been unable to establish an interdependence between language planning and its secondary effects. These secondary effects include issues of identity, specifically self-categorization and categorization of others. He claims that in order to address these issues language planners need to engage in prestige planning, "a crucial part of planning processes" (p. 99) which seeks "to overcome stereotyping categorizations which often include intolerance, mistrust, or even elements of hostility" (p. 89).

Perhaps in formulating English language policy to improve the communicative abilities of Japanese students, Japanese language planners have failed to address the categorizations of English language speakers dominant in Japanese society. Specifically, I am referring to prevalent attitudes of prejudice and discrimination that many monolingual Japanese hold towards second language speakers as outlined earlier in this paper. Unlike curriculum, tests, or other structural factors which can be altered relatively quickly, attitudes and beliefs are not easily changed. Personal convictions cannot be swayed by policy initiatives or an influx of money. Attitudes require time and education to be changed. Prestige planning is a key aspect of language planning and failure to address negative attitudes surrounding a language planning initiative will result in objectives not being met. It is important that policy-makers engage in prestige planning to sway beliefs about the English languages and English language learning in Japan. Failure to do so will ensure that efforts to improve the communicative abilities of Japanese students will be in vain.

Conclusion

The purpose here has not been to isolate a particular variable which can adequately explain why the Japanese have not been more successful English learners. Rather, the point has been to illustrate that there exists a prevailing attitude among Japanese speakers that they are, for one reason or another, poor English speakers and more importantly, believe that this situation

cannot be changed. Such a strong, pervasive attitude cannot help but have contributed to the general lack of success among Japanese English learners.

While many Japanese hold negative attitudes about their own ability to learn English, others hold discriminatory attitudes towards Japanese English language speakers. This prejudice is reflected in the workplace where proficient English language speakers face limited promotion prospects and comparatively low pay. These are issues relating to prestige, and to change these attitudes and eliminate the barrier that they create to teaching English communicatively and improving the communicative abilities of Japanese students, language planners need to engage in prestige planning to improve the perception of English language speakers. Perhaps, the private sector will lead the way in affecting this change. In recent years many of Japan's biggest companies including Matsushita, Toyota Motor Co., electronics makers NEC and Hitachi, construction conglomerate Komatsu, as well as the Japanese division of American Express International and IBM Japan, Inc. have all tied promotions to English ability (Voigt, 2001). This is a positive change and one that should help to change Japanese attitudes about English language study and ultimately, contribute to the improvement of English language education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Chris Hepple and Prof. Jeffrey Quinn for their helpful ideas and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

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