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The Role of the Native Speaker in College English Language Teaching in Japan

by Takemasa FUJITA

I

In my previous paper "The Impact of Cultures: Problems of English Language Teaching in Japan" (Management and Economy No.124) I discussed the fundamental problems behind the proposals made by the British lecturer of English at Nagasaki University, who subsequently left Japan because his proposals were turned down. I pointed out that much of the Japanese students' poor linguistic performance is due to differences between the target language and his own: differences in culture, attitude toward life, and the use of language in general. I also said that because the Japanese culture and that of the English-speaking peoples are at opposite poles it is absolutely necessary to compare the cultures in the course of English language instruction in Japan.

The incident involving the British lecturer raises another problem which needs to be discussed. Though it is a problem of great importance to the teaching of English as a foreign language, little attention has been paid to it. That is the question on the role and function of the native speaker in the teaching of English as a foreign language in the Japanese college and university. For it seems to me that the incident occurred because either the visiting lecturer or the university authorities or both lacked proper under-
standing of the role of the native speaker in college English language instruction.

The literature concerning the role of the native speaker in Japanese college English teaching is very scanty. There have been no research works reported yet. There is, however, an essay on foreign instructors in Japan, written of late by a Japanese cultural anthropologist, Mr. Masao Kunihiro of Ochanomizu University. In it he writes, with much hesitation because of a fear that his writing might be misused by ultra-nationalists, that there are today in Japan a very small number of bad foreign instructors of English as well as a lot of good ones. According to his observation, these few bad foreign instructors are academically unqualified, insincere in their jobs, bored with teaching, and therefore boring to their students. Mr. Kunihiro finds that the good foreign instructors also share common characteristics: they are young, intellectually inquisitive, and interested both in knowing Japanese culture and in teaching the English language.

I think Mr. Kunihiro sees the reality correctly and has said what some people have refrained from saying due to the Japanese virtue of politeness and other considerations. But in his essay he doesn't clearly define the proper role of the foreign instructor although he seems to suggest that the foreign instructor should vividly represent in himself and convey to his students in his teaching the culture of the English-speaking people in contrast to that of the Japanese.

Technically speaking, to define the role of the native speaker should come first and foremost. Then we can tell whether a foreign instructor is good or not. One who fills his role is good and one who doesn’t is not. This paper is a search for a definition
of the role of the native speaker in college English language teaching in Japan.

II

Let us first reflect on what role the foreign instructor played in Japan in the past. This will provide a historical perspective of the matter. It is noteworthy that in the early years of the Meiji era (1868-1912) a great number of foreigners came and stayed in Japan and made epoch-making contributions to the revolution that took place in education, industry, agriculture, medicine, the military, and social sciences. They were promoters of the Meiji civilization and enlightenment. Japan had just opened her long-closed ports to the West and set about her prolonged task of modernization. By and large these foreigners were the teachers of the people of Japan.

There were two categories of foreign instructors in the late 19th century Japan: those who came over of their own accord, mostly Christian missionaries of noble character and high morality, and those who came under contract to the Meiji Government. It was the policy of the Government to invite from abroad as many specialists as financially possible to facilitate the construction of a modern state. The Government also sent the best selected students to the Western countries for learning, but it took some time to foster Japan's own specialists in that way. Her sense of urgency led the Government to employ an ever increasing number of foreigners in the early years of the era. They were all experts in various fields such as laying a railway, shipbuilding, constructing a lighthouse, telegraphy, mintage, agriculture, manufacture, education, etc. As of the fifth of Meiji, i.e. 1872, there were 119 Englishmen, 50 Frenchmen, and 16 Americans on the list of the
Government’s foreigner employment.

In contrast to the Government-employed foreigners who were specialists in various vocational fields, most of the Christian missionaries, who also increased in number year by year, were at first engaged in educational work in private institutions. This was so mainly because the Meiji Government didn’t allow the Japanese people freedom of faith until 1873. In this group were some foreigners who made an enduring contribution to learning in Japan. For example, J. C. Hepburn, the first Protestant missionary to land in Japan, studied Japanese thoroughly and compiled in 1866 the first Japanese-English dictionary. His system of Romanization of Japanese is still prevalent in use.

The missionaries to Japan of the early Meiji era, most of them from America, Britain and Canada, are today remembered as the founders of more than a score of the so-called "mission schools" which were high schools and colleges. Such major Japanese private universities of today as Rikkyo (or St. Paul’s), Aoyama Gakuin, Meiji Gakuin, Kanto Gakuin, Tohoku Gakuin, Kansei Gakuin, and Seinan Gakuin were all founded by missionaries of some Protestant denomination or other in this period.

The Government-employed foreign educators, on the other hand, contributed profoundly to the development of the Japanese public school system. Foreign educators occupied important chairs in the government educational institutions such as Kaisei School, the predecessor of the present Tokyo University. A remarkable feature of these foreigners was versatility. William Griffis, the first American instructor employed by the Meiji Government, taught physics and chemistry at Kaisei School (1872—4) and published The Mikado’s Empire, one of the earliest books to introduce Japan to
the rest of the world. Horace Wilson, who taught English at Kaisei School (1871–4), introduced baseball to the Japanese for the first time in history. Francis Brinkley, a British gunnery instructor at the Naval Academy (1871–7), taught both English and mathematics, and he was the chief editor of an English paper, Japan Mail.

Another characteristic of this group of Government-employed foreigners was that most of them were as devout as the missionaries. A case in point is William Clark who was employed by the Government to serve as the first principal of the newly founded Sapporo Agricultural School, the predecessor of the present Hokkaido University (1876–7). Though he held the office only for a short period of time, he left with the Japanese youth an immortal message: "Boys, be ambitious!" His Christian influence was so profound that the school produced such outstanding spiritual and intellectual leaders of the age as Kanzo Uchimura, whose English book How I Became a Christian: Diary of a Japanese Convert (1895) has been read throughout the world, and Inazo Nitobe who served as the vice secretary-general of the League of Nations, who also wrote a number of books in English to make the Japanese people understood by other peoples of the world, amongst them was Bushido: The Soul of Japan (1899).

Kanzo Uchimura, Inazo Nitobe, Tenshin Okakura—the author of such English books as The Ideals of the East (1903), The Awakening of Japan (1904) and The Book of Tea (1906)—and some other equally excellent writers of English of the era testify that the foreign instructors' English teaching was successful. What was the situation of English language instruction in those days? First, it must be noted that except for such subjects as Japanese literature, English was widely employed as the medium of instruc-
tion. The Government-hired American and British instructors taught all the liberal arts subjects in English. The missionaries engaged in education in private schools and colleges taught various subjects also in the English language. In Tokyo University in the first half of the Meiji era, native instructors as well as foreign instructors used textbooks written in English and spoke English in teaching liberal arts subjects. A graduate wrote in retrospect, "Except for the subjects of Chinese and Japanese classics, all other subjects were then being taught in English in Tokyo University. Whether alien or native, the instructors all used English as the medium of instruction. It was as if the use of the native language was prohibited."

This trend of using English as the medium of education, however, came to be changed. The Government had all the while encouraged the learning of foreign languages up till 1883 when the newly appointed education minister Kowashi Inoue announced the policy of placing a greater emphasis on the native language. The basic knowledge and skills of the Western civilization had all been absorbed around this time, and the Japanese young elite who returned from abroad after having accomplished their respective studies now began to take the places of the foreign instructors in many of the government institutions of higher education. Japan was getting more and more independent in learning, and the foreign instructors were getting fewer in number. Ernest Fenollosa, who lectured on philosophy in the Literary Faculty of Tokyo University (1878–1886), had difficulty in obtaining a teaching position when he revisited Japan in 1897. In 1903 Lafcadio Hearn, who had held the chair of English literature in Tokyo University for seven years since 1896, was replaced by Soseki Natsume who had just returned
from Cambridge University. The case of Lafcadio Hearn was symbolic in that even from the English department, foreign instructors were dwindling away, not of their own accord but as a result of the Government’s altered policy. By this time, therefore, the foreign instructors had almost all disappeared from such faculties as medicine, law, science, agriculture, engineering. All of this meant that the Japanese language came to displace English as the medium of instruction in colleges and universities.

As the Japanese language increased in importance as the medium of instruction, learning of other languages seemed to lose importance in a corresponding degree. Toward the end of Meiji, in 1911, Soseki Natsume spoke of the trend in foreign language instruction as follows: "Students in my days learned foreign languages much better. I learned all subjects of liberal arts by the medium of English. Geography, history, mathematics, zoology, and others I learned in the English language. So I don't say that I studied English so many hours a week, but I say that academic knowledge and information reached me through and in English. I learned to read, write, and speak English not so much in the English class as in other classes which were conducted in English. Whereas today such a form of education is considered disgraceful. It is only natural that when the nation has established itself on a solid basis the afore-mentioned manner of instruction should give way. And this has taken place. As far as I see, however, there was a certain cause for which the learning of English was made noticeably ineffective. That was the language policy by the late education minister Inoue (1883–5) that except for the English class the Japanese language should be used as the medium of instruction and that Chinese classics should be included as part in the learning of
Japanese. Whatever the reason behind this policy, I have every reason to believe that this artificial restraint imposed on the learning of foreign languages has been the cause of our students' poor performance in foreign languages today."

Thus the role of the foreign instructors in the early years of Meiji was to help the nation acquire advanced knowledge and techniques of the West. They played the role excellently well, not because they were well-trained, experienced instructors but because the students had a strong motivation. To the Japanese, then, success or failure in modernization meant life or death in the community of nations. So, not necessarily the teacher but the pupil was excellent. The method of instruction was of course the direct method, not the indirect translation method. The instructor taught in his native language and the students understood him. This was possible not because the students were excellent in language learning but because their attention was concentrated on the content of instruction rather than on the form, that is, the language. Perhaps the students of the Meiji era were as poor linguists as our students are today. The difference is that they had a definite purpose before them and knew that the language was only the means to obtain the purpose. As a result, they not only attained their aim but also learned to use the language skillfully.

III

In this section I'd like to describe some recent examples of the foreign instructor's role in the English language class in Japan. The examples are all from my personal knowledge. In my former post I used to have a new American college graduate each year as a colleague in the English department. I had altogether five American
colleagues during my tenure there. I had a lot of chances to observe their classes. Now that I’m far away in time and space from my former post, I think I can take an objective view of them. I’ll concentrate on what roles these young American instructors assumed in their respective English classes.

The first American instructor, whom we call Mr. L., taught his class with an American sense of humor. He always greeted his class with “Are you happy?” at the outset. Then he told them what he did personally in the previous week and how he felt about it. It was usually such a commonplace thing as eating some Japanese food, riding a commuter train, visiting a temple or shrine, reading a Japanese novel in translation, seeing a Japanese movie, or acting as a judge at an English oratorical contest. He described in easy English words the occasion and his actions and then added his feelings and thoughts about them. Afterward he used to tell the class to ask him questions or give comments about his story. Although his students were not as active as he expected, they understood him well and they liked him very much because he always brought a new topic and never tired them. He was a good storyteller and entertained them.

Originally Mr. L. meant to use a textbook as well. His students each bought a copy of Charles Dickens’ Christmas Carol according to his request at the beginning of the first semester. But he found that they were more interested in hearing his observations on Japanese ways and manners than in reading Dickens’ story. So he decided to leave reading to the students and concentrate on telling them his impressions about life in Japan during class. This had a number of good effects. First, his way of teaching gave his students time for training their ears for aural
comprehension. They had to be all ears to understand him. Some of them were excellently successful in developing a habit of good listening. Secondly, his approach afforded his students useful English words and phrases to express common things in daily life. Thirdly, and this was the most important, his students learned to look at their daily, ordinary activities from different angles because his reactions to Japanese ways of doing things were not the same as theirs. In this sense, I think, Mr. L. did a good job. Because he was fresh from the United States he could convey his experience of "cultural shock" to his students very vividly. He compared the two cultures, Japanese and American, through the English language. He enabled his students to see things differently. I think he played very well the cultural role of the native speaker.

The second young American instructor, whom we call Mr. M., was diametrically opposite to Mr. L. as far as his approach was concerned. First, he didn't give a free talk as Mr. L. did. In a way, he didn't believe in it. He didn't think that it would benefit his students. He adhered to the textbook that he selected for his class. It was *More Useful English* by W. C. Lamott (Meidensha Co.), which provided, as its preface said, "forms and patterns for actual conversational practice." In his class procedure, he had his students study the day's portion of the conversational forms and patterns carefully. Then he proceeded to practicing the forms and the patterns chiefly by the question-and-answer technique. He hoped that his students would learn to speak English in this way. He concentrated on speaking practice rather than listening practice.

The merit of his approach was that it helped the students to learn correct pronunciation of a number of useful English expressions in daily use. The demerit was that by artificially limiting the
forms, patterns, expressions, etc. and by adhering to the same textbook throughout the semesters, the students soon began to be bored and lose interest. Psychologically speaking, there must exist a very strong motive in the learner if he is to endure repetition of the same things. Japanese college students are in the advanced stage of learning English. They have at least six years of study behind them. Unless they are well motivated, they won’t feel like studying the same subject. Once they understand the content and the forms of English expressions, they are not interested in saying them over and over again. They cannot be made parrots.

The third young American instructor, whom we call Mr. D., seemed to be rather a happy-go-lucky type as far as the seriousness of teaching was concerned. He didn’t seem to teach so much as entertain his students. Usually he had with him his favorite musical instrument, a guitar. He spent half of the class period in teaching an English song or two. His students immensely enjoyed learning English songs accompanied by his guitar playing. Because he was casual they felt very easy with him and became active and asked him questions about American students’ life, hippies, the Presidential election, etc. So he spent the latter half of the period in telling them about some item of American culture.

Mr. D. had a good understanding of humanity. He knew how to deal with human beings. He didn’t distinguish between good and bad students. He made his students feel free and he placed himself at their command. If they wanted to learn a new American popular song, he taught one. If they were interested in the Presidential election, he read them a few weekly news magazines and explained the content using the vocabulary at the students’ command. Because he didn’t speak a word of Japanese during
class, the students were immersed in the English language unawares. They were exposed to spoken English. In this way the students learned to listen to and understand spoken English and also to express themselves using a limited vocabulary.

The fourth young American instructor, whom we call Mr. A., played the linguistic role of the native speaker rather well. His was a better modification of Mr. M’s approach. He used W. L. Clark’s *Spoken American English* (Kenkyusha Co.) as the textbook. He aimed at his students’ correct pronunciation, fluency, and flexibility in speaking. To attain his aim, he employed the mim-mem (mimic-memorize) technique. The students were assigned to study the material at home beforehand, and the class period was devoted to oral drills. He was very energetic and enthusiastic. So his class was always animated. He carried the mim-mem practice in unison, by rows, and by individuals very effectively. I think he was successful in playing the drill-master’s role and that this was on account of his enthusiasm in instruction. Without his enthusiasm his students would have been bored with repeating the same patterns and expressions so many times.

The fifth and the last American instructor, whom we call Mr. W., followed Mr. A’s method using the same textbook. However, his character was not so passionate as Mr. A’s, and half of his students were not quite satisfied with his oral drills in the beginning of the first semester. So he divided the class period into two. For those students who were interested in American culture he used the latter half of the period for lecture. In this way he played the linguistic role in the first half of the class hour, and the cultural role in the latter half. However, Mr. W’s formalistic compromise between the two roles didn’t work very well, because he
had the two roles divided and not integrated in his approach.

In summary I think that out of the examples stated above we can conclude the following. First, if a native speaker is to be employed as instructor in college English instruction, he will do well to remember that his role is twofold, namely, linguistic and cultural. Secondly, it is very hard to play the linguistic role successfully if the foreign instructor aims solely at it (that is, forgetting or sacrificing the other role). It requires an extraordinary amount of energy and enthusiasm. This is especially true under the present system of college education in Japan, where usually the class period is 100 minutes and the English class, as well as other classes, meets only once a week. This system is far from fitted to intensive ways of foreign language instruction, and the fact is that the linguistic skills are best developed by the intensive method. Considering the fact that the teaching hours are so sparsely distributed, which is very bad for language instruction, the foreign instructor must devise a way to meet the situation. Thirdly, if the foreign instructor is culture-minded it is comparatively easy to fill the linguistic role as well as the cultural. The examples of Messrs. L. and D. well testify to this. This is due to the fact that any language is after all a means of communication and that in our ordinary communication we pay attention not to the form (language) but to the content. Here it should be reiterated that the Japanese students of the Meiji era were comparatively successful in their learning of foreign languages because they paid attention more to the content than to the form of the language.
IV

In the September issue of *Modern English Teaching* there is an interesting article on foreign-language instruction by Prof. Mayako Ikeda, who has long been teaching Japanese to American and Canadian college students. She says in the article, "Just as there are many native speakers of English in Japan who think they can teach English in the Japanese school and college because they speak the language, so there are a lot of Japanese in America who think they can teach Japanese because they are Japanese." She refers to the Japanese language teaching in American universities where the native speakers are classified into two categories: those Japanese who can be only auxiliary in the language instruction fall under one category and are called "informants", and those few specialized Japanese who are equal partners with American instructors form the other. The Random House Dictionary defines "informant" as a native speaker of a language who supplies utterances and forms for one analyzing or learning the language. In this sense all the native speakers can be informants, but not all can be instructors. In prof. Ikeda’s definition, a Japanese instructor is a Japanese who is not merely an informant but is trained in teaching Japanese as a foreign language, one who can look at the Japanese language and culture objectively from the foreign student’s point of view. Most people are not aware that it is extremely difficult for an untrained native to have an objective view of his native language and culture. It isn’t true that any speaker of a language is automatically a good teacher of the language.

According to Edwin T. Cornelius, Jr., Consultant on English Teaching United States Informantion Agency, there are five elements
in the preparation of the foreign-language teacher:

1) Proficiency in the foreign language; the language teacher must be a native speaker or must speak the language as a native speaker would.

2) Understanding of the language system; the language teacher must understand how the language works, and must be able to describe the language to his students during the "explanation" period.

3) Understanding of the students' native language; the teacher must understand how the students' native language works and must be able to relate the foreign language to the native language during the periods of analysis or explanation.

4) Experience in methods of teaching; the foreign-language teacher must be experienced in classroom teaching techniques, or at least must have the benefit of study and guidance with someone who has experience in methods of teaching.

5) Acquaintance with teaching materials; the teacher should be familiar with materials and aids that are used in language teaching and should be prepared to maintain a constant contact with the professional field of foreign language teaching.

This is an overall view of the ideal foreign-language teacher. In the context of English teaching in Japan, the foreign instructor, who is a native speaker of the language, has a definite advantage over the Japanese instructor in the first of Mr. Cornelius' criteria, proficiency in the foreign language. On the other hand, in his third, understanding of the students' native language system, the native Japanese instructor is naturally in a better position. In the other respects both stand more or less on equal ground. So if the two cooperate, making the most of their respective merits, it would
do much good to English teaching in Japan.

In the history of foreign-language teaching there was a spectacular example of success in partnership between the native speaker and the non-native linguist. That was, of course, the ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program) during World War II. There were a number of factors which led to the success of the program, such as the urgent need to train soldiers in the spoken language of the areas where they were to be sent, the unlimited financial resources, the force of army discipline, the small classes of no more than ten students, and the intensive teaching of seventeen to twenty hours per week. But it seems to me that the greatest contributing factor was the realistic division of labor in the teaching staff. The native speakers of the foreign language took charge of aural-oral drills while the American instructors were responsible for the linguistic explanation. They called the first of the two parts in the division of labor "informant’s drill" and the latter "linguist’s explanation." I think that the ASTP type of division of labor is very suggestive. Provided that the materials are well organized, the combination of the "informant’s drill" and the "linguist’s explanation" cannot fail to yield desirable results.

Traditionally, Japanese teachers of English have had a tendency to spend too much of the class hour in linguistic explanation (including translation) and to have little time left for language drills. As a result, they have made their students too conscious of grammar and too weak in ability to speak English. This has been pointed out as one of the great pitfalls in English language teaching in Japan. If we are to be cured of this malady, the ratio of "explanation" time and "drill" time must be reversed.

The foreign instructor as "drill" master can do a great job.
Because his students have had at least six years' English study under Japanese teachers of English as described above, he can safely take it for granted that they have had almost more than enough explanation of the language system. All he should do, then, is to concentrate on "drill."

However, in order to be a successful "drill" master, usually the foreign instructor must be able to have his class at least two or three times a week. If this is not possible under the present college or university system, he might choose to be a successful "cultural informant," rather than a frustrated "linguistic informant." We have already mentioned good examples of a successful "linguistic informant" or "drill" master in that young American instructor Mr. A., and of a successful "cultural informant" in Messrs. L. and D., in the section III.

In the "Names in the News" column of today's Asahi Evening News, Japan's Ambassador to the United States Nobuhiko Ushiba is quoted as saying, "Talks between the United States and Europe never become emotional, as they are generally of the same race. But those between the United States and Japan are likely to involve emotional elements considerably." He maintained that this is due partly to lack of "true communication" between the United States and Japan—but mostly to a more fundamental problem: a difference in traditional ways of thinking in the respective countries. He implied that difficulty in communication comes from a difference in ways of thinking, of cultures. If he is correct, it follows that understanding of a language requires understanding the culture behind the language. Since language and culture are intimately bound together, it is important to teach culture as well as language. In this sense, the native speaker as "cultural informant" will do well
to supply "cultural" data as well as "linguistic."

Notes

1. As I stated in my former paper, this visiting British lecturer had taught English for two years in the Economics Faculty of Nagasaki University and last May made the following propositions: (1) his teaching of English conversation should be done at his house instead of in the classroom because his students were too shy to speak English in the classroom. (2) The number of students to be taught at a time should be reduced to a maximum of fifteen. (3) His students should be classified according to the degree of proficiency possessed by each student in his own estimation at the outset.

The university authorities conferred for two months among themselves and decided that the first of his propositions would break the long established Japanese way of teaching and that the second would be technically impossible when there were so many students enrolled for his class. As a result, the British lecturer left the university for home last July because he had proposed the changes on an "all or nothing" basis.

2. As a matter of fact, when the British lecturer followed the university routine and taught his big class regularly in the classroom, no one said anything against him; but when he meant business and was about to improve his class from his professional point of view, he was not accepted. The authorities' reaction might be thought authoritarian or bureaucratic on the one hand. But on the other, the visiting lecturer might be said to be a little lacking in dexterity in playing the role properly under the circumstances, although there was no doubt that he was an expert in his profession. This might be due to his misunderstanding or lack of understanding of the Japanese people and culture. It seems that
proper understanding of Japanese culture is prerequisite to playing successfully the role of the native speaker as specialist in the English class.


