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CAN A NON- NATIVE SPEAKER TEACH ENGLISH IN JAPAN?

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Abstract

English is vigorously learned in Japan, but the average level of English proficiency of Japanese students is still low compared to that of other developed countries. This article will consider the purpose and significance of learning English for Japanese at the college level, based on the author's experience, both as a student and a teacher, at Kyoto University, Japan.

The English taught in Japanese universities, at present just as 40 years ago, has a tendency to be a humanities subject and thus make light of oral-aural elements. This trait, rooted in the teachers' general lack of fluency and a false notion that spoken English is void of content, and therefore inferior to written English, needs improvement. It is the responsibility of those involved in higher education to help each student to harbour rich content by cultivating robust thinking and motivate expression. English classes are mostly taught using Japanese, which also needs serious reconsideration.

Considering Japan's place both from the global and East-Asian points of view, English as a *lingua franca* and Asian languages as a *lingua vicinas* (languages of neighbours) should be in the college curriculum. The notion of English as *lingua franca* that emphasizes communication rather than grammatical correctness suits the situation where Japanese non-native English teachers teach students. There is no such thing as a perfect speaker of any language. Those who have content—here, what they want to convey to younger users of English as a *lingua franca*—are all qualified to teach English.

Keywords: Content, English as *lingua franca*, non-native teacher, university, spoken English

1. INTRODUCTION

Why do Japanese learn English? You see sign for 'English Conversation Schools' at every town corner here. Open a newspaper and you will see a full-page ad for a magical method of learning English without tears, or even without effort. Several English programmes are aired on TV and on the Internet. It is the most 'normal' of the compulsory foreign languages at all levels of education, from elementary to tertiary. A high score on the TOEIC is considered a must in job-hunting. An increasing number of universities have adopted the use of TOEFL scores to screen graduate level students, thereby requiring students to pay fees up to US\$230 to take this test. Yet the average level of English proficiency of Japanese students is still low compared to that of other developed countries. Are we really learning English in the first place? In this article, I will consider the purpose and significance of learning English at the college level, based on my 40-year experience, both as a student and a teacher, at Kyoto University, Japan.

2. ENGLISH AS A HUMANITIES SUBJECT

Though a professor of English literature, I am not a professionally trained teacher of English as a foreign language. I do remember taking several courses at college to obtain a license to teach English at high schools, but I must confess I mastered none of those 'methods'. Many of the English teachers at universities in my generation majored in English literature, and after becoming English teachers at the college level, they still think it their duty to write articles and books on English literature in Japanese. We, in turn, were taught by English teachers in the same vein.

Thus, all the English courses I took at college were administered by these teachers, who named one student after another, had them read a passage aloud, and made them translate the text, which was, of course, that of English literature. This practice was to check whether students had looked up difficult words in an English-Japanese dictionary the previous night—to examine whether the learning had been done at home, and not to make them learn the language in class. For those who had prepared beforehand, and thereby finished the learning, attending the class was just a waste of time. For those who had not prepared, attendance was as meaningless, because class was the place for checking the learning, rather than for the learning itself. Many students attended the class just because teachers took attendance as part of the grade assessment.

I liked to prepare for the class, however, and looked forward to hearing the professors solemnly declaring their interpretation. The English classes



were not foreign language courses, but, in effect, literature courses. Looking back, I think myself fortunate, as a fledgling literature major, to have attended beginners' courses focused on close reading of masterpieces of English and American literature. But even among students majoring in science were some who enjoyed this type of English class. Unfortunately, however, Kyoto University does not offer any liberal arts course on Western literature at the moment. A proper liberal arts course on Western literature, not an English language course taught in Japanese using literary texts, should satisfy those literature-oriented students. Only then will English language courses be able to focus on communicative skills, independently from the old literature-based framework.

3. SPOKEN ENGLISH

A user of a particular language who has used it since early childhood is called a native *speaker*. I am a native *speaker* of Japanese. Of course, this does not only mean that I can *speak* Japanese, but it also means that I can write, read, and aurally comprehend the language. It turns out, therefore, that the ability to *speak* a language implies by synecdoche the ability to perform all four of these skills. This metaphor may exist because speaking, being the first step in the language acquisition, is the basis of all the other skills.

However, I notice hatred for teaching spoken English in many college-level English teachers in Japan. This antipathy towards spoken English, apart from being based on teachers' own inabilities to speak English fluently, appears to be based on the misconception that there is empty 'chitter-chatter' in English. Japanese teachers of English often say that it is useless to make students speak fluently without making them think. True. What is the use of talking glibly without acquiring knowledge and robust logical thinking skills? 'Conversation in English' is often a derogatory term among college teachers, who are of the opinion that you should go to an English conversation school in town if you want to be a fluent speaker.

Yet I wonder if it is ever possible for those who lack logic and knowledge to speak fluently, especially in a foreign language. Language is a tool, and a receptacle for *contents*, but there is no language that is like a jug without water. As content necessitates expression, there is no such thing as English without content. We often forget that one of the conditions for improvement in language proficiency is to have content—something to say. Before you can help students to advance in a language, you must help them to have content and motivation to communicate. When I ask the students in my class, 'What do you think, Mr./Ms....?' I often get for an answer, 'I have no idea.' This is not, as one might suppose, a figure of speech. They do not mean



that they cannot find the correct answers (which I never ask for), but they literally have no ideas—nothing to communicate! To help them possess ‘ideas’—this should, I believe, be the very purpose of humanities education.

It is often said that Japanese people are bad negotiators in international situations. Many erroneously attribute it to their poor English skills¹. No. Instead, it is because Japanese politicians and businessmen are poor thinkers and lack the enthusiasm necessary to express what little they have in mind. It is the responsibility of those involved in higher education to cultivate thinking and motivate expression in students, rather than to endow them with knowledge and understanding. Without this basis, no method of language teaching will make students speak English. Neither will it make them write, nor will it make them read, nor will it make them aurally comprehend.

4. ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

There are two categories of foreign languages that I propose should be taught at universities in the age of globalization. One is *lingua franca*, and the other, *lingua vicina*. *Lingua franca* can be roughly defined as a language for communication between Non-native speakers or between non-native and native speakers. English as a *lingua franca* has already been a subject of numerous studies². Firth is considered to be the originator of this concept

¹ A typical example can be seen in the foreword in the newsletter (2000) of JACET, the largest association of English teachers in Japan. ‘It has been pointed out that Japanese stand at disadvantage at international competitive scenes on account of their low ability in foreign languages, especially in English. The phenomenon has been seen for some decades, but the feature of the current criticism is that politicians, businesspersons, commentators and executive officers at civil services unite their tone to call for the rearing of human resources that can cope with the globalized 21st century. The government has founded a deliberation council in response to this trend.’ (My translation) Thirteen years from this foreword, and Kyoto University still harps on the same theme in one of its symposiums, titled ‘English Education to Foster Global Human Resources’ (2013).

² A corpus named VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English) offers data for the study of English as a *lingua franca*. Researchers have extracted from VOICE linguistic idiosyncrasies peculiar to *lingua franca*, such as simplification (omission of articles and 3rd - person-present ‘-s’ from verbs), and influence of speakers’ linguistic background. On the other hand, there are arguments against admitting the status of a language to English as a *lingua franca*, fearing its linguistic imperialism and a crisis of multilingualism. Sometimes the guilty feelings towards the ex-colonies prevent from positive treatment of English as a Lingua Franca.



when, in the 1990's, he called communications in English between non-native speakers "*lingua franca* interactions" (1996, p. 237). House of Germany points to the shocking fact that there are more instances of communication in English between non-native speakers than between native speakers (2009, p. 141) English as a *lingua franca* does not evaluate learners by their closeness to native speakers' norms. It does not regard its speakers as incomplete learners.

English is comparatively new as a *lingua franca*, which has changed its form throughout history. When Alexander the Great expanded the territory of his empire, the *lingua franca* was *Koine* Greek. From classical Rome to the Middle Ages, Latin was the *lingua franca*. In this time, Romans were the only native speakers of the Latin tongue, whereas all others needed to learn Latin to participate in political and educational activities. After the split of the Roman Empire, and the ensuing fall of the Western Roman Empire, Latin continued to be the *lingua franca*. Then on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, a common language for trade developed out of a mixture of Frankish, Spanish, French, and Arabic. Actually the term *lingua franca* was a translation of the Arabic '*lisan-al-farang*' which was "an intermediary language used by speakers of Arabic with travellers from Western Europe" (House, 2003, p. 557). In the late fifteenth century, the linguistic nationalism of the Renaissance convinced people of the validity of vernaculars as means for expressing intelligent content. These vernaculars, supported by the newly invented printing technology, rapidly refined themselves. Nevertheless, in cultural, artistic, and diplomatic activities in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Europe, the *lingua franca* was French.

Finally, English soared triumphantly into the status of *lingua franca* after the nineteenth century, when the British Empire expanded its colonial reach over the surface of the earth, and in the twentieth century, when the United States gained political and economic hegemony throughout the world. Japanese kids, seeing anyone who appears to be a foreigner, address him/her with 'Hello!' thinking that the person speaks English. Japanese adults believe that the first foreign language to be learned should be English. Actually, English is currently most widely used in academic, commercial, and diplomatic contexts.

English is a compulsory subject at many Japanese universities. It is not because English is essentially superior to other languages or easier for Japanese students to learn, but because it is the *lingua franca* at present. However, we must remember, as we have seen above, that the *lingua franca* can change with global political and economic developments from century to century, or even decade to decade. It may be Arabic in the next decade. It may be Chinese; no one would deny those possibilities, at least in Eastern Asia.



Then the compulsory foreign language at Kyoto University would be Arabic or Chinese. We should keep in mind that the purpose of teaching English is not to make students capable of speaking *English*, but to make them capable of speaking the *lingua franca* for their empowerment in this global age.

The other type of foreign language, which I call *lingua vicina*, is a neighbouring language. *Lingua vicinas* for Japanese are Chinese, Korean, and Russian. Although problems abound concerning territory, human rights, post-war processes, and economic conflict, Japanese students know too little of what is happening in neighbouring countries, and show too little enthusiasm to learn their neighbours' languages. How exciting it would be to be able to read Chinese and Korean newspapers sold at newsstands, to use *Weibo* and *Baidu* on the Internet!³ Surely the actions and issues of neighbouring countries are conveyed by TV news and the Internet to some extent, but these are indirect sources, and the views of media reporters or Internet users probably contain their own biases. If Japanese cannot know their neighbours' thoughts without the mediation of media or interpreters, how can they be secure in their own views and exchange them with their neighbours? Their status in the world may be very shaky.

It is often simply and mistakenly thought, particularly in our globalized society, that fluency in English leads to competitive power in international negotiations. With only English available to them however, how can Japan argue with its neighbours? I propose that the language curriculum at the university level should be composed of three categories: Japanese as the *native* language, English as *lingua franca*, and Asian languages or Russian as *lingua vicinas*.

5. ENGLISH TAUGHT BY NON-NATIVE TEACHERS

It may surprise readers to know that English is usually taught in Japan using Japanese. Advocates of this approach say that in a classroom where both the teacher and students are Japanese, it does not make sense to speak to students with accents peculiar to Japanese. Students can listen to 'authentic English' by playing the complimentary CD from the textbook publisher. Do

³ *Weibo* is a Chinese microblogging website. Akin to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, it is one of the most popular sites in China, in use by well over 30% of Internet users, with a market penetration similar to the United States' Twitter. (*Wikipedia*) *Baidu* is a company that offers various web services from Chinese-language search engine to online collaboratively-built encyclopedia. (*Wikipedia*)



not inure them to your strange *Engrish*⁴, grammar-wise and pronunciation-wise. Why not use the language native to both of you to explain profound ideas and logic conveyable only in Japanese? Et cetera. Others argue contrarily that native speakers are the only appropriate teachers of a language.

My opposition to both opinions above is thus: it is all right to teach profound ideas and logic, but that is not what we should do in a foreign language class. I will teach English using English with my Japanese accent and idiosyncrasies, because even 'authentic' native speakers are not free from accents and idiosyncrasies. Whatever the language may be, its grammar and usage taught at school are inductions from innumerable instances, and not prearranged programs. Let us suppose an 'ideal language' with perfectly incarnated grammar and usage. (I know that this supposition itself is far-fetched because grammar and usage are actually dynamic and changing.) Then do native speakers speak the 'ideal language'? Do I speak 'ideal Japanese' in addressing the students in my class? Have I ever used such ideal Japanese in my sixty-year life? Only a machine, installed with some super language program, could approach (but never reach) this ideal state, and the result would be a crashing bore. Native speakers exchange messages with each other with idiosyncrasies and even defects. Thus, non-native speakers conveying their ideas in acquired languages seem far better than those keeping silent for fear of violating grammar and usage.

That is why I suppose that my teaching English using *my* English cannot have very ill effects on students. Often groping for words and expressions, and even correcting myself before the students, I show them what level of English a learner can achieve by way of example. I also urge them, even in a reading class, to speak up and write their ideas down in English.

My approach may not sound very innovative, or it may sound just a matter of course for most of the readers of this article, but it requires some courage in Japan. I must confess I owe my decision to Dr. Neddar's (An Algerian academic) attitude towards English teaching. Algeria's long colonization by France (1830-1962) left its language of education as French even after its independence. The Arabian Algerians who account for 80 per cent of the whole population are French-Arabic bilinguals. Although the

4 Corrupted English spoken by speakers of East Asian languages, especially Japanese speakers who tend to confuse [r] sound with [l] sound. The corruption extends from pronunciation to word order to grammar.



language in compulsory education has gradually shifted to Arabic, higher education in Algeria is still conducted mainly in French. Dr. Neddar, a specialist in English linguistics and TEFL, conducts his college classes at University of Mostaganem entirely in English. He visited our university in 2009, when I asked him to speak in my English class. There he addressed my students in fluent, yet apparently non-native-sounding, English sprinkled with errors. And yet his speech successfully elicited responses from the students. After the class he asked me, who was then teaching English using Japanese, this humiliating question: 'Why don't you speak English in your English class?' Looking back, the chagrin I then felt still torments me. It was this incident that pushed me towards 'teaching English in English'. Needless to say, the basic idea behind his and my practice is 'English as a *lingua franca*'.

On a recent job-offering/job-seeking site designed exclusively for academics (JREC-IN) you can see that an increasing number of Japanese universities require that English teacher candidates have TEFL degrees. Though this could reduce job opportunities for those majoring in literature, it will certainly work for the improvement of English teaching in higher education. Then, will literature majors like me be disqualified from teaching English as a foreign language? To the contrary. As senior speakers of English as a *lingua franca*, researchers of English literature have a lot to teach to their juniors—how to read and write articles and essays, how to give oral presentations, how to choose and enjoy paperback novels, and how to go about studying abroad. Those who have content—here, what they want to convey to younger users of English as a *lingua franca*—are all qualified to teach English.

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