

Some Observations on the Barriers to Communication-centered English Teaching in Japan

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0. Introduction

Over the past few years a considerable number of studies have been made toward communication-centered English teaching in Japan, and numerous attempts for change have been made in both junior high and senior high schools. In this paper we will explore this more toward change. We will attempt to outline briefly within the confines of a brief treatise the main factors influencing TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) in Japan, its effectiveness or ineffectiveness, and some possible solutions. These factors will be viewed from historical, academic and psychological perspectives.

In conformity with the observation mentioned above, the writers will focus on such an affective side in this paper and will clarify what kind of psychological barriers to Japanese students would give an undesirable influence upon English learning. Then we will propose some ideas to overcome those difficulties.

The following discussion is based in part on many hours of interviews with Japanese students of English as well as others such as Chinese students and young professionals living and working in Japan. The ideas expressed here-in, therefore, are in part at least from several perspectives as well as our own. While some of the items entertained here-in may seem old hat to some readers. However, it is the purpose of this paper to stimulate further the understanding of those involved in English education in Japan.

The following outline provides a base from which to examine many factors dictating the atmosphere of the study of English in Japan specifically and the cultural or communication gap between Japan and the West in general.

1 . Historically

Of the many countries comprising the Asian sphere, Japan seems unique in its legacy until the middle of this century in that it has a history of minimal occupation by other races of people. This history of relative non-occupation is indeed a unique status even on a global scope. A history of non-occupation means that Japan had comparatively little outside influence. By way of comparison, most Japanese neighbors have been directly exposed to other cultures and from early had a degree of outside influence shaping their development. Indonesia, Bali, the Philippines, China, Singapore, Vietnam and other Asian countries were all exposed to outside cultures, language and ideology. Because of this contact, many of the natural psychological barriers to communication were long ago replaced with a framework for communication; a common ground of mutual understanding and acceptance of other cultures, which until recently was not found in the Japanese culture. That is to say, an intrinsic wariness of things foreign in Japan still pervades the collective consciousness. It should be noted here that in spite of this, there are many individuals in Japan who don't fit this general rule, and many of these individuals in fact seek out interaction with "foreigners" either in Japan or by going abroad.

By way of comparison the Chinese, for instance, have a starkly different attitude. It has been said often of the Chinese that they possess a "hungry spirit." A spirit reputedly born of a history of poverty. This is because the Chinese long ago recognized the importance of the utilization of an international language to foster prosperity through business and social ties with other countries. In this sense, the Chinese and Japanese are remarkably dissimilar to each other. The Chinese people possess an

openness to outside influence uncommon to Japanese people.

Another point to consider is that Chinese pronunciation is difficult, thus making the tackling of foreign tongues less difficult by comparison.

For these and other less obvious reasons, the Chinese have a distinctly less colloquial perspective than its Japanese counterpart.

2 . Academically

There is recognition in private and some public schools, indeed even within the Ministry of Education itself that oral ability is the ultimate goal of any study of language.

Although A new Course of Study by the Ministry of Education strongly insists on the cultivation of oral communication ability, English taught in Japanese public schools is still essentially through the Grammar Translation Method (referred to forthwith as "GTM"). Because the English imposed on the entrance examinations for upper schools is grammar-centered, the teaching emphasis is on translation and grammar training; speaking and communication are the exception and not the rule.

In the last few years public and most private schools offer a conversation class once or twice a week. Sometimes it is with a native speaker of English. However, these conversation classes often contain as many as 40 or 50 students and a common class method will have only 2 students role-playing a dialog at any given time. So even though conversation classes exist, sufficient time spent in authentic English conversation is rare.

Students are trained early in the Japanese educational system not to speak out, be creative or initiate. In short, passiveness is rewarded and acknowledged, not creativeness. Emphasis is also placed on correctness to the point that students become afraid to attempt to answer unless he/she can answer perfectly. The students are self-conscious of making mistakes and losing face. This phenomena is reinforced by the tests students are given in which only perfect answers on English grammar questions are awarded points.

3 . Psychologically

Many psychological stages must be gone through in learning a language. Especially when the languages share many fundamental differences such as Japanese and English. English by its content, sentence structure and cultural origin is much different than Japanese. It is much more direct, specific, creative and speaker-centered than Japanese. It is also a language in which opinions are voiced freely and frequently. In fact not to do so in some instances would be considered rude. Japanese, on the other hand, is just the opposite. Some of our interviewees said that not only are Japanese people reluctant to voice their opinion, often there is no opinion to express. That is, they learn from early on that it is more important to agree with others than to voice an opinion. Language in Japan is along the lines of its culture and that is 'Sempai-Kohai' or vertical ; English, on the other hand, is for the most part horizontal. There are, of course, differentiations in English such as 'formal/casual', 'polite/impolite' and so forth, but it is the exception instead of the rule. Further, there is much less proclivity for non-verbal communication due largely to its one-race status. Finally, it is sometimes said of the Japanese that they possess a rather negative self-concept compared to the peoples of many western and other Asian countries. In other words, the Japanese view themselves, their society and their role in it fundamentally differently than people in the West.

4 . Analysis

In this next section we will address some of the problems cited earlier, and present what we conclude to be the logical solution.

We think there are several major faults of the GTM when used as the sole means of language instruction.

To begin, translation keeps the learning entangled in intricacies instead of centered on the meaning of the sentences being studied. Also,

learning by translation inclines students to continue translating instead of evolving to focusing on meaning, thus greatly slowing their acquisition. It is widely recognized that the GTM concept of reading is not really reading and doesn't promote direct understanding. In fact it interferes with it.

The Education Ministry's policy now is that students in Japan study English to pass examinations for university entrance. The emphasis almost totally is on grammar. This is not so different than the approach to English in the Meiji Period when English was taught to only a few elite people, i. e. politicians or diplomats which by choice or otherwise needed only a tertiary ability in English. There were no foreigners in Japan to speak of, nor were there any plans for them to be in the future. In short, the emphasis on English at best academic, not for actual communication.

If the Education Ministry had no inclination that students should have more functional ability in English after so many years of study than they do now, it would not have attempted the shifts in focus that some within its ranks have pushed for these past few years. Now that we know the need for change has been recognized both within and without the Education Ministry let us proceed now to propose the methods we feel would most adequately achieve this :

- (1) As stated earlier, we believe a total junking of the present GTM would not be beneficial. For functionality in English a shift in focus is needed to a broader objective. One including grammar translation but with a focus on speaking, listening and reading.

A method that contains all of these in harmony is the Direct Method (referred to forthwith as "DM"). It leads directly with the spoken language for communication. That is through usage of the target language rather than through the mediation of the native language as in GTM. To "think" in the target language as native speakers do, not through translation.

The DM is different from GTM in both objectives and method. In the DM the central objective is to speak and understand the target language. In GTM, it is to translate in order to understand. As Viëtor

(1886) points, "Translation is a special skill with which school instruction should not be concerned."

- (2) Still addressing the academic points, conversation classes in Japan should be staffed with teachers native or foreign which are adequate role models in pronunciation, fluency and ability. Many so-called English teachers presently are too "shy" from lack of confidence in the target language to be a speaking role model. A very necessary element in language acquisition.
- (3) Also classes usually are very over-crowded. If this be the case there are techniques for large numbers of students to be kept engaged in dialog pair practice simultaneously, not one pair at a time. In short the classes should be student-oriented, restructured and geared for more speaking.

On the psychological front, because there are major differences between Japanese and English it is all the more important for students to "think" in the target language, not merely translate it. "Children learn their mother tongue by learning it in meaningful situations and interacting with speakers of the language in their environment." (Lado, 1988) It is thought by many that learners of a foreign language should learn it the same way as the mother tongue.

As all teachers should know, a negative self-concept or inferiority complex will inhibit learning ; especially upon language learning because of its demands for productive skills. That is to say, to form a positive self-concept helps to form positive attitudes toward language learning. The communication skills acquired with the help of skilled speakers of English as role models for students provides positive reinforcement thus a feeling of confidence. This is a working goal of the DM. Studying only for tests, especially tests in which "perfect" answers only are rewarded is non-motivational, self-defeating as concerns functionality and ultimately demoralizing.

Paul G. La Forge (1983) points out that, "Self-concept is formed in a circular way through confirmation from others and by selectively shunning aside actions and experiences incongruent with the image of the self." As he says, if the self-concept is perceived through confirmation from others, the positive self-concept would be formed by the feedback of positive focus from others. We all have strengths that we are not aware of, and when we discover them, we can find a better side of ourselves. These steps lead learners to self-awareness, and as a result, learners are able to gain confidence in themselves. On the basis of this idea, we suggest that affective education in the form of communication-centered teaching should be adopted for TEFL (Teaching English as Foreign Language) in Japan in order to make language acquisition effective.

5 . Conclusion

We acknowledge the brevity of English educations in Japan is too broad a subject to render a thorough treatment in a brief treatise. Our purposes here were to acknowledge there is a need for change. To point out that the present system the ability of students in Japan to communicate in English is disproportionate to the number of years they spend in study. To propose what we feel to be the solutions best suited for the Japanese student of English based on cultural, historical and psychological perspectives.

In our follow-up paper we will address the strengths and weaknesses of both the present GTM used in Japan and the DM:

In conclusion, we want to emphasize the necessity of transforming from the traditional methods that we regard as out-dated with more productive communicative methods.

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