

# SPOTLIGHT ON--LANGUAGE LABORATORY ASSOCIATION OF JAPAN

## THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN JAPAN

### — Perspective and Prospect —

The English language was taught for the first time in Japan, about a hundred years ago when Japan opened its doors to the world after nearly three hundred years of national isolation. The German and French languages were almost simultaneously adopted as a second or a third foreign language. Since then the foreign languages have been considered the most important subjects of study until shortly before and during the World War II, when they were neglected by the military policy. Today English teaching *par excellence* is being conducted with more vigour and enthusiasm than ever before.

The aim of English teaching in Japan is twofold. On the one hand, it aims at a practical command of the language; on the other, it aims at promoting the understanding of the cultural and social backgrounds of the English-speaking nations. A remarkable tendency seen in Japan during the last few decades is the widely-recognized need of a practical command of English as a means of communication between people with different linguistic backgrounds. Formerly more emphasis had been laid upon the understanding of a written text through translation than upon the mastery of spoken English. Today leaders in various fields are unanimously emphasizing the necessity of improved English teaching with special attention to the oral drill.

The educational system of Japan was reorganized after World War II with that of the U.S.A. as its model. Six years of elementary school is followed by three years of the lower secondary school. These nine years of education are compulsory. They are followed by three years of the upper secondary school, which in turn are followed by two years of junior college or four years of the university. The post-graduate school consists of two years of the master course and three years of the doctor course.

In the lower secondary school, English is taught normally three 50-minute periods a week for three years. In the upper secondary school there is an option between the A or the B course. The A course requires 9 credits and the B course 15 credits, a credit meaning 35 periods of 50 minutes' class work. In both the lower and the upper secondary school, English is an elective subject, but the majority of the students want to take it. Especially in urban areas, practically all students select English from among the elective subjects.

Nowadays all graduates of the elementary school automatically enter the lower secondary school and approximately 94% of the graduates of the lower secondary school choose to proceed to the upper secondary school, where again the majority of the students select English as their elective subject. This state of the matter caused a shortage of well-

qualified English teachers at the start of the new educational system. The quality of English teachers, however, is being improved gradually.

The problem for English teachers in the upper secondary school is the preparation of their students for entrance examinations to universities. Entrance examinations are at least in part given by individual universities. Because it is technically difficult to test applicants' oral ability within a very limited time, most colleges and universities screen their candidates by means of written tests. This has led the teachers in upper secondary schools to slight oral drills in their teaching.

About 40% of the upper secondary school graduates advance to colleges and universities. In the four-year university course, the minimum requirement for English is eight credits, if the student takes a minimum of four credits in a second foreign language course (usually French, German, Chinese, Spanish or Russian). Otherwise the minimum requirement for English is twelve credits.

The main problem in English teaching on the university level is that it tends to be too literary and not practical. Since most of the university English teachers are interested in literature, and since the selection of text books and the method of teaching are at their own discretion, many of them select literary pieces and limit their teaching to the translation of their textbooks. It is quite natural that an average university graduate taught in this way should have a very poor command of spoken English when he can read and write English with some ease.

The difficulties described in the foregoing paragraphs show the gloomy side of the perspective. They are a product of inertia and of a long tradition of English language teaching in this country. In the last decade or two a growing number of language teachers are awakening to the importance of a foreign language as a means of international communication.

The Ministry of Education has published the **Course of Studies** stressing the importance of developing balanced skills in speaking, understanding, reading and writing; offered central in-service training courses for English teachers; established language centres with modern technological equipment in a number of state universities, etc. etc. This year the Ministry has launched a ten-year plan of installing language laboratories in all the secondary schools in the country.

The language laboratory in Japan began operating in the early 1950's. The Language Laboratory Association (LLA) was organized in July 1961 with a membership of about four hundred in the Eastern half (Kanto) of Japan and about three hundred in the Western half (Kansai). A few years later, two more chapters were added: one in the central part (Chubu) with the city of Nagoya as its centre. At present the membership of the four chapters number approximately two thousand. About half of them are affiliated to colleges and universities, and the rest are teachers of secondary schools, commercial language schools, educational research centres, etc. etc.

The four chapters carry on more or less similar activities: e.g. holding study meetings at least twice a year, publishing study reports and news

letters, etc., besides taking responsibilities for the annual conference in rotation.

The most commonly used technological aids in Japanese classrooms are cassette or open-reel tape recorders and overhead projects. More or less elaborate language laboratories are set up in approximately 11% of 10,000 lower secondary schools and 16% of the 5,000 upper secondary schools. The ratio of universities with language laboratories is much higher.

It is often reported that although elaborate language laboratories are installed, the necessary additional personnel including mechanics and software compilers are difficult to employ at schools and colleges. This fact inevitably causes increase of the duties of regular teachers to their disheartenment. However, we emphasize that the teacher's zeal is of vital importance. Unless the personnel are completely motivated and the teachers who use the language lab willingly devote themselves to making good software, the equipment will go to waste. That is why the L.L.A. has been petitioning the Government and other educational authorities to increase the budget of the language laboratories in schools and colleges. Many of the private schools and colleges have managed to solve this kind of problem on their own. Last but not least are the contributions of radio and television language courses. The Japanese Broadcasting Corporation has included English lessons on different levels in its radio programs since 1925 and in its television programs since 1952. More than ten different English courses are being broadcast to schools and homes almost regularly each week. Some schools and colleges use recorded news broadcast from the Far Eastern Network (FEN) of the U. S., Armed Forces and the BBC short wave stations.

On the whole, the prospect of better English is bright.

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