

An Overall Study of English Education in Both Postwar Japan and China

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Introduction

Japan and China are close neighbors separated only by a strip of water. There has been a long history on the cultural exchanges between two countries. Chinese characters were grafted onto a non-cognate, syllabic indigenous language with subject-object-verb syntax. In the past, neither of the two countries had ever planted a colony, and no foreign language had ever replaced the native language for purposes of general education. We have no second language that is indispensable for communication within our community. Books written in Japanese and Chinese are available in the most advanced fields of learning without having to resort to other language as a means of instruction. As a result, to a great extent, it is very difficult for both countries' people to learn an entirely different language like English, though some aspects such as pronunciation and sentence structure of English are much easier for Chinese to remember than for Japanese. In contrast with the situation in most other school subjects, both Japanese and Chinese have to start to learn English at zero or very close to zero. For them, the spoken English sounds like a strange blur of noises. The writing system is at best confusing, at most frightening. So there are some common difficult problems for both Japanese and Chinese when they are learning English. For example, there is a grammatical distinction in English between singular and plural, where there is no such distinction in Japanese and Chinese.

Are the Japanese and Chinese English learners' proficiency and level the same, though the difficulty of learning English is the same for both Japanese and Chinese? The answer is *No*. Through two years of English studying in Japan, I deeply realized through my personal experience that there are some differences between Japanese and Chinese in learning English and their English linguistic competence and English communicative competence are also very different. Therefore, I would like to make some comparative researches on learning English as a foreign language in both Japan and China and find some merits and demerits of both countries' learning and teaching English. The researches will surely encourage English learners in Japan and China to learn with effect so that they can advance English education.

1. A concise introduction to TEFL in Japan and China

(1) The range and quality of TEFL in Japan and China

The teaching of foreign languages has a very important place in Japanese education. About a dozen foreign languages are taught in Japan. Of these, English, German and French are widely taught in secondary schools and colleges. Children begin working on English in the first year of junior high school, and they continue to study the language for the next six years. Throughout Japan, a tremendous amount of time, money, and energy are devoted to the teaching and learning of English, although the present-day effort of English language teaching in the People's Republic of China probably surpasses the effort in Japan (at least as far as the number of students is concerned).¹

In China, the teaching and studying of a lot of kinds of foreign languages has been carried out. Up to now, thirty-four kinds of foreign languages have been offered in institutes of foreign languages, foreign language departments in teacher's colleges and other comprehensive universities or colleges. Those foreign languages are such as: English, Japanese, Russian, German, French, Spanish, Arabic, Greek, Italian, and Swedish. English, Japanese, German, and French are offered in most of the universities or colleges as a foreign language. In junior and senior high schools, English teaching is given the first place. In some junior and senior high schools in big cities, Russian or Japanese is offered. According to incomplete statistics, in some big cities, such as Beijing (北京), Tianjing (天津), Shanghai (上海), Harbin (河北), and Jinan (济南), there are nearly ten thousand students who are studying Japanese.²

(2) What are the reasons that cause the current TEFL situation in both Japan and China?

Unfortunately, the result of the tremendous Japanese and Chinese investment in English teaching is often disappointing. The time and energy our students devote to English is mostly wasted. The amount of effort put into English language teaching and learning produces small results in both Japan and China. Japanese and Chinese students can hardly speak fluent English though they have studied English for about ten years. What are the reasons that cause these results? I think the reasons are as follows:

a. Teacher capacity

English teachers are, on the whole, proficient in English, but not many of them are familiar with the current trends in ELT methodology. They are used to the traditional teaching methods and techniques. And perhaps it will take some time before most of them can adapt themselves to radical changes in teaching materials as well as in teaching methodology.

b. Student capacity

The students are more interested in acquiring knowledge about language than in practicing the language in use.

c. Japanese and Chinese are the first language environment

The students are studying English in an environment where Japanese and Chinese are the first languages for both Japanese and Chinese and where English is a language reserved for contact with foreigners. Yet the students have little opportunity to come in contact with native speakers of English although Japanese students have more chances to come in contact with native speakers than Chinese students do. In other words, there are only a few chances of learning and acquiring English naturally as in an English-speaking environment.

d. Influence of traditional ELT methodology

Various ELT methods and techniques have predominated in Japan and China at different times. The grammar-translation method, for example, has long been prevalent in Japan and China. Even today there are teachers who feel more inclined to give grammatical analyses of sentences and to do a lot of translation exercises than to try other methods. Recently, both Japanese and Chinese teachers of English began to be aware of the development of the communicative approach in language teaching. However, since the communicative approach may be interpreted in various ways and there is not a definite way of communicative teaching, it is difficult to change over from the traditional ways to the new way. Therefore, the traditional way of teaching still prevails, even though there are attempts made at implementing communicative principles of language teaching in some places.

(3) In order to improve the current TEFL situation, what should we do?

Therefore, in order to improve the students' English abilities, the following factors should be paid attention to, I think:

a. The traditional ELT methodology and the current views on ELT methodology

Certain elements in traditional ELT methodology have been useful and effective, and so they should not be discarded altogether. For example, we find the pattern drill a useful means of familiarizing the students with grammatical structures, without a good grasp of which there would be no linguistic competence. So the pattern drill will be retained; but instead of drilling patterns for the sake of patterns, I think it necessary to relate patterns to meaning and use. In other words, language structure practice is to be given in contexts that involve some basic appropriate principles.

Besides, vocabulary work and translation have contributed much to the students' language improvement. They ought still to be considered as essential points to be covered in our textbooks.

However, the traditional ELT methodology overlooks an important aspect of language teaching—the teaching of the communicative use of language. So it is fitting that we should make our textbooks partly communicatively oriented, so that they will help the students to acquire some degree of communicative competence to some extent. For example, it is important to make both the language situations and the language materials as realistic as possible, and instances of artificiality and contrivance ought to be made as unobtrusive as possible. Such forms of classroom activities as role-play, simulations and true-to-life interactions are to be used throughout the textbooks. In this way, the students will be provided with opportunities to practice communication in the classroom. Moreover, the students' attention is to be paid to appropriate language use. Basic listening, speaking, reading and writing skills will be taught so that the students will acquire some basic learning strategies.

d. The relationship between linguistic competence and communicative competence:

As to the relationship between linguistic competence and communicative competence, it is important to make clear what they mean first. Linguistic

competence means the spontaneous and flexible as well as the correct manipulation of the language system, and communicative competence involves principles of appropriacy and readiness on the part of the learners to use relevant strategies to cope with certain language situations. Linguistic competence is the basis of communicative competence. Without linguistic competence, there is no communicative competence to speak of. But communicative competence does not result from linguistic competence automatically. Attempts must be made to provide as much practice as possible for students to develop communicative competence while practice for the achievement of linguistic competence is given.

c. Student-centered orientation, and not neglect of the teacher's role as a facilitator:

Language acquisition requires a large amount of practice on the part of the students at the foundation stage. So the students must involve as much as possible in various kinds of classroom activities. However, the students cannot be left to do things completely by themselves. The teacher should function as a facilitator, giving guidance and advice when necessary.

2. The developments of teaching methods and audio-visual aids used in English teaching in postwar Japan and China

Traditionally, English education in Japan and China emphasizes reading English, particularly utilizing the grammar translation method. The emphasis of most secondary level English courses is laid on preparing students for college entrance examinations, which are mainly written ones, and so there is not much time to practice speaking and listening. However, with the rapid development in science, education and culture in all kinds of fields of Japan and China, there is great amount of international exchange among people, things and information in various kinds of fields through the window of the world. So the importance of understanding each other through communication in foreign languages is growing enormously. In order to put priority on the teaching and studying of oral communication, both countries have adopted some advanced teaching methods by using audio-visual equipment. In Japan, audio-visual equipment is actively used to incorporate cultural studies into language education and to further enhance the students' foreign language skills. "Since the Language Laboratory Association (LLA) was organized in 1961, mechanical aids have greatly developed. Almost all the schools and universities are

equipped with tape-recorders and linguistic tapes or videotapes. A large number of junior and senior high schools are equipped with slides, filmstrips, videotapes and language laboratories. Since NHK started English broadcasting by radio as early as 1925, the wide use of radio broadcasting has been rapidly recognized. As for TV, NHK began English telecast in July 1953 in Tokyo, and then expanded it to Osaka and Nagoya. Recently, video and computers are widely used in various ways in English education.”³ With the spread of access to the Internet, the possibility of using computers in language classes has been greatly expanded. There are great many linguistic resources available on the web, and they can be very useful for the students and teachers. On the Internet, teachers and students can discuss issues with teachers and students from all over the world. Lesson plans and other materials are also available on the web pages.

In China, classrooms for foreign language education with electrical audio-visual aids have been built, extended and equipped with the most advanced facilities in all of the institutes of foreign languages and in all of the common universities, professional foreign language schools, key junior and senior high schools. A lot of methods for foreign language education with electrical audio-visual aids such as films, slides show, photography, sound recording and video have been widely adopted. Some universities with good teaching conditions also are producing software of electrical audio-visual aids used for foreign language education. The committees of foreign language education with electrical audio-visual aids have been formed both in nationwide limits and in the localities. All kinds of weekly and monthly periodicals of foreign language education with electrical audio-visual aids have been printed and published. In addition, the computer has also been used in foreign language education. For several years now, several key universities and Research Institutes of Foreign Languages have run periodic training courses to promote computer literacy among the nation's English language teaching communities. The computer is there for bibliographical search, for storing information, analyzing testing results, calculating learnability of texts: so many things which only yesterday had to be manually done can be left to the disc. China must modernize as the world modernizes—in computer use as well as in the use of English.⁴

As stated above, we know both countries have given high priority to English education with electrical audio-visual aids such as TV, radio, slides, video and CDs.

The development of using electrical audiovisual aids in English teaching and studying in both Japan and China has greatly changed the old patterns of English teaching. The previous English teaching in schools in both Japan and China emphasized knowledge about English, not performance. There was not sufficient emphasis on practice of listening and speaking skills. Introduction was not geared towards communication with English speaking people. Little about American culture was taught in English classes, which prevented Japanese and Chinese from communicating adequately with Americans.

3. Something about ALTs, student exchange program and in service training

In Japan ALTs have a grand gatherings of unprecedented size. They are placed in a lot of public schools, while in China ALTs are only placed in a few of key universities and key junior and senior high schools. However, have ALTs been greatly contributing to the development of Japanese students' foreign language communication skills? In my opinion, the result is not very ideal. Though a lot of assistant language teachers have been sent to all kinds of schools throughout the country, and the teaching activities have been changed from examination-oriented to communication-oriented to some extent, one point meriting attention is whether native-speakers who are animating in all kinds of schools really play an important and practical role in promoting Japanese English education. In fact, native speakers have not exerted a tremendous influence on English teaching in Japan as we expected. As far as I observed, the reason is that some native speakers do not know at all how to teach English to Japanese students (who are not very active in expressing their own ideas straightly and clearly). I have ever attended an English conversation class conducted by a native speaker in a certain university. For the first ten to fifteen minutes, she gave some correct answers to the exercises and then required the students to have some English conversation on the fixed topic given by her. You know, many Japanese students have introspective characteristics and their English communicative competence are also limited, so they can not say a lot about the fixed conversation topic while she (the native speaker) was just standing beside the students without giving any hints about the topic. English conversation class like this is not very successful. So, as for English conversation classes conducted by native speakers, they should not be lumped together. So I think the distribution of native speakers should be paid attention to. The native speakers should be assigned to some schools in which the students' English level is higher than that of those

students studying in ordinary schools. And we should be particular about teaching conversation to Japanese and Chinese. I think some guidelines for encouraging oral activities may be suitable for Japanese and Chinese students. Such guidelines are as follows:

- a. Maximize participation so everyone will have many chances to talk.
- b. Avoid “audience” situations in which the other members of a group (probably feeling sleepy) are sitting around hearing a few members speak.
- c. Depend on students’ input: Ask them to suggest the topics, draw up, and give feedback.
- d. Each activity should have a specific goal so students will have a feeling of accomplishment when they have reached the goal.
- e. Give time for preparation (actual as well as psychological). Ask the students to do this as homework before the class or give them five minutes in class.
- f. Establish a classroom atmosphere in which each individual feels that he or she is an integral part of the group.
- g. Handle mistakes diplomatically, unobtrusively, and constructively; capitalize on them so each individual can feel she or he has contributed to the class rather than ruined it.
- h. Avoid “negative encouragement”(such as fines for use of the native language). Acknowledge all contributions in a supportive, encouraging manner, but also allow students the right to be quiet at times.
- i. Emphasize the skill or practice of language points so that the activity is not seen as an end in itself.
- j. Exploit the physical space of the classroom and its furniture or facilities in any imaginable way.

Though there are some unsuccessful English classes conducted by English native speakers, there are many interesting and inspiring English conversation classes given by native speakers. In China, the English learners’ (especially those studying in junior and senior high schools) exposure to English has been very much limited though there have been many great improvements in the wake of the ‘open’ policy. Foreign language proficiency is achieved principally in the situation of formal teaching. In addition, teachers are indigenously Chinese and are trained

basically in home institutions where there are only a few native speakers of English. Only a privileged minority of teachers has the opportunity of studying in English-speaking countries. Therefore, maybe Japanese learners of English are better than Chinese in English communication competence, but worse than Chinese learners of English in English linguistic competence (for example, in answering questions from English written or multiple choice tests such as TOEFL according to the incompletely statistics, the total score of TOEFL acquired by Japanese students is on an average 490 while Chinese English learners can get 550).⁵

In Japan, the Ministry of Education provides scholarship to Japanese students who can get good scores in the test of TOEFL to go abroad for study, and cooperates with some foreign governments by publicizing their respective scholarship programs under which Japanese students are invited to study abroad every year. This is nearly impossible in common universities in China except in some key universities such as QingHua University (清华大学) and Beijing University (北京大学).

In Japan, the Ministry of Education has been carrying out a kind of in-service training program under which a number of English language teachers of junior and senior high schools are sent to English-speaking countries to be given in-service training at institutions of higher education in those countries. However, in China only a few English teachers can get this kind of chance. Especially it is too difficult for junior and senior high school English teachers to go abroad to undergo in-service training, because English teachers must take very strict written tests and oral tests before going to English-speaking countries to get the training. The test questions are too complex for junior and senior English teachers to answer. In one province, only one English teacher can pass such strict tests every two or three years. So in fact, the in-service training in English speaking countries for junior and senior high school English teachers exists in China in name only. Yet, whatever the consequences, the idea of in-service training in English speaking countries is reasonable. In my opinion, more junior and senior high school teachers of English will have chances to go abroad to study advanced English teaching methods in the near future as China makes rapid development in economics, culture and education. However, it is rather impossible for 99% of Chinese junior and senior high school English teachers to improve their English language teaching competence now.

4. English teaching types in both Japan and China

English teaching types in both Japan and China are almost the same, including six types: secondary schools (junior and senior high schools), universities, private language schools, *juku* (in Japan, it is called *juku* while in China, it is called a continuation school), English classes in companies and English classes for children. Many secondary school students go to private cramming schools in order to pass the entrance examination for higher schools besides their studying in public schools. Some big companies spend much money on English conversation classes for salaried workers (Japanese office workers), who study at their own workplaces. In a very small number of elementary schools in Japan (while in China in all of the elementary schools), English conversation classes are offered. Attention I would like to arouse here is that there are two big special English classes in China. In almost every university all over the country, there are TOEFL and GRE English training classes all the year round. Any one can attend this kind of training classes provided that some amount of money is paid. During the training classes, the students can get strict training in English listening comprehension, English grammar, and English reading comprehension which aim at their passing difficult TOEFL and GRE test. After finishing this kind of English short-term training (almost one year or two years), the students can almost pass TOEFL and GRE texts. To my opinion, it is these kinds of English continuation classes that make Chinese students get higher scores in TOEFL and GRE tests than the students in other Asian countries. The other kind of English special training class is called vocational English class. Every year, this kind of vocational English test, which is intended for teachers and workers at their posts in colleges and universities, must be carried out in every province. If teachers or workers want to promote their present positions to higher positions (for example, from a common lecturer to an associate professor, or from an associate professor to a professor), they must pass this kind of vocational English test. In order to pass this kind of vocational English test, almost all the teachers and workers attend the vocational English class mentioned above. Most of the questions are from guidance materials taught in the vocational English class. In spite of lack of reliable data, it is generally agreed that the vocational English class has greatly improved English levels of workers and teachers at their posts.

5. Something about school systems of both Japan and China

Both of the two countries have textbooks and syllabuses authorized by the Ministry of Education, that is, textbooks and syllabuses must be approved by the two countries' respective Ministry of Education. Even in Chinese colleges and universities, textbooks and syllabuses are also ratified by the Ministry of Education. As for English major students in colleges in China, they must pass College English Test Band 8 before they graduate from colleges. As for non-English major students, they must pass College English Test Band 4 before they graduate from colleges. Teachers are not free to select textbooks and syllabuses to conduct English class. In my opinion, the use of national textbooks and syllabuses is suitable for English teaching. The national level of English teaching and studying can be improved only by national concert action, not by each going on his/her own way. English teaching hours per week in public junior high schools in Japan are three or four hours and in senior high schools five hours on an average, while in China, the English teaching hours are from four to six hours per week on an average. I think, the teaching hours of English teaching in Japan are a little short. As above mentioned, English is very difficult for Japanese to study either pronunciation or the differences in sentence structures between English and Japanese.

English class has been offered in all of public elementary schools in the cities in China since 1990. The pupils begin to study English from the fourth grade of elementary school as had been done in Hong Kong, while in Japan, though a few private elementary schools offer English courses, there has recently been a slight increase in English education at the elementary level. "In Japan, English teaching begins in junior high schools when the students are twelve years old. That is to say, the students start studying a foreign language at the age when the best time for acquiring languages has almost passed, and their innate ability to acquire foreign languages is already waning."⁶ Happily, English teaching will be offered in a lot of elementary schools throughout Japan in 2002 according to the guiding principles of the Ministry of Education.

Conclusion

From what I have seen, heard and read, I would like to conclude English teaching in Japan and China as this: though there have been great developments in

junior and senior high schools English teaching, there are still many demerits to be worth improved. The trouble with the English teaching system in Japan and China at this moment still lies with entrance exams that rule the lives of Japanese and Chinese students. The teaching activities still give priority to examination-oriented rather than communication-oriented. From the universities down to the junior and senior high schools, the English teaching stress is still laid on the grammar and translation.⁷

Japanese has the world's most complex verbal system, fully 13% of everyday speech consisted of foreign loanwords, mostly narrowing of their meanings, while the pronunciation of loanwords is generally altered to fit the Japanese syllabary. In order to change the pronunciation of loanwords in accordance with the Japanese syllabary into standard spoken English, the Japanese people must make great effort to do it.

In addition to it, there are a lot of phonetic symbols that do not exist in Japanese while they almost exist in Chinese such as [z], [r], [tʃ], [ʒ], [ʃ], [θ], and so on. So the Chinese people gain the upper hand in English pronunciation than the Japanese do to some extent, I think. Besides, Japanese syntax is subject-object-verb syntax while Chinese syntax is subject-verb-object syntax that is the same as that of English. Maybe it is one of the main reasons for Chinese people to learn English easier than Japanese do.

In the context of China, while achieving spoken competence in English should remain a primary goal, instruction should not neglect the conventions of written genres. With its highly constrained and conservative conventions, written English (and its idealized spoken varieties that provide models for instruction) has much in common with the Chinese writing system and *putonghua*. All literate English users, whether they acquire it as a first or as an additional language, have remarkably similar notions about how a text should be read even if their spoken performance of that text presents to others problems of intelligibility.⁸

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