

Application of the Audio-lingual Method and Problems in Japanese EFL Programs

Shuso HORIE

オーディオ・リンガル教授法の適用と日本における英語教育の問題点

堀 江 周 三

Key words: Structural linguists 構造言語学者, pattern practices パターン・プラクティス (文型練習),
grammar-translation method 訳読式教授法, teaching strategy 教育法計画,
bilingualism 2カ国語運用能力, educational goal 教育目標

The Concept of the Audio-lingual Method

Though the audio-lingual method has achieved 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 patterns to students through continual practice until the speech patterns become habitual.

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.¹⁾

The art of writing is not part of language, but rather a comparatively modern invention for recording and broadcasting what is spoken.²⁾

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 English (or other languages') speech patterns 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 as yet little understood.³⁾ 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 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⁾

The Case of Japanese EFL Programs

Since the end of 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 recently, such EFL programs were dominated by the strong influence of the grammar-translation method, which had been used until the audio-lingual method was introduced. Japanese students were mainly taught grammatical points of English and the translation method. It was just as Robert Lado said about the grammar-translation method, it being “grammar recitation and dictionary thumbing.”⁵⁾ It is still common to encounter English classes in the public schools where the teacher calls upon the student 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.⁶⁾

However, traditional EFL programs which were mainly based on the theory of the grammar-translation method have not been able to achieve the goals decreed by the national educational policy of the Ministry of Education of Japan, which are:

- 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.
- 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.⁷⁾

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

In spite of people's expectation, that is this recent change in EFL programs will dramatically help to achieve the goals which they set, it could be another failure in the history of foreign language teaching in Japan. It is usual, especially in Japan, to fault either the method or the teacher for inability to produce language users.⁸⁾ It seems wise, however, for Japanese to re-think and reexamine the goals of instruction.⁹⁾ That is, 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 those English-speaking nations mainly through the written portion of the language (i.e. reading), but not the spoken one. This fact leads us to be skeptical about the success of EFL programs in Japan which largely depend on the audio-lingual method. Thus Hayes describes:

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 that grammar and translation are not requisites for learning a language.¹⁰⁾

Therefore, the problem of Japanese students in EFL programs — that they are not achieving the goals set out by the Ministry of Education of Japan — will 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 would be more important for Japanese to pay more attention to the fact that there is not a direct relationship between written and spoken language in English, although the written language is directly related to the spoken one by the use of the syllabic writing system (“kana”) in Japanese.

Note

- 1) Leonard Bloomfield. *Language*. Henry Holt, New York, 1933, p. 21
- 2) Leonard Bloomfield. “Linguistics and Reading”, *Elementary English Review*, 19, 1942, p. 126.
- 3) Davies, Alan, and H. G. Widdowson. “Reading and Writing,” in the *Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics*. Ed. by J. P. B. Allen and S. Pit Corder. Oxford University: London, vol. 3, 1974, p. 155.
- 4) Curtis W. Hayes. “Language Contact in Japan,” in the *Sociolinguistics Studies in Language Contact*. Ed. William Francis Mackey and Jacob Ornstein. Mouton Publishers, New York, 1979, p. 363–76.
- 5) Robert Lado. *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach*. McGraw Hill, New York, 1964, p. 4.
- 6) Hayes. *op. cit.*, p. 363.
- 7) is cited in Hayes. *op. cit.*, p. 363.
- 8) Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 368.
- 9) Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 373.
- 10) Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

References

- Alan, Davies, and H.G. Widdowson. Reading and Writing. *Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics*. Ed. By J.P.B. Allen, and S. Pit Corder. Oxford University, London, Vol. 3, 1974, 155–201.
- Bloomfield, Leonard. *Language*. Henry Holt, New York, 1933.
- Bloomfield, Leonard. Linguistics and Reading. *Elementary English Review*. Vol. 19, No. 4, 1942, 125–130.
- Hays, Curtis W. Language Contact in Japan. *Sociolinguistics Studies in Language Contact*. Ed. by William Francis Mackey, and Jacob Ornstein. Mouton Publishers, New York, 1979.
- Lado, Robert. *Language Teaching. A Scientific Approach*. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964.

要 約

オーディオ・リンガル教授法は1920年代から30年代にかけて、アメリカインディアンの言語研究を行っていた構造言語学者たちの提唱した言語理論に基づいている。彼らの言語研究の姿勢は、口語が言語の中核であり言語の研究対象は口語にあるとの考えに基づいていたのである。この言語に対する考え方から生み出されたのが、ロバート・ラドとチャールズ・フリーズによって作り上げられた言語教育法であるパターン・プラクティス（文型練習）

法でオーディオ・リンガル教授法のまさに中核をなしている。この文型のキーワードを入れ替えるという単純な練習法は、現在まで英語会話教育の中心的な教育法として幅広く教育現場に採用され続けているのである。

日本においても、従来から学校教育現場での中心的な教育法であった訳読式教授法が日本人の英語運用能力の向上に良い結果をあげていないことから、旧文部省は指導要領の改訂のたびに会話能力の向上を求めるようになった。そして、その結果、このパターン・プラクティス（文型練習）を中心としたオーディオ・リンガル教授法が教育現場にも大幅に採り入れられるようになったのであるが、この教育法はあくまでも口語英語の教育を目的に考えられたものであり、英語全般についての教育を目的としているものではない。教師は、このオーディオ・リンガル教授法が教育目的としたことを十分に理解した上でその適用をすることが求められている。