

## English Language Education: Exploring the Perspectives of Japanese and Native Speaker Teachers

Eric Des Marais, Division of Language and Culture Education

*English language educators pull from a wide range of experiences, theories, and pedagogies. This is true all over the world, but is particularly interesting in the case of Japan. Japanese teachers of English and native speaker teachers have quite different experiences and attitudes regarding foreign language education. Taking a social constructionist view, this paper will examine how these two groups construct English language education differently.*

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### Introduction

There are approximately 330 to 360 million native speakers of English in the world today (Crystal, 2006). While this makes it third in global popularity after Mandarin and Spanish, when second language speakers are taken into consideration (between 470 million and 1 billion), English becomes the most spoken language in the world (Ethnologue, 2019). English is indeed a global language (Graddol, 1997). With so many speakers the world over, there is no one group of people who can claim it as their own. This has, in fact, led to language drift—English is being influenced by the cultures that use it (Jambor, 2007).

These numbers also mean that at least 6 billion people in the world are able to function without using English at all. While English is the most useful

language in a global context, in day-to-day life for those 6 billion people, how important is it?

In this context, the case of Japan is particularly interesting. Japan is the fourth largest export country in the world, and it imports 61% of its food. It is one of the largest economic powers in world. Clearly, English is important to Japan. There have been many attempts to improve English language ability in Japan. The Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, started in 1987, was one attempt to increase English Language Skills. All junior and high school students study English, and it is part of the entrance examinations for universities. Many companies also desire high TOEIC scores from job applicants.

Even with all this encouragement, practically speaking, the number of foreign residents is only a little over 2 million (Okada, 2018). While English language skills are integral to Japan as a global powerhouse, on a day-to-day basis, most Japanese people have no opportunity, or even reason, to use English.

Within this context, there is another dynamic — that of positions of Japanese teachers of English and Native Speaker teachers of English. While both groups are dedicated to producing skilled users of the English language, because these two groups have quite different backgrounds, educational experiences, and perspectives on teaching English in Japan, their social constructions of English Language Education (ELE) are different.

Social constructionist theory states that our knowledge of the world is formed through social interactions (Burr, 1995). It is our interactions with other people and social institutions that leads to our conceptions of the world. In terms of English language education in Japan, these differing social constructions of language education can lead to misunderstandings between Japanese and native speaker teachers. For example, stereotypes of native speaker teachers draw a picture of playing in class too

much without much serious teaching, or on the other hand, they demand too much of students and then get angry at students and embarrass them. Native speakers also hold unfair stereotypes about English education in Japan — that Japanese teachers ignore communication skills, or students are immature and not serious in class, or that there is too much of a focus on tests and this impairs developing communication skills.

What follows is an examination of some of the factors around English Language Education that lead to confusion. This will start with a review of the major theories of second language acquisition to help explain the theoretical background of language education. This will be followed by contrasting the Japanese teacher of English context with the native teacher context. For each topic, the Japanese teacher experience is explained, and then the native speaker teacher experience is explained. It is my hope that by increasing understand of these two perspectives, Japanese teachers and native speaker teachers can understand each other better and thus create a better learning environment for students.

### **Theories of Second Language Acquisition**

As second language acquisition is by no means a new problem in the world, it

is not surprising that there are a multitude of theories attempting to conceptualize the process. It would be an arduous task to explain all of the linguistic, social, and psychological theories impacting second language acquisition pedagogy, but a short summary of a few of the major ones that impact English language education in Japan is provided below, all coming from Laviosa (2014).

#### *Grammar-Translation Method*

Perhaps the oldest method of second language acquisition is the Grammar-Translation Method. Although folklore dates it back to the 16th Century and the translation of medieval texts, the method was formally developed in Prussia in the 18th Century to teach French and English to secondary students. Through the study of grammatical rules and vocabulary, students would then be able to access the knowledge and wisdom of foreign language literature. To this day, it is still widely used pedagogy, especially for second language learners who will focus on the translation of texts. In this method, grammar rules of the target language are taught through the native language so that the learner comes to understand how the underlying rules of one grammatical system relate to another. This method is generally very teacher-centered, with instructors providing lengthy explanations of grammar and vocabulary in the lessons through the mother tongue.

#### *The Direct Method*

In the late 1800s, another pedagogy came to prominence in the United States. This method put oral communication as the most important skill, and in many ways was the direct opposite of the Grammar-Translation Method. Laviosa (2014) cites an early Berlitz teacher's manual showing this contrast: 1) no translation under any circumstances; 2) strong emphasis on oral work; 3) avoidance of grammatical explanations until late in the course; and 4) maximum use of question-and-answer techniques. The reasons Berlitz argued for this was that translation wastes valuable learning time for the new language, translation encourages interference from the mother tongue, and each language has its own special qualities that cannot be translated. By 1914 there were over 200 Berlitz schools in the United States and Europe, and the school brand continues even today. The schools focused on oral conversation drills and practice, guided by native speaker instructors. In many ways, this system is the prototype for *eikaiwa* in Japan.

#### *The Audiolingual Method*

This method was developed in the 1960s in the United States, when international relations were increasing in importance. Once again, listening and speaking were seen as the most important

skills. It was based on the theory of operant conditioning by B.F. Skinner, so teachers were to provide learning environments for students in which positive responses (i.e., grammatical or word choice) were positively rewarded (smiles, stickers, encouragement, etc.). Dialogues and oral drills formed the basis of the early stage. This would be followed with reading and writing, first by copying examples and then later through self-production. The mother tongue was generally not used so as to not interfere with the second language; translation was seen as a specialized skill, only taught at advanced levels. Importantly, this method was also informed by Situational Language Teaching, which focused on syntactical structures. So, although it put oral communication at the forefront, it was still similar to the Grammar-Translation Method in that it was organized by grammar.

#### *Communicative Language Teaching*

Not too long after the rise of the Audiolingual Method in the United States, British linguists rose to meet the challenge of teaching English as a second language to adult and child immigrants from the Commonwealth. Through extensive empirical research into the needs of learners, they came to the conclusion that the “situations” which were important to learners were not

grammatically constructed, but were instead constructed from the functional needs of social interactions such as asking for things, expressing likes and dislikes, and making suggestions. The originators believed it was a fundamental mistake to assume that learners can understand the logic of communication from studying the logic of grammar. Important assumptions of this method are that: 1) language must be appropriate to the social situation; 2) learning involves the creation and understanding of messages with actual meaning; 3) learners engage in psycholinguistic and other forms of cognitive processing; 4) language learners must learn through trial and error; and 5) students need free practice in which simultaneous use of skills occurs. Practice activities include logic-gap exercises, role plays, solving puzzles, and other activities which are familiar to the learners in their own language.

Theory plays an important role in informing pedagogical choices within a classroom, and teachers are also responding to social contexts and pressures from administrators, parents, students, their own peers, and their own history. The next part of this paper will examine some of the differences Japanese and native speaker teachers face when constructing their own meaning for English language education. Each context

will be described from both the experience of Japanese teachers and of native speakers.

### **Contexts Influencing the Construction of English Language Education**

#### *Expectations for Student at Different Ages*

While both Western and Japanese school systems have elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educational levels, there are some important differences in the expectations for students at each level. For language education, this is particularly important.

In Japan, the main focus for high schools, especially academically oriented high schools, is success on university entrance examinations. Students often attend *juku*, not to better themselves or make friends, but to do better on university examinations. This is particularly a factor in English language education, because universities generally test on the ability of students to translate. So, universities set the tone for what Japanese teachers should teach in middle school and high school. University, on the other hand, is much more relaxed than in the West; it is a time for social development, self-exploration, and contemplation before stepping into the adult world of work. Here, English test scores, particularly on TOEIC, may be an extra edge on success on the job market.

In the West, high school is less rigorous academically. Student clubs and part-time jobs play an important role in student life; secondary school is probably more like a *bukatsu* Japanese high school. University, on the other hand, especially in the United States, is particularly rigorous. Students are expected to become independently functioning adults. Time management, independent intellectual thought, and the ability to succeed using critical thinking are important goals.

#### *Experiences Learning Foreign Languages*

Teachers generally feel most comfortable teaching the way that they learned. For Japanese teachers of English, this means a grammar translation format. Most teachers experienced learning English through a teacher-centered approach, with grammar explanations in Japanese. Output focuses on written work, especially copying or translating exercises. Memorization of vocabulary, drills, and reading prepare students for tests. Goals for students include passing university examinations, or in university, doing well on TOEIC L&R. Hence, reading and listening skills are important.

Native speaker experience with foreign language education generally follows either the Audiolingual Method or the Communicative Method. That is, oral communication is of primary

importance, either from a grammatical structuralist approach or a functionalist approach. Oral drills and repetition, some grammar instruction, and role-plays are common exercises. Classes are held almost entirely in the target language. There would have been no focus at all on standardized testing in the foreign language. Communication, especially oral communication, would have been the primary goal. Teachers generally try to create warm, supportive environment to build student confidence.

#### *Foreign Language Skills*

Japanese students generally study English much longer than Native speakers would have studied a foreign language. In fact, most native speakers have quite low-level skills in a second language, if any at all.

Japanese teachers will have studied English for six years in secondary school, and for four more years in university. They will have studied four times a week in secondary school 50 minutes a lesson. In university, they will have studied about 3 hours a week their first year, and about 90 minutes a week their second year.

An American teacher probably studied Spanish, French, or German in high school, and probably the same language at university. In high school they studied 5 times a week for 50 minutes per lesson, but for only two years. In university, they

probably studied the same amount per week, but for only one year. Importantly, almost no one studies Japanese, by some estimates less than one percent of the general population. That means most native speaker teachers are not well-prepared to understand or even appreciate the difficulties of translating between Japanese and English.

#### *Teaching Objectives*

While of course all teachers want their students to master the English language, teachers must also set realistic and practical goals for their students.

In many ways, the Japanese approach is quite practical. Most Japanese people will never have the need to talk to foreigner. However, if they are involved in academia, they will need access to the knowledge base contained within English-language academic journals. Thus, in high school, the main objectives for students are to do well on university examinations, the Center exam, and perhaps some consideration of EIKEN. Once students get to university, the TOEIC L&R is the main measure of success, along with being able to understand journal articles. Recently, presentation skills for conferences is rising in importance, so oral skills are starting to become important.

For most native speaker teachers of English, they imagine the highest goal for students to be successfully working or

studying abroad for an extended period of time. There may be some thought to preparation for tests related studying abroad, either TOEFL or IELTS, which are four skill tests. However, test preparation is usually not a main focus unless the program is specifically aimed at sending students overseas to study. Lower level goals for students would be functional — making sure students have the language skills to travel abroad, communicate with a homestay family, or finding help if they are lost.

#### *Cultural or Systemic Factors*

It is also important to consider the pressures that both groups of teachers face. There is often a desire to change from both groups of instructors, but there are outside factors that make change difficult.

For Japanese teachers, especially at the secondary level, administrators and parents usually have very little English ability themselves, so they are not able to judge how well an English teacher is doing. That means examinations play and even more important role in measuring a teacher's success in the classroom. Also, because Japanese students are so ingrained with the teacher-centered, passive learning approach in all their subjects, students can be particularly resistant to active approaches when working with Japanese teachers, even more than with native speaker teachers.

Reinforcing this passivity, strict teachers who provide lots of correction are considered to be “good,” but overcorrection can harm student confidence, which is key to active learning success.

On the other hand, native speakers face their own set of hurdles. Although they have a strong preference for active learning in class, using lots of role-plays or collaborative projects, because most of them do not have a high level of Japanese ability, it can be hard for them to monitor classes and keep students on task, especially for a large class. Also, because they haven't studied Japanese, it is hard for them to understand how different the two languages are, even for daily life functions. Another problem is that Japanese students have very little experience with group work, class discussions, or expectations around using English in class.

#### **Conclusion**

Japanese and native speaker teachers of English language have very different experiences with second language acquisition. The context of their own educational experiences, their theoretical backgrounds, and even their experiences of Japanese society leads to different social constructions of English language education.

While having such different experiences can be seen as a barrier

between the two groups, it can also be viewed as an opportunity. All teachers want improve professionally, and by working hard to understand each other, the best of both perspectives can be used to create educational programs that help Japanese students improve their language skills.

This research paper was a qualitative analysis examining the social and cultural factors affecting English language education in Japan, so no quantitative data was considered. However, future research should also examine quantitative measures of language acquisition in order to determine specifically the strengths for both groups of teachers. It would also be beneficial to engage in further qualitative research (for example, focus groups and interviews) to determine how these two groups of teachers can better integrate their skillsets.

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効果的な英語教育のために-日本人教員とネイティブ教員の協働を目指して

Des Marais, Eric (共通教育部)

### 要旨

英語教員はそれぞれが幅広く様々な教授経験、教育理論、そして教授法を持っており、それは世界中どの国の英語教員にも当てはまることである。しかし日本では、外国語教育に関して日本人教員とネイティブ教員との間に大きな違いが見られる点が、特に興味深い。本稿では社会構築主義の視点から、日本人英語教員とネイティブ教員とが英語教育を行なう上でどのように異なっているのかを考察する。

### キーワード

英語教育; 教育学; 教室内ルール; 日本