

Problems of Teaching English to Japanese Learners

—Focusing on Differences in Spoken and Written Languages—

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要旨

全ての人を対象とした日本の外国語教育は、英語教育を原則として、第2次世界世界大戦後に始まったが、日本人の英語力は TOEFL 等の世界標準のテスト結果から見る限り、その教育効果は出ていないのが実情である。

このような状況を打破するため、学校の教育現場ではコミュニケーション技能の向上に重点を置いた授業が展開され、今や古典的なものとなったオーディオリンガル教授法を中心とした教授法がいまだに取り入れられているのが実情である。しかし、アメリカの教育学者達が指摘するように、地理的に英語圏の国と隔絶した状況にある日本では、口語教育に偏重した教育方法よりも、読む、書くを中心とした文語教育に重点を置いた教育が必要であると考えられる。

英語の大変にスペリング方式は複雑であるが、主要な部分には規則性が存在しており、日本の英語教育を担当する教師は、その基本理念を理解したうえで、英語教育にたずさわる必要があると考えられる。このことは、日本の英語教育の成果を上げるためにも不可欠であると言える。

1. Introduction

In the last half of the nineteenth century, Japanese government had kept the policy of blocking out all western people except the Dutch to avoid being colonized and amalgamated by the western nations. The policy was also to maintain its own self-respect and the system of feudalism. When the new government abolished the old policy and opened its doors to the western nations, the people in the country finally obtained opportunities to study English.

However, historically and socially Japan had been a typical monolingual community in the world by the end of World War II, and only a small number of people in the country were able to learn English. After the war, the country had been occupied by the USA, and real English education for junior high school students in this monolingual community had started under the new compulsory education system. With this new education system, everybody in Japan has to study English at least three years as a foreign language.

2. History of EFL Programs in Japan

Since the end of the World War II and through the Occupation (1945-1952), the study of English as a foreign language (EFL) has become one of the major subjects in



the Japanese school curriculum. Until recent years, such ESL programs had been dominated by the strong influence of the grammar-translation method, which had been used until the audio-lingual method was introduced.

With this old and traditional teaching method, Japanese students were mainly taught grammatical points of English and translation skills. It was just as Robert Lado described the grammar-translation method, it being “grammar citation and dictionary thumbing.”ⁱ It is still common to encounter in the public schools in Japan where a teacher calls upon students to translate, sentence by sentence, line by line, phrase by phrase, word by word, from texts on which the instructor has become an expert of sorts.ⁱⁱ

However, the traditional EFL Programs in Japan which were mainly based on the theory of the grammar-translation method had not been able to achieve the goals decreed by the national educational policy of the Ministry of Education in Japan.ⁱⁱⁱ The goals described in the previous Educational Guideline for Course Work by the Ministry of Education were as in the followings:^{iv}

- 1) All students at the beginning of their middle school years shall be familiarized with the phonology of a foreign language; the basic language skills to be taught are hearing and speaking. ---continued---
- 2) Students should also learn the ‘basic usage’ of the language being taught, and should be able to read and write.
- 3) Through the knowledge of a foreign language, students should increase their awareness and come to understand a culture other than their own.

When the people in the Ministry of Education discovered that the EFL Programs based on the grammar-translation method were incapable of teaching the communication skills which were listed first in their educational guideline above, they decided to apply the newer teaching method, the audio-lingual method, as a primary teaching strategy to the EFL Programs in Japan. Though there had been several attempts to replace the old teaching programs with new ones, such change applying the audio-lingual method in the EFL Programs was a dramatic one in the history of English education in Japan, since they never accepted the audio-lingual method as a primary teaching method in EFL Programs until then.

3. Aspects of the Audio-lingual Method

Though the audio-lingual method has achieved a great success in the history of language teaching, it is certainly not a perfect method for language teaching in every detail. It is not a teaching method which can cover all areas of language teaching. The main goal of the audio-lingual method is simply to teach English speech pattern to students through continual practice until the speech patterns become habitual. The audio-lingual method is simply applicable to teach spoken property of English.

The audio-lingual method is based on the theory of those structural linguists in the



1920's and 1930's who worked on unwritten American Indian languages. Generally, such structural linguists had the common view that spoken language is primary and that written language is at best a pale reflection of spoken language.

They felt spoken language alone should be the legitimate object of study of linguistics. Thus, one of the most renowned structural linguists, Leonard Bloomfield, stated:

Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks.^v

The art of writing is not part of language, but rather a comparatively modern invention for recording and broadcasting what is spoken.^{vi}

The main theme of the audio-lingual method, 'Pattern practices', introduced by Robert Lado and Charles Fries (two of the most competent and renowned linguists of the Bloomfieldian school), is based on the above basic theory and consists of mass drill to build up speech patterns of English or other languages as a matter of habit formation. That is, the audio-lingual method itself is not intended for teaching reading or writing skills, but for teaching communicative skills. Teaching reading and writing skills is still a complicated and difficult task for language teachers, even though the audio-lingual method has been very innovative in the area of teaching communicative skills.

We have had a good deal of analysis of reading and writing skills, yet there is little synthesis. The way in which people handle written language, whether receptively in reading or productively in writing, is extremely complex and yet little understood.^{vii} Thus we need to continue to work to create better teaching methods, especially for the teaching of reading and writing skills. We also should try to understand the theoretical background of the audio-lingual method and should apply the method correctly to each language program, considering what the most necessary language skills are for students in the future.

Unfortunately some people tend to misunderstand the concept of the audio-lingual method and try to apply the method to all language teaching programs. Recent remarkable changes in EFL programs in public schools in Japan, which are strictly under the control of the national educational policy for foreign language teaching by the Ministry of Education of Japan, might be one of such examples, as was pointed out by some American scholars, like Curtis W. Hayes.

4. Problems of English Teaching Programs in Japan

In spite of people's expectation that applying the audio-lingual method in teaching English would be successful, various data, like the TOEFL scores of Japanese, show that English skills of Japanese learners are still quite poor. Thus, it should be wise for Japanese to re-think and re-examine the educational goals of English education as some American educators suggests.^{viii}

Although Japan has strong relationships with English-speaking countries, most



Japanese have almost no opportunities to talk with native speakers of English because of the geographical distance between them. Consequently, almost all Japanese have to learn the matters of the English-speaking nations mainly through the written portion of the language, that is reading, not the spoken one. This fact leads us to be skeptical about the success of the EFL programs in Japan which largely depend on the audio-lingual method. Thus, Hays explained the problem of Japanese ESL programs as in following:

Some societies, especially those which are isolated geographically from foreign speaking areas, must realize that bilingualism is not an educational goal to be realized by every student, that even the ability to read with fluency may be more important in those areas where there is little, if no, opportunity to use the spoken language, that there is an aptitude for language learning, suggesting that some students will learn faster than others, and grammar and translation are not requisites for learning a language.^{ix}

Therefore, the problem of Japanese students in EFL program—that they were not achieving the goals set by the Ministry of Education in Japan—would not be solved simply by substituting the grammar-translation method for the audio-lingual method (which is not focused on the teaching of written language). It should be more important for the people who direct Japanese EFL program to realize that there is no direct relationship between written and spoken language in English, although the written language is directly related to spoken one by the use of the syllabic writing system, ‘kana’ in Japanese.

5. The Relation Between Written and Spoken Language in English

Even before the structural linguists claimed that spoken language comes prior to written language, many renowned linguists had taken similar positions on this issue. One of them was Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the most influential linguists in the early 1900’s, said:

Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the objects.^x

Those linguists, including the structural linguists, often used some version of the ‘symbols of symbols’ view to discuss the relationship of the two forms of language. That is to say that spoken words are symbols of things or thought, and that written words are symbols of spoken words. A typical example of this sort of view was mentioned by Roman Jakobson as ‘written or printed symbols are symbols of symbols.’^{xi}

However, this is not really true, because there are several cases in which the spoken language makes distinctions that written language does not, and conversely, the written language makes distinctions that spoken language does not.



The former case, in which spoken language shows distinctions that written language does not, can be found in English words that have two or more distinctive pronunciations for each of them, what is called ‘homographs’. One of the such examples can be found in two distinctive pronunciations of a verb, ‘read’ for the present tense and the past tense.

In the latter case, in which written language shows distinctions that spoken language does not, are the relationships between the words which have the same pronunciation, so-called ‘homophones’. One of the such examples can be found in the words, ‘right’, ‘rite’, ‘wright’, and ‘write’.

In the former case, the pronunciations disambiguate the spelling, and in the latter case the spellings disambiguate the pronunciation. That English spelling distinguishes proper names by capitalizing an initial letter is another good example of the latter case. Thus it is already clear at this point that the spoken and written language in English are partly independent without discussing further details of the inconsistent relationships between spelling and pronunciation of words, although they clearly share a large central core.

In all true writing systems, the units of written language are largely relatable to the units of spoken language. The English writing system is basically alphabetic, but not entirely. That is, in English, spelling are not only related to phonemes (sound units) but also to morphemes (meaning units) and grammar. This makes learners of English feel that English spelling system is very complicated and hard to learn, though they are highly organized. Hence, all teachers of English education in Japan have to know the fundamental idea of English writing system.

By understanding the importance of written language and knowledge of English spelling system, teachers of EFL classes should teach reading and writing skills much more effectively. Unfortunately, the spelling system of English is very complicated and no good teaching manual for this area has been available, it should be very important for educators in Japan to recognize emphasizing teaching of written English in Japanese EFL programs is inevitable to be successful for the program.



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- i Robert Lado. Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach. McGraw Hill, New York, 1964, p.4
- ii Curtis W. Hays. Language Contact in Japan in the *Sociolinguistics Studies in Language Contact*. Ed. William Francis Mackey and Jacob Ornstein. Mouton Publisher, New York, 1979, p.363-76
- iii The present name is Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan.
- iv The description was cited by Hays. op. cit. p. 363
- v Leonard Bloomfield. Language. Henry Holt, New York, 1933, p.21.
- vi Leonard Bloomfield. Linguistics and Reading, *Elementary English Review*, 19, 1942, p.126
- vii Davies Alan, and H.G. Widdowson. "Reading and Writing," in the Edinburgh in Applied Linguistics. Ed. by J.P.B. Allen and S. Pit Corder. Oxford University: London, vol. 3,1974, p.155.
- viii Hays. op. cit. p. 373
Mary Sanches. Relexification and Syntactic Change in Japanese in Papers in Linguistics.1977
- ix Hays. op. cit. p. 373
- x Ferdinand de Saussure. Course in General Linguistics. Ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Trl. by Wade Baskin. McGraw Hill, New York, 1966, p.23-4.
- xi Roman Jakobson. 'Retrospect' in Roman Jakobson: Selected Writing I . Mouton, The Hague, 1962, p.654.

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