

English as an International Language in Japan

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Abstract

This paper explores English as an international language (EIL) in the context of Japan. The Japanese are interested in and want to use English to communicate, but currently their abilities and potential to use EIL are not fully utilized. Differences between English as a second/foreign language and EIL are discussed, and the economic and educational value of EIL in Japan is addressed. Suggestions are provided on how the Japanese can increase interaction with other nonnative speakers of English using EIL. Classroom implications for teaching English as an international language, with its broader definition of English communication, are also examined.

Introduction

Languages such as English, Dutch, and Spanish spread around the globe because of exploration, trade, and colonization for hundreds of years. English is a language that originated in and has been adapted from many languages, notably Germanic dialects, French, Latin, and Greek, to mention a few (Fromkin et al. 1996). The English language has been in Japan for about 200 years; it was first introduced during the Tokugawa period, well after other European languages such as Dutch and Portuguese were introduced (Loveday 1996). In the past, one reason the Japanese may have underutilized English is because Japan is an island country, decreasing the likelihood of encountering people from other language groups. Fromkin et al. (1996) noted that physical, political, and ethnic barriers can slow the spread of linguistic changes. These three barriers have, to some extent, separated Japan from its neighbors throughout its history. Air travel and improved sea travel have, however, helped to increase the frequency of encounters with speakers from other cultures who speak other languages.

Today, English has surpassed other languages in its use by Japanese and other nonnative speakers because 'English is the vehicle for science, technology, media industries and a number of other trends and activities' (Strevens 1983, p. 4). Fromkin et al. (1996) noted that the standard dialect of a language is associated with the power structures of society. Because of the influence of the United States in Japan after World War II, American English is being taught in the educational system. Currently in Japan, second language (L2) learners are striving to achieve near-native-speaker pronunciation, but this target needs to change to a target of international intelligibility. In the future, most Japanese L2 speakers of English as an international language can have a target of overall comprehensible pronunciation, rather than having a British, North American, or Australian accent.

The people of Japan have an interest in communicating in English that can be observed in a variety of situations. For example, a train conductor at the Matsue station recently praised a native English speaker by saying, '*Nihongo* much, much,' rather than using only Japanese to express his admiration. At a restaurant in Matsue, a native English-speaking foreigner was asked, in English, to 'sign here' when using a credit card. A taxi driver said, 'Good morning,' to an American, although he then admitted, in Japanese, that he could not speak English. These are examples of the willingness of many Japanese to attempt communication in English when possible. The increased use of loan words from the English language is further evidence of the Japanese people's desire to use English and/or foreign-sounding words. It is noteworthy, however, that in Japan while there is a great deal of indirect contact with English through movies, music, and advertisements, direct contact with English-speaking foreigners is proportionately lower. Furthermore, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbukagakusho) (2002, para. 2) noted, 'The English-speaking abilities of a large percentage of the population are inadequate.' For those living outside of Japan, as well, there is a general impression that Japanese cannot communicate well in English. A Swiss professor of international political economy was recently quoted as saying, 'Japan's

linguistic barrier impedes it from 'connecting' to the outside world, especially in articulating views, position and insights' (Lehmann 2002, para. 11). When comparing Japan to many other countries, there are fewer people with a high level of English speaking ability, although as a whole there has been gradual, tangible improvement in English communicative capabilities.

Differentiating English as an International Language

Around the world, nonnative speakers use English in a variety of situations to communicate with both native and nonnative speakers. Today, the English language is a common language through which people with different first languages (L1s) can communicate with each other. In the past, English was taught under the assumption that second language speakers would be primarily conversing with native speakers of English. According to the British Council's website (n.d.), 'English has official or special status in at least 75 countries with a total population of over two billion.' This is a significant part of the world population, which is estimated at 6.3 billion (United Nations Population Division 2003). The British Council's website (n.d.) also states, 'Speakers of English as a second language probably outnumber those who speak it as a first language,' a thought echoed by Alptekin (2002), Jenkins (2002), Seidlhofer (2001), Strevens (1983), and Timmis (2002). These statistics show the importance of English as an international language (EIL). When students study English as an international language, they learn English for 'international communication rather than for communication with its NSs [native speakers]' (Jenkins 2002, p. 85). Many Japanese recognize the importance of speaking English to communicate with native English-speaking foreigners, but the general population is not fully utilizing their potential to speak English as an international language with other nonnative speakers.

In July of 2002, Monbukagakusho (2002, para. 1) developed an action plan to 'drastically' improve English education because 'it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language.' Strevens (1983) noted that, other than variances such as

those found between, for example, British and American English, English grammar and lexis taught throughout the world are relatively uniform (one dialect), varying only in the phonological features (the accent) of the instructor. Consequently, the next step should be for Monbukagakusho to shift from second language English education to education focused on English as an international language.

Increasingly, there is acceptance of the idea that L2 English learners should not feel like they have failed if they are intelligible but do not acquire native-like pronunciation (Alptekin 2002; Jenkins 2002; Seidlhofer 2001; Strevens 1983; Timmis 2002). Walsh and Diller (1981, p. 18, cited in Brown 1994, p. 55) noted that 'lower-order processes such as pronunciation are dependent on early maturing.' As such, according to lateralization and the Critical Period Hypothesis, it is unrealistic for most adult second language learners of English anywhere, including Japan, to acquire native-like pronunciation. In spite of this, there is a perception in Japan that one must have perfect grammar, lexicon, and pronunciation. Writing the Chinese *kanji* characters requires accuracy and precision. This attention to detail may be affecting, even inhibiting, second language acquisition by the Japanese learner because he/she finds it difficult to produce it perfectly. Until now, a target for Japanese L2 learners of English has been a native accent such as those in North America, Britain, and Australia. Although the target of a native-like skill was the goal in English as a foreign language, in EIL education, a target of intelligibility is the goal. As Strevens (1983, p. 6) noted, 'Total mutual intelligibility within a language community [in this case, English throughout the world] is a myth,' although he also observed that phonologically 'the phenomenon of reputed unintelligibility... quickly evaporates' as a nonnative speaker adjusts to the other speaker's accent. Intelligibility with an L1 accent is acceptable if the learner intends to be a member of the international English-speaking community. As such, English as the lingua franca of the world is changing the desired target accent to an understandable pronunciation among all speakers of English.

Economic Importance of English as an International Language for Japan

People who are in international business and in research, such as agriculture and geophysics, use English to communicate with others from many countries. Japanese professionals in these fields use English to exchange ideas verbally, to make contracts in commerce, and to write publications, as well as to communicate personally with others they meet. Japan's economy, especially the manufacturing of computers, electrical appliances, cars, and other transportation equipment, relies heavily on the international market for export (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs 1997). Selling manufactured goods to other economic regions is vital to Japan's economy because the country does not have many natural resources. Intellectual trade, on the other hand, is one of Japan's most prominent and important resources. As such, using English as an international language to facilitate the export of both items and knowledge-based products is logical when considering the increasing number of EIL speakers from around the world.

The economic downturn in Japan has created an interest in English as an international language in Japan. Since 1999 when the Nissan Corporation of Japan recruited Carlos Ghosn as its CEO to lead the restructuring of the company, there have been some significant changes within the company. Even though English is not the native language of Ghosn or the Japanese employees, the working language in the offices at Nissan became English, not Japanese or French (Yoshida 2001). English was chosen because it is the lingua franca for international business. This is a clear example of the need for a common language between nonnative English-speaking groups in business; this further confirms the importance of English as a lingua franca in Japan. Other examples abound. Over 2,000 Japanese firms assess employees' English ability with scores from the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (McCurry 2003). Is it not surprising, therefore, that the number of test takers at institutions increased from 205,000 in 1989 to 698,000 in 2001 (TOEIC 2002). McCurry (2003, para. 14) spoke with a Japanese electric power engineer who stated, 'English proficiency

simply means better prospects in these days of downsizing and rising unemployment.'

Educational Interest in English

In the past, English has been viewed by the Japanese populace as a subject in school and as a pastime for adults rather than as a real form of communication. Currently, however, the number of conversation schools indicates that the general public is interested in English conversation. In addition, the Japan Broadcasting Company (NHK) has many programs on radio and television for learning not only English but also other languages. Foreigners from North America, Europe, and the African continent who are living in the rural prefecture of Shimane have found it possible to live for a number of years without progressing beyond basic Japanese introductions because they have been able to communicate in English with many people in the prefecture. Typically, in urban areas this trend is even more obvious. The only way foreigners can live here without speaking Japanese is if they communicate in the common language of English with Japanese citizens and with other foreigners who have different first languages. This indicates that the ability of Japanese to use English to communicate continues to progress.

The Japanese government continues to expand English education for the next generation, recognizing that the acquisition of English communication skills 'has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the future development of Japan as a nation' (Monbukagakusho 2002, para. 1). Monbukagakusho is increasing expenditures to further foreign language education and cultural exchanges, with an emphasis on English, through endeavors such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. Started 16 years ago to improve English education in junior and senior high schools, the JET Program has recently expanded to include elementary schools. In 2002, this program had 5,890 participants from six English-speaking countries, along with 383 participants from an additional 33 countries (JET Programme n.d.).

Opportunities for Growth of English as an International Language

Monbukagakusho's recent action plan (2002) promotes more exposure to native speakers for English learners. The Ministry's intent is to expand overseas opportunities for high school and university students to study English. Monbukagakusho has set a target of 10,000 high school students studying overseas each year. One source of funding in the action plan is from private resources, but it is unclear how the remaining funds will be obtained. For university students, more scholarship programs will be created. Again, it is not clear how the Ministry is planning to fund these scholarships. This is a concern as the Japanese economy continues to decline. Furthermore, universities are becoming fiscally independent and less reliant on Monbukagakusho because of the decentralization of the Ministry. Michael Halliday (Lam 2002) stated that a country should stay with only one model of English. Japanese educational institutions clearly subscribe to an American accent so one could argue that Japanese learners should only study in the United States. This does not seem to be the case currently, as many schools send students to England and Australia to study English. As such, if English as an international language is the goal, there should be little opposition to English study in other countries where English is an official language. Therefore, if the Japanese educational community accepts EIL, then Monbukagakusho can consider less expensive alternatives. For instance, travel and living expenses in Singapore, Nigeria, Hong Kong, and India may be lower than in England or the United States, thus making overseas exchanges more financially viable.

If English as an international language is the goal, sending students to other nonnative English-speaking countries is another viable option. Increasing opportunities for nonnative speaker (NNS) of English to NNS encounters is important if the target language is of an international type. There are countries that are in closer proximity to Japan than the United States and England. China and South Korea are good candidates for exchanges or programs promoting international communication through English, and because of the proximity, the programs would be fiscally easier to support.

Besides study abroad, there are other opportunities for learners to speak English. Experiences such as these give participants a real purpose for using their English skills. One such opportunity is the Asian Youth Forum. The Forum is a venue for college-age people from Japan, Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, and other Asian countries to discuss language, culture, global issues, and international understanding; English is the lingua franca. This setting provides an excellent opportunity to discuss and learn from other people of the same age. The first Forum was held in South Korea in October 1999. The second Forum, in November 2001, was held in Kitakyushu, Japan, in conjunction with the annual Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) conference. The third was in Taipei, Taiwan, in November 2002, as part of the Pan-Asian Language Teaching Conference. The next Asian Youth Forum will be held June 24-27, 2004, in Vladivostok, Russia. In the past, there have been about 50 participants at each Forum.

Another option rather than English study programs is international volunteer programs. One example is Habitat for Humanity, which provides opportunities for EIL learners to engage other EIL users and learners from other countries. Habitat for Humanity is an organization supported by former United States president, Jimmy Carter. Habitat builds affordable homes around the world for low-income families. Because the families who are buying the homes must work with the other volunteers to build their homes, the importance of EIL becomes abundantly clear – the lingua franca is English. In August 2001, for example, the Jimmy Carter Work Project was held in South Korea. Forty-four university students from Japan went to Korea and interacted not only with Koreans but also with volunteers from 23 other countries (Habitat for Humanity Korea 2001). This project gave volunteers unique opportunities for interaction with a wide variety of people using English. In addition, the participants heard nonnative speakers with various accents. This did not, however, stop them from communicating with each other in English. Habitat for Humanity Korea continues to have Blitz Builds on a regular basis. In addition, builds that have a few volunteers as well as those which have hundreds or thousands of volunteers are held throughout the world

every year. In addition to opportunities to speak EIL, organizations like this give learners the chance to experience another culture(s). Experiencing and understanding different cultures is important in the use of EIL because understanding other cultures provides knowledge that can then be used to understand nonnative speakers and their ideas.

Classroom Implications for Teaching EIL

There is a general impression by those living outside of Japan, often substantiated by anecdotal evidence (Strevens 1983), that Japanese students are more capable of reading and writing English than of listening and speaking it. The JET Program and other proactive measures encourage students to value listening and speaking, but further effort in the classroom should be given to communicative ability. Recognizing the importance of listening, Monbukagakusho (2002) has set a goal of implementing a listening test into the University Entrance Central Examination beginning in 2006. It is believed that this will further promote the importance of listening in junior and senior high school classrooms. English as an international language recognizes English as the lingua franca of the world. As such, it differs from past concepts of English both in the way it is taught and in the way it is used as a nonnative language. EIL does not prescribe to one accent of English (e.g. North American, British, Australian, etc.), but instead, the desired accent is an internationally intelligible one. As such, there will be a subtle change in education away from overestimating the importance of an authentic accent to communicative competence. Furthermore, the aim of L2 English education will move from communication with native English speakers to the much broader goal of communication with nonnative speakers as well.

In classrooms in Japan, instructors need to help English learners develop strategies to repair and adapt quickly in nonnative speaker (NNS) to NNS situations where there is a breakdown in understanding. Breakdown may occur for a wide variety of reasons, including using foreign pronunciation or pronunciation that has not yet achieved an intelligible level, missing contextual

cues, or lacking sufficient lexicon. Communication strategies such as self rephrasing, direct appeal for help, and asking for repetition (Dornyei & Scott 1997) can not only be taught but encouraged and reinforced, thus enabling students to complete utterances and providing confidence for further attempts to speak the target language.

Asking for repetition and/or using contextual cues when breakdown occurs are not used as much as was previously thought. Jenkins (2002) found that L2 learners in NNS-NNS situations were not always relying on contextual cues or knowledge of previous conversations but were instead trying to force an understanding based on the receiver's perception of the speaker's phonemes (the sounds that are combined to make a word). In ignoring the contextual and linguistic cues, the learners completely misinterpreted what the speaker was trying to say. Instructors should emphasize the need for the English student to adjust or change the lexicon to the context as well as assume the role of an active listener. Speakers of English need to strive to repair incorrect utterances and correct or change their pronunciation so they are more intelligible. Jenkins (2002, p. 91) stated that 'it [is] becom[ing] crucial to identify which errors seriously threaten phonological intelligibility.' Speakers need to be taught to be sensitive to the receiver's responses and to observe body language, both of which can convey understanding or misunderstanding. It may also be necessary for the speaker to try to anticipate what kind of pronunciation the receiver can understand, based on the receiver's speech, accent, and linguistic origin. These skills must be taught in EIL classes.

Conclusion

English is the world's lingua franca, but Japan needs to develop a curriculum that reflects the needs and reality of speaking English as an international language. In Japan, English as a foreign language has been taught for many years, yet the use of English to communicate with other second language speakers has not reached the potential that it could. This may be due to the fact that English language education has not accepted English as an international language. Japanese have,

in the past, not fully utilized their English abilities, partially because Japan's economic strength has not demanded it. The idea of being an autonomous country is fading as the global economy results in the lowering of trade barriers between countries. As a result, the importance of EIL for business is being realized. Japanese business people are placing a higher priority on English proficiency as more corporations use TOEIC scores as part of the evaluations for promotion. Furthermore, Monbukagakusho is advocating increased attention to English in education. The next step is teaching English as an international language rather than a foreign language. With at least six years of English study in junior and senior high school, the Japanese have some ability to communicate in English. Beyond this, the general citizenry must continue to improve the English skills they possess so that they can communicate with increased confidence and proficiency. This will not be accomplished quickly, but it is a realistic goal given time and conscious effort by educational institutions, instructors, and the people of Japan.

Websites for EIL Opportunities:

Habitat for Humanity International at <http://www.habitat.org/>

Asian Youth Forum at <http://www.asianyouthforum.org/>

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