

THE PARADOX OF ENGLISH LEARNING IN JAPAN: PROBLEMS AND POLICIES

BERNARD SAINT-JACQUES

ABSTRACT: This paper will examine the various policies of the Japanese Government concerning English teaching and learning in Japan, from the Meiji period (1868) until the most recent declarations of the Government concerning this matter. It will particularly focus on the white paper "Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English abilities" of Atsuko Toyama, Minister of Education (March 31, 2003). Those policies represent an immense effort to improve English knowledge in Japan. Moreover, Japanese scholars have conducted serious research on second language learning and teaching. A great deal of theorizing, experimentation, innovations and debates have taken place. Indeed, the teaching and learning of English in Japan is a multi-billion dollars industry. Several people considering the very inadequate results of these gigantic efforts claim that something is very wrong with the teaching and learning of English in Japan. The purpose of this paper is to show that these negative assessments are based on a narrow understanding of language learning, ignoring the sociolinguistic aspects of language learning.

KEYWORDS: Politics and Language

INTRODUCTION

What is the most important language in the world today? Almost everyone would answer English. Indeed, the ascent of modern English is quite a feat

when one considers that in 1582, Richard Mulcaster, the most famous educator of his day, wrote: "The English tongue is of small reach, stretching no further than this land of ours", and that as recently as the 18th century, English was outranked by French, German, Spanish, Russian and Italian. European academicians of the time deplored the fact that English writers wrote only in English.

English has become a world language, an international language. There are more speakers of English in the world, either as a native or a second language, than any other languages. Here, one cannot resist the temptation of mentioning an exciting event occurring in the world today. For the first time in the history of the world, there is an international language, English, which will remain the lingua franca of the world, even if the military, political and economic power and prestige of the most important country hosting this language, the United States of America, are taken over by another country. In the past, Persian, Greek, Latin, Portuguese, Spanish, French which successively had the status of international languages, were replaced by another when the country hosting these languages lost their preeminence in the world. International English has disengaged itself from its native roots, whether it is England or the United States. At the occasion of an address to the 11th Asian Round Table (1984), Prof. Takao Suzuki distinguished between "International English" and "Native English", making the claim that "International English" belongs to all the people of the world. The role of English as an international means of communication, independent of its roots in the US and England, has already been recognized in recent years, even by those not particularly friendly to these two countries. In 1995, at the Bandung Conference, which represented 1.4 billion people from twenty-nine Asian and African countries (including Red China), the proceedings were entirely conducted in English. The Cairo's Egyptian Gazette, answering

the irony of an American journalist who enjoyed the fact that the delegates of communist countries communicated in English, wrote: "English is not the property of capitalist Americans, but of the whole world.

POLICIES IN JAPAN

In this perspective, it is interesting to notice that right from the Meiji Period (1868), English has been the foreign language of predilection in Japan. However, starting at the beginning of the Meiji Period, German and French were also studied and a great number of texts in these two languages were translated in Japanese. Yet with the exception of a few lexical items from these two languages in the Japanese vocabulary, for instance from German for medical terms, English became the dominant foreign language for acquiring foreign technology and for international communication. Excluding the period of the last war when English was not taught in many schools, although English was never formally banned, English has remained until today the most taught and learned foreign language in Japan.

There is no doubt, particularly in the last 50 years, that the Japanese Ministry of Education, Japanese scholars of second language learning and teachers of English have conducted serious research on second language learning and teaching. A great deal of theorizing, experimentation, innovations, debates have taken place in the hope of making language teaching more effective and more interesting. Every year, famous foreign scholars, language teaching specialists are invited to Japan and their writings are translated in the Japanese language. English is taught at all levels of education, and recently the Ministry of Education has even recommended that English should be taught in primary schools. In addition to regular schools and universities, English is also taught in an extremely large number of private language schools.

In March of 2003, the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (abbreviated MEXT), Atsuko Toyama, proposed a new policy "Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities". The Action Plan establishes a system for cultivating Japanese with English abilities in 5 years. The formulation of the Action Plan clarifies the goals and directions for the improvement of English education to be achieved by 2008 and the measures that should be taken by the Government to realize these goals. Any specialist who is familiar with the various problems inherent in the teaching and learning of English in Japan cannot but agree that the various measures of the Action Plan are theoretically excellent. These measures are directly related to the

Shortcomings of the teaching of English in Japan and present solutions for everyone of them. It should be said that these shortcomings in the teaching and learning of a foreign language exist in many other countries.

The first measure of the Action Plan to improve English classes is to cultivate communication abilities through the repetition of activities making use of English. Instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centered classes are no more recommended. The number of teachers will be increased to allow small-group teaching of approximately 20 persons and the streaming of students according to proficiency. The aim of the second measure is to improve the ability of teachers to conduct classes in the English language. Intensive language training for teachers will be promoted and their proficiency in the English language will be an important part of their evaluation. Overseas training will be provided for English teachers of junior and senior high schools who have gained advanced teaching and English abilities. The utilization of native speakers of English through the JET Program (The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program) which was established in 1987 is even made more flexible

by extending the maximum period of employment from 3 years to 5 years. The JET Program invites graduates from overseas to participate in international exchange and English language education throughout Japan. The number of JET participants who are currently working in Japan has reached around 6,000.

MEXT is very much aware that in Japan there are few opportunities to come into contact with English in daily life. To counteract this problem, MEXT proposes various measures to improve the motivation of students for learning English. One is the promotion of opportunities for overseas study. With a goal of 10,000 high school students studying abroad annually, support will be provided for overseas programs. Another measure to improve the motivation of students is a drastic change in the evaluation system for selecting school and university applicants. Communication abilities, including listening and speaking will have to be evaluated. The traditional examination dealing only with grammar and translation will not be sufficient anymore.

In spite of these gigantic efforts of the last 50 years, it is a clear fact that, with the exception of a minority, very few Japanese can have a simple conversation in English. Several observers considering the inadequate results of these efforts of the Government have claimed that something is very wrong with the teaching and learning of English in Japan. One of them was Edwin Reischauer, former US Ambassador to Japan, who seriously listed the miserable performance of Japanese in English as one of the seven wonders of the world. These negative assessments and evaluations of English learning in Japan are based on a narrow understanding of language learning, ignoring the sociolinguistic aspects involved in language learning. Languages are not learned in a vacuum, but in a given social environment. It is very appropriate here to quote the German philosopher, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), who emphasized with great foresight that "We cannot really teach a language, but only create favorable

conditions for that language to develop spontaneously in the human brain. What are these favorable conditions? There are two essential conditions: Motivation and the opportunity to use the language. These two conditions are closely related. If a learner has practically no opportunity to use a language for communication, this learner's motivation to learn the language will eventually disappear. For the average Japanese, the opportunity to use English for communication in daily life does not exist. As quoted before, MEXT is very much aware of this problem: "In our country, there are few opportunities to come into contact with English in daily life so that many children have difficulty applying in daily life what they have learned in the classroom". Most students who were able to spend several months in a foreign country studying English lose their fluency after a year or two when they return to Japan simply because they had so few opportunities to use the language. This is a fundamental law of language learning. A language which is not used for frequent communication will slowly disappear, first on the active level, that is speaking and writing, and eventually on the passive level, listening and reading.

From this point of view, it is quite evident that the goals of MEXT as outlined in the "Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English abilities", however desirable they are, cannot be achieved in the Japanese society. Under the heading "English language abilities required for all Japanese nationals", MEXT states that "on graduating from junior high school and senior high school, graduates can communicate in English". Communication is described as the possibility to conduct basic communication as greetings, responses or topics relating to daily life. "On graduating from university, graduates can use English in their work". These goals are far too comprehensive and idealistic. In many countries where there is even more opportunity to speak English the situation is not different. One could not say for instance: English language abilities are

required for all French nationals, or English language abilities are required for all Chinese nationals, and so on. As emphasized before, a language cannot be learned if there is no opportunity, or necessity to use it, that is motivation. For the great majority of Japanese there is no opportunity nor necessity to speak English. I fully agree with Koichi Kato, a member of the Liberal Democratic Party, who said: "Rather than trying to have all Japanese speak English, we should attempt to increase the English ability and fluency of those Japanese representing the government, those in large financial and banking organizations, those who are part of corporations and important companies" (Japan Times, 28/02/2000). This is exactly what France and China - to give only a few examples - have accomplished.

CONCLUSION

These remarks do not mean that English language teaching in Japan should not be continued and improved. The various benefits of second language learning usually identified in the defense of language education fall into two categories: (1) the practical and tangible benefits of being able to communicate in a second language, and (2) the broader and intangible benefits of expanding one's intellectual experience. Sakuragi (2006), in his paper "The Relationship between Attitudes toward Language Study and Cross-Cultural Attitudes", insists on the potential effect of language education on the improvement of cross-cultural awareness and a better understanding of other cultures. Sakuragi in his paper (2006, 20) gives the example of second language teaching in the United States and I quote: "While the practical benefits of language learning in the United States are sometimes questioned due to the increasing dominance of English in international communication, the argument that language study helps students develop a sense of being a "world citizen" remains cogent". There are

many Japanese who will never become fluent in English because they have practically no opportunity to use the language for communication. Even for them, in the cultural perspective, the study of English is beneficial.

REFERENCES

Sakuragi, T. (2006), "The Relationship between Attitudes toward Language Study and Cross-Cultural Attitudes", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 30 2006, p. 18-31.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Bernard Saint-Jacques is Prof. Emeritus at the University of British Columbia and the former Head and Professor of the Intercultural Communication graduate program at Aichi Shukutoku University in Japan.