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Author(s)	ブラウン, トニー; 平田, 恵理
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English as an Asian Language

What “ English ” should Japanese students learn ?

Tony Brown* Eri Hirata**

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アジア言語としての英語：

日本人学習者の学ぶべき英語とは？

トニー・ブラウン* 平田 恵理**

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コミュニケーション能力の育成に重点が置かれる今日の英語教育において、学習者を評価する際に一般的（もしくは直感的）に用いられる指標は、英語母語話者(NS)（特にアメリカ英語）との類似の度合いをみる、というものである。しかし、日本人学習者や他の英語非母語話者(NNS)が実際に英語を使う場面はNS との場合よりもNNS との場合が多いと報告されている。このような現状を踏まえ、本稿では実社会で必要とされるコミュニケーション能力と日本人学習者の学ぶべき英語について再考する。

1. Introduction

Since the reform of the course of study there has been a greater emphasis in English education in Japan on using English for the purposes of communication, rather than as a set of problems to be solved, or as a kind of intelligence test to ensure entry into the next stage of academic progress. Indeed, in its paper on the reform of foreign language teaching, the Ministry of Education (MEXT 2003), explicitly instructs teachers to “ develop students’ basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages . ” For this reason, there has been a gradual - if sometimes reluctant - shift from the use of grammar and translation-based methodologies, and towards some flavour of the communicative approach. Moreover, the public university entrance exam has evolved, at least to some extent, to reflect this change, reflected especially in the recent addition of a listening component. Meanwhile, native-speaker models of English continue to play a dominant role in language education in Japan. This paper

*Faculty of Education, Nagasaki University

**Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University

challenges the suitability of that dominance, and examines the language situation Japanese speakers are most likely to meet.

2. Japan's Relationship with Asia

Japanese learners, then, are now expected to learn to *communicate* in English. The next question that needs to be addressed, however, is “communicate with *whom* ? ” It is important to ascertain what kind of language situations Japanese learners are likely to meet once they complete their formal education, and enter the real world. This has obvious implications for what kind of English students should be exposed to in the classroom .

We can get a clear picture of what varieties of English Japanese learners are most likely to encounter by looking at some statistics. In 2008 , 6,153,829 Asians visited Japan, out of a total of 8,350,835 visitors overall (JTM 2010a). Thus, Asian visitors accounted for about 74% of the total. In the same year (see figure 1) over twelve million Japanese travelled to Asian countries, compared to just over 11 million to the rest of the world (JTM 2010b). These figures include visits to multiple countries on one trip.

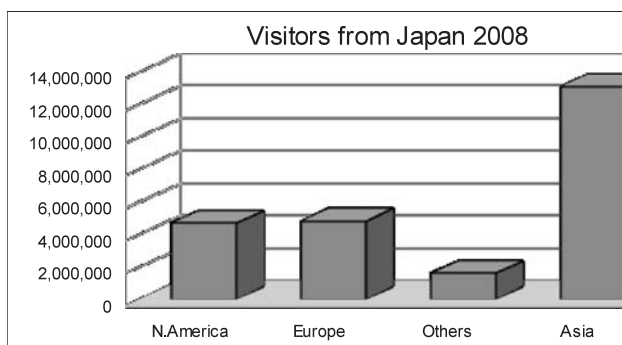


Figure 1 (Source Japan Tourism Marketing Co.)

According to Japan's External Trade Organisation (JETRO 2009), almost 50% of Japan's exports in 2008 were to Asian countries, while 41% of its imports came from Asia (see fig . 2). (It is worth pointing out that the high figure for imports from “ other ” countries is largely accounted for by petroleum products from the Middle East). Chinese and Korean-speaking countries accounted for 38% of exports and 27% of imports. Moreover, these figures continue to rise steadily. In comparison, incoming and outgoing trade with the United States stood at 17.5% and 10.2% respectively. In contrast to figures on trade with Asia, trade with the US has been declining for some time. Total trade with China first exceeded that with the United States in 2004 . Furthermore, this trend is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. According to a recent paper from Japan's International Economic Research Division (Takahashi: 2009), future Japanese trade policy should be targeted towards “ Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Taiwan, and other ASEAN member states that use Japanese capital goods and parts. ”

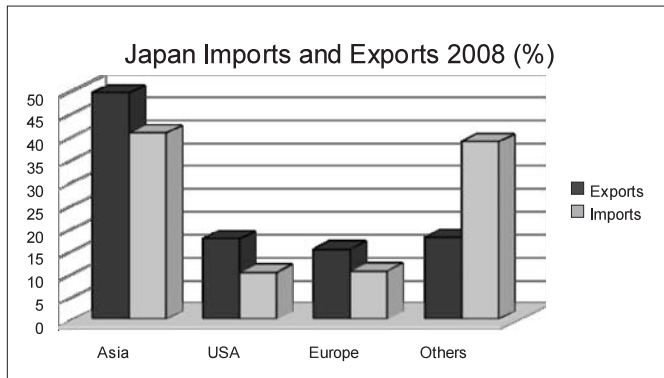


Figure 1 (Source Japan Tourism Marketing Co.)

Moreover, on April 16 2010 , the first Japan-China-Korea Committee for Promoting Exchange and Cooperation among Universities was held in Tokyo (MEXT 2010) . This was attended by members from all three countries, as a forum for “ quality-assured exchanges ” as set forward in the Second Trilateral Summit (Beijing, October 10 , 2009) by former Prime Minister Hatoyama. In the light of this, a further commitment to EAL was given recently by Education Minister Takaki (Japan Times , 2010) who emphasised the value of using foreign languages as a lingua franca, commenting that Japan has to “ educate children who in the future can speak at least a language spoken as a common language in many countries or that of neighboring countries. ”

3. English as an International Language (EIL)

For some years now, the status of “ elite ” forms of English (mainly so-called General American and Standard British English) has been challenged in the ELT community. As early as 1992 , Phillipson (1992: 244) described EIL as a “ laudable attempt to get away from the native speaker as the target ” , and warned of the “ link between language and power ” (Phillipson 1992: 249) . Canarajah (1999: 127) similarly disputes the *native speaker fallacy*, and points out the futility for non-native speakers of English of aiming for native-speaker competence , “ as the needs and contexts of L2 speakers differ in many ways from center-based speakers. ” Kirkpatrick (2007: 6) regards the fallacy of “ inner circle ” varieties of English being somehow superior to others as a kind of prejudice. This blind insistence on using inner-circle norms as a measure of examinees whose needs fall in the realm of English as a Lingua Franca is deplored by Jenkins (2006) , who insists that “ it is crucial for examination boards to engage with EIL. ” Moreover, McKay (2002: 1) contends that, if English is to serve as an International language it “ cannot be linked to any one country or culture; rather it must belong to those who use it. ” Widdowson (2003: 167) agrees that the future development of English “ is no business whatever of native speakers in England or anywhere else. ” Seidlhofer (2005: 340) emphasises the need for teachers

to focus on “ the features of English which tend to be crucial for international intelligibility ”, pointing out the importance of both productive and receptive skills. It is somewhat discouraging, then to see that a study of Junior High School textbooks by Matsuda (2002) reveals the near-exclusive dominance of inner circle English, especially American English, and adds that “ the selection of vocabulary and spelling were based on the American convention, and pronunciation guides and tapes that accompanied the textbooks also represented the phonology of American English. ” Furthermore, the increasing importance of the TOEIC test - as a means of finding employment in large companies, or even, in some prefectures, as a stage in becoming employed as a teacher of English ? further emphasises the continued dominance of Standard American as a model for Japanese learners to follow. MEXT (2002) urges prefectural and city education boards to set minimum TOEIC levels for newly-hired teachers, suggesting a score of 730 , though it is worth mentioning that by no means all education boards have made this a requirement, and where they have, the minimum score varies from board to board. However, in 2009 , about 1.8 million Japanese took the test (TOEIC 2009).

Nevertheless, as Rajagopalan (2004 : 114) rightly points out, most learners of English are unlikely to have the opportunity to put into practice what they have learnt with American or British native speakers, but rather with other non-native speakers, whose use of language will be somewhat different, not only from their own, but also from the native-speaker models to which they have been exposed in the classroom. Hunston, Hirata and Otoshi (2007 : 23) demonstrate that interactions between non-native but ‘ expert ’ users of English can be utilised as language models for learners, especially in introducing the spoken features of English. Phillipson (2003 : 167) goes even further, emphasising the superiority in many cases of non-native speakers, citing their competence in “ adjusting their language for people from different cultural backgrounds. ”

For many Japanese learners this implies the necessity to understand, and be understood by, L2 speakers of English whose L1 is another Asian language. This is clear, especially in the light of the data put forward in section two of this paper. This type of competence, not the capacity to mimic or comprehend speakers of Standard American should become a key goal of English education in Japan.

4. Conclusions and Further Study

More and more writers in ELT are rejecting the “ native speaker fallacy ” in favour of a view of English as, not the property of the “ inner-circle ” countries, but rather as a medium for communication among speakers for whom English may be a first, a second or a foreign language. The success, or lack of it, of Japanese L1 speakers of English should be determined not by their ability to ape American English or any other inner-circle model, but rather their ability to understand, and be understood by, those interlocutors with whom they are most likely to come into contact. For most Japanese people, their most likely communicative environment after leaving university, is using English as a lingua franca with

other Asian L1 speakers, especially speakers of Chinese and Korean. The implications for English education in Japan are clear. Students need to be exposed to a wide variety of Englishes, including ? and, perhaps, especially ? those used by effective communicators whose mother tongue is another Asian language. While it may be sufficient to use Standard American as a model for production purposes (bearing in mind that communicative competence is far more important than grammatical or phonological perfection), more listening activities or video-based instruction need to be made available to learners that resemble the types of situations they are most likely to meet in the real world. Furthermore, if the system of ALTs is to continue in the future, it makes sense to increase the number of language assistants from Asian " outer-circle " countries such as the Philippines, Singapore and India. The time has come for English education to take another step forward, from seeing itself as dealing with English as a Foreign Language, and re-focus on English as an International, and especially an Asian, language.

Clearly this paper is based mainly on a review of the relevant literature and recent national statistics, in order to make the case for a review of the varieties of English to which Japanese learners need to be exposed. What is needed next is an analytical study of the kinds of problems Japanese speakers of English are likely to encounter when communicating with other Asians, especially those whose mother tongue is Chinese or Korean. Such an analysis will be the basis of a study in the near future.

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