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English as an Asian Language

What should Japanese students learn

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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) 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

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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 亚洲, 亚洲人 visited Japan, out of a total of 亚洲人 overall (JTM). Thus, Asian visitors accounted for about 亚洲% of the total. In the same year (see figure) over twelve million Japanese travelled to Asian countries, compared to just over 亚洲 million to the rest of the world (JTM). These figures include visits to multiple countries on one trip.

![Visitors from Japan 2008](image)

Figure 1 (Source Japan Tourism Marketing Co.)

According to Japan’s External Trade Organisation (JETRO), almost 亚洲% of Japan’s exports in Asia were to Asian countries, while 亚洲% of its imports came from Asia (see fig. 1). 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 亚洲% of exports and 亚洲% of imports. Moreover, these figures continue to rise steadily. In comparison, incoming and outgoing trade with the United States stood at 亚洲% and 亚洲% 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 亚洲. Furthermore, this trend is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. According to a recent paper from Japan’s International Economic Research Division (Takahashi), 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.
Moreover, on April the first Japan-China-Korea Committee for Promoting Exchange and Cooperation among Universities was held in Tokyo (MEXT). 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) by former Prime Minister Hatoyama. In the light of this, a further commitment to EAL was given recently by Education Minister Takaki (Japan Times) 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, Phillipson 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). Canarajah (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 L1 speakers differ in many ways from center-based speakers. Kirkpatrick 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, who insists that it is crucial for examination boards to engage with EIL. Moreover, McKay 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 agrees that the future development of English is no business whatever of native speakers in England or anywhere else. Seidhofer 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 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 urges prefectural and city education boards to set minimum TOEIC levels for newly-hired teachers, suggesting a score of 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 about million Japanese took the test. Nevertheless, as Rajagopalan 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 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 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, L speakers of English whose L 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 L 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 L 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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