



Title	Perestroika in language teaching: some directions for the 1990's
Author(s)	Mcomie, William
Citation	長崎大学教育学部教科教育学研究報告, 16, pp.113-123; 1991
Issue Date	1991-03-25
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10069/30138
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This document is downloaded at: 2019-04-20T02:45:48Z

Perestroika in language teaching : some directions for the 1990's

William MCOMIE*

(Received October 3, 1990)

In the last five years the Russian word 'perestroika' has entered the minds of people all over the world as synonymous with reform, restructuring or rebuilding of the Soviet political and economic system. But before perestroika could be attempted, there first had to be 'glasnost', or 'openness' about the problems and shortcomings of the status quo. Literally speaking, it means 'giving voice' to people and implies a frank recognition of their criticism and concerns. Until the defects in the structure are identified and located, the restructuring cannot take place.

Today the need for similar perestroika in language teaching and in education in general is more and more obvious. The demand for people fluent in different languages and experienced in communicating across cultural boundaries has never been greater and should continue to grow rapidly as our world becomes more and more like that 'global village' described decades ago. But beyond the goals of linguistic fluency or even 'intercultural communicative competence' lie many other conceivable, and conceivably far more important 'macro' goals. It is these goals which those of us who aspire to be 'educators', rather than mere 'technical instructors,' should concern ourselves with most. And the fact that these goals are mostly being ignored in education as a whole should concern us most of all. In fact, perestroika is not only for Russians but for everyone.

The State of Language Teaching in Japan

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to describe fully the state of language teaching in all parts of the world. It would be difficult enough just to describe the state of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) all over the world. Peter Strevens (1982) compared world-wide TEFL to the famous fable about the blind men and the elephant, wherein the elephant represents world TEFL and the blind men individual teachers feeling its different parts. His point was that no one teacher could know all of TEFL directly through his own experience, but was dependent on the experience of others, and their written or oral communication, in order to form a larger picture. Likewise, it is difficult to form a complete picture of language

* Department of English, Faculty of Education, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki 852, Japan

education even in one country, such as Japan. For that reason, in this article, my primary focus will be on English education in Japanese junior and senior high schools since that is where the need for perestroika is most apparent.

As is well-known, formal exposure to English for almost all Japanese begins in the first year of junior high school and continues for the next six years until graduation from high school. The fact that after six years study of the language most high school graduates cannot understand or speak English well enough to converse confidently with non-Japanese is well-known and has been much written about and much criticized.

However, the criticism that has been directed at the English education system in junior and senior high schools is, I believe, in a sense unfair and misplaced. If the goal were to produce fluent, accurate and confident speakers of American Standard English, then criticism would certainly be justified and appropriate. However, it seems to me that this has never really been the goal. Instead, the goals have been the cramming of knowledge about English, mostly taught through Japanese, for the purpose of taking college entrance examinations. In other words, English has been turned into an academic subject, like any other, and taught and tested in the same way as other academic subjects. This is not a phenomenon unique to Japan, but is characteristic of public education especially in countries all over the world. The result of this 'academicization of English' is that students may know a lot about English, including obscure points of grammar and archaic expressions that many native speakers of English, unless specialists themselves, do not either know or care about. They lack, however, the practical English conversational skills that one feels they should have after six years of English study.

Ending the Confusion

It is very important to understand the difference between knowledge about something, such as a foreign language, and the practical know-how of doing something, such as speaking a foreign language. It is quite possible to have a Ph.D. in a foreign language or literature and yet be unable to order a menu in a restaurant, or to perform a similar task, in that same foreign language. It is because they are separate things, which may, of course, influence each other, but may nonetheless be cultivated and developed separately. It is the reality of this separation which we must recognize before meaningful reform can occur. Then, once a consensus has been reached about which goal is to be emphasized, knowledge or know-how, academic cramming or conversational skills, the appropriate ways and means, methods and materials can be selected. As of this writing, it is still mostly knowledge about English, often a special kind of 'examination English' made in Japan, for Japanese purposes, that is pursued. Of course, there is nothing inherently surprising or remarkable in that, given that this is Japan. And I do not mean to criticize, but I do hope to describe the situation from

my perspective as a foreign teacher at a Japanese university, offered in the spirit of 'glasnost'.

The students that I teach are the products of this same educational system and I have frequent opportunity to judge both the quality of their English, and their ability to use it for communication and self-expression. Those few that can go beyond the usual hesitant, false-beginner level are the exceptions that prove the rule. They have done so mostly in spite of the system, on their own, through contact with English speakers and exposure to English outside of class, or by virtue of a year spent at an American high school.

It would be easy to criticize this kind of result but rather than doing so, I want to ask if such criticism is not unfair. Would it not be criticizing it for something it was not designed to do? The Grammar-Translation method was originally introduced, ironically, to improve the existing language education methods. However, I doubt it was ever intended to produce fluent, oral communicators. It goes against common sense, the same common sense that children exhibit when learning to speak their native tongue: they babble, and coo, and gesture and talk 'baby talk'—all in preparation for mastering it by an early age. It is the same common sense that tells adults to practice giving speeches if they want to become polished orators, or practice the craft of writing if they want to be writers, or practice translating if they desire to translate well. It is the same common sense that should tell us, indeed, that the likely effect of teaching English by means of grammatical explanations in Japanese, transliteration into katakana and translation into Japanese is to inculcate these same kinds of abilities. Is it any wonder that many Japanese thus tend to first translate an English utterance into Japanese, then render their reply back into English while processing it grammatically and expressing it with Japanese sounds. Therefore, that is why, if we apply this same 'common sense' to the evaluation of English education in Japanese schools we cannot criticize it for only doing what it is designed to do. To do otherwise, would be something like criticizing an automobile because it cannot fly, or a fish because it cannot walk. If there is a fault, it is in the goal, whether stated or not, not in the design. Because of the way that means influence the end, and vice versa, we must examine carefully both our goals and the methods we choose to attain them. Choosing a certain goal often limits the means we can choose to attain it. And if we use the wrong methods we may never reach that goal, but end up somewhere else. Even the loftiest aims can be undermined by the wrong means.

If the goal of English study in Japan is truly to be the development of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills that allow Japanese students to fluently and freely express their thoughts and understand the thoughts of others in an English that approaches international standard English (based on educated, native, or non-native standards), then there is a lot of restructuring to be done. The coming revision of the curriculum toward conversational and listening skills is certainly a step in the right

direction. But it is only a first step, on a long journey toward real competence in intercultural communication in English, or another language. I have outlined a few more first steps below, which I believe, based on twenty years experience as both a student and teacher of languages, in a variety of situations and using a variety of methods and materials, to be vital to 'mastery' of a foreign language. These steps apply first of all to Japan, but are also relevant to other countries and cultures.

A Dozen Steps in the Right Direction

1. Eliminate all use of and reference to other forms of writing, such as kanji, katakana, hiragana, romaji, when introducing students to and having them practice the English sound system.

This is so fundamental that it should hardly need to be stated. Teaching the English sound system by means of the Japanese system can only have one result : that English sounds more like Japanese than English. 'ingurishu' is not English, no more than 'makudonurado' is McDonald's. If the sounds of English must be represented in a script other than English itself, let it be the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), or some other phonetic script unrelated to Japanese and fully capable of representing accurately all the sounds of English. But as a final stage, English words should be written in English, so that Japanese speakers learn the same sound and letter correspondences as do English native-speakers. Writing English in katakana for Japanese students and expecting them to learn to speak English is like giving a baby a set of crutches and expecting it to learn to walk.

2. When practicing the English sound system, treat it as a system, not as an accumulation of individual words, to be pronounced in isolation.

Since context often alters the pronunciation, focus mostly on the rhythm and intonation of groups of words—stress groups, tone groups, and combinations thereof. When focusing on the pronunciation of individual words always proceed from there to place them in the context of rhythm and intonation of complete utterances.

3. Reduce grammatical explanations in Japanese to a bare minimum, limiting it to the most essential concepts and vocabulary that cannot be explained simply in English, or demonstrated non-verbally or through the context of some clear situation.

Grammar is like a strong, bitter medicine. It is better to administer it in small doses, and also much more effective. It may help adults to acquire a language in measured doses at the appropriate times. It may equally hinder mastery if overdosed.

4. Maximize the students' exposure to English, while at the same time minimizing their exposure to Japanese in the classroom.

Even if the teacher's English is 'imperfect,' it doesn't mean the students' will be. Each student will imitate in his or her own way, creating a unique interlanguage in the process.

5. Encourage the students to use English to express themselves in a meaningful way,

to say what they want to say in English, whether in or outside the classroom.

This clearly implies departing from the textbook when and where necessary to serve that goal. Ideally, the textbook should be an aid to learning, not an autocrat. Neither students nor teachers should be slaves to it.

6 . Use and practice natural, authentic language, which suits the particular situation.

Such language need not always be super-fast and/or idiomatic. But to the extent that it is artificial, contrived and 'canned' it will not train the students' listening for real-life situations.

7 . Evaluate the students' progress in a way which does not overly interfere with the learning process or increase stress.

Tests should be a means of evaluation of levels of ability and of progress toward learning goals and should not become the ends themselves. The students should not be terrorized by tests.

8 . Do everything to make the learning of languages a pleasant and enjoyable experience, and not an unpleasant one.

This may require different means for different age groups and cultural groups with their own problems and handicaps in language learning. It is the teacher's job to find the right means.

9 . Use language as a tool to teach about other subjects, to open students' minds to a wider world, and to the premises and possibilities of other cultures.

This could mean teaching them about global issues such as the environmental crisis, rampant consumerism, poverty, and war, or about intercultural communication and comparative culture. In either case, the aim would be to foster the development of aware, responsible world citizens.

10. Involve the students at an affective, emotional level, not only a mental, cognitive one.

This will help to make whatever is to be learned more memorable and meaningful, and less likely to 'go in one ear and out the other,' or to be retained only up until the next examination, and then quickly forgotten.

11. Create the conditions whereby the students may become active and involved in their own learning.

The more active and involved the students are in their learning process the more they may learn. This may not always be what the teacher wants them to learn, but it may be what they need to learn, before that other learning can occur.

12. Tell the students they have nothing to fear from making mistakes, and encourage them to learn from their mistakes.

We learn by making mistakes. He who is afraid to make mistakes cannot learn. He who makes no mistakes has nothing to learn. If we do not learn from our mistakes, we go on making them. This is true not only for language learning, but for life as a whole, of which language learning is only a part.

13. Rather than nativizing the foreign language, foreignize yourself.

From the beginning, accept the foreign language on its own terms, as it is. Instead of only bending it to your language and culture, bend yourself to its rhythms and thought patterns.

If the above proposals were adopted for the Japanese school system, I expect that in a few years from now I would not have to spend so much time teaching remedial English to false beginner first year college students. Yet it is obvious to me that most of them run counter to the most basic patterns of Japanese culture. For that reason, another approach might be considered. Instead of reforming the teaching of English as it has been up to now, a process that would engender social, cultural and political resistance, it could be left as it is. But then it should be clearly labelled as 'examination English' (kyoiku eigo, or shikeneigo) and differentiated from 'real English' for communication with 'foreigners.' This would be like 'rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's', like sacrificing living English on the academic altar for the larger, selective processes of Japanese society. But as a price for this sacrifice, time should then be allotted outside the formal curriculum for the practice of self-expression and communication in English, under the guidance of native-speaker or fluent Japanese teachers. The Japanese students would become 'honorary English speakers' during the club time and would interact with each other in English and receive correction, from the teacher or from each other, when necessary. It would even be possible, and preferable, to have a few non-Japanese, exchange students, for example, participate on a regular basis. Then the learning of English as a foreign language for Japanese students would more closely approximate the learning of Japanese as a native language, outside of a classroom and through interaction with one's peers and significant adults. If English for communication was treated in this way, as a sort of extra-curricular activity, in the same category as kendo or other after-school club activities, and not tested, it would probably be learned far more effectively and with greater practical results. I expect that at the end of six years more students would have more ability to communicate in English. At the very least, fewer would graduate with an active dislike for English, that is, the 'examination' variety.

Resurrecting the dead

Yet because of the prospect of interference between the two varieties of English, 'examination' and 'real', it would be better if another language, preferably a dead one like Latin, or ancient Greek, or Sanskrit, could be substituted for English as a subject for examinations. These languages could function equally as well as a form of mental training and memory and intelligence testing, while also providing some cognate words for modern languages. In addition, they would have the great advantage of not being confused with the communicative functions of a living, changing language, such as English. This would free English to be taught and, learned not as an academic subject,

but as a practical skill. Presumably, it could still fit within the Japanese school curriculum, but more as an extra-curricular activity, as outlined above. English would then be liberated from its captivity as an academic subject and free to perform its far more important role as a means of intercultural and international communication.

The grammar-translation and 'yakudoku' traditions

The grammar-translation method was designed and developed for use in secondary schools. It reflected the ambitions and aspirations of the nineteenth-century grammar school in various countries. It began in Prussia in the late eighteenth century and reached its full flower in the Prussian Gymnasien of the 19th Century. It then came to Japan in the Meiji era, along with many other features of the Prussian secondary educational system.

Its similarity to the thousand-year old tradition of 'yakudoku' in Japan made it the chosen method of language instruction in Japan. According to a recent survey (Hino, 1989) it is still the dominant method of English language education in Japan, being employed by 70 to 80% of teachers. This means that for a thousand years or so, up until the present day, the dominant method of learning and teaching foreign languages in Japan has been that of word-for-word reading and translation (yakudoku) that has focussed mainly on the literal meaning and literal understanding of texts. Students tend to think that until they have translated it into Japanese they haven't read it or understood it. This results in a very slow rate of reading and a too literal or superficial understanding.

Let us take a line from the song "Russians" by Sting as an example. The English is as follows :

'How can I save my little boy from Oppenheimer's deadly toy'

The literal Japanese translation would be :

僕はオッペンハイマーの破壊的な玩具からどうやって幼い息子を救ったらいいんだろう。

However, such a translation, while supplying the meaning of the words themselves, does not at all address the 'macro' or 'meta' levels of meaning which lie behind, between and beyond the words themselves. We may distinguish at least four levels of meaning :

1. literal=deadly toy
2. figurative—metaphorical=the atomic bomb
3. attitudinal—connotational=negative, sceptical, derogatory, disrespectful ?
4. historical—associative=J. Robert Oppenheimer, American atomic physicist, WWII, Manhattan Project, Hiroshima, Nagasaki

For level 2 the meaning might be elicited by asking : Who was Oppenheimer ? What was his 'deadly toy' ?

For level 3 : What does Sting probably think about scientists and the results of scientific research, about the products of technology ?

For level 4 : Who was Oppenheimer ? What was his full name ? When did he live ? What did he do ? Where did he work ? Why did he make the atomic bomb ? What is the relevance to you ? Your children ? To Japan ? To the world ?

Each level expands the range and context of the meaning, the richness of association and relevance, the depth of thinking required. The first level is the micro level and the fourth is the macro level, although one could expand it even further.

If students do not get beyond the first level, then they have understood nothing, even if they read it in Japanese. At the second level, they have at least understood that it is about nuclear weapons, but they have still missed most of the meaning. At the third level they may begin to understand that the song is one of protest and concern about the nuclear arms race and the threat of nuclear war. But it is only by reaching the fourth level and understanding the full richness of meaning and association that we can truly begin to appreciate the song.

What level is reached depends on the students, the teacher and the environment, including the goals of instruction. Mere mechanical translation and grammar instruction would end at level 1. Teaching would carry the students at least to level 2 or 3. However, true education would not stop short of level 4 and might even attempt to go beyond it.

The Cultural Divide

Hino (1989) has posited that it is the 'kanji culture', which has made the grammar-translation method so popular in Japan and prevented the Japanese from adopting the communicative approach stressing speaking and listening skills. This style of language learning has up to now not been generally suited to the Japanese. The Japanese response to the Oral Method developed by Harold Palmer before World War II was very mixed. The cultural climate in Japan at that time was not at all conducive to the learning of foreign languages as an oral communicative skill. Even today, a micro-focussed, translation-obsessed reading and writing approach still dominates. This climate seems to be changing, but only very slowly. Nativising a foreign language may be easier in the beginning, but it is nonetheless not the way to master a foreign language, if the goal is to communicate with the native speakers of that same language. It produces an English with a definite 'made in Japan' flavor. Do the Japanese want an English they can export, or one for domestic consumption only ? If it is the former, then they must consider a much more radical and rapid perestroika. Half-hearted measures will not do.

The present situation is that most Japanese graduate from high school with an English 'handicap' that reinforces the already strong 'cultural handicap' toward interacting with foreigners. After six years of English study, most have achieved nothing

more than a false beginner level of ability. Of course, many Japanese do go on to achieve reasonable ability in English, but they do so by virtue of their own efforts, by self-study, by attending language schools, or by going abroad.

In the final analysis, the challenge is really more cultural than linguistic, more political than educational. The means exist to make nearly every Japanese student a fluent English speaker; it is only the will or consensus to implement them that is lacking. From my point of view, becoming reasonably fluent in a foreign language is a technical problem, well within the capacities of most people, given enough motivation and the right attitude.

Where's the education in English education ?

Yet the real challenge is going beyond linguistic or cultural instruction to an expanded knowledge of oneself and the world, toward real wisdom. That should be the goal of education, including language learning. It has been said that the crucial battleground of the 1990's will be between education and propaganda. Education examines and evaluates both sides of an issue, or many sides, whereas propaganda presents and forcefully argues for only one side. The crucial question is whether English education will be in the forefront of this battle or stick timidly to the sidelines. Is it to be education for the wider world, for the macro context, or mere instruction that does not go beyond the micro context, the technical application ? Is education to be valued for its own sake or for its vocational value ? Are schools to be knowledge factories churning out uniform student products ? Or will they attempt to impart some real wisdom ? Are we wise enough as teachers to even attempt such a task ? It seems to me that we must first make ourselves wise, and then we may have some influence on our students. Education should have some content, some focus other than mere training for some profession or vocation. Education should also bring increased awareness of oneself and the world. It should not be only for the purpose of getting a job. It should have not only vocational value but spiritual, intangible value as well.

The function of art is the communication of experience across personal and cultural divides. The goal of education should be to increase one's sensitivity to, and ability to evaluate that experience. It should lead to an enhanced ability to see complexity, and subtlety and the interrelatedness of things, as well as their simplicity and the repetition of patterns. It should deepen one's appreciation of art, music, literature, and science, as well as enabling one to distinguish science from pseudo-science. It should empower one to judge for oneself, to interpret with sophistication, to avoid too rapid judgements, to shun too simple arguments, to regard skeptically those who claim to know all the answers, and to seek answers for oneself by asking ever sharper questions, knowing that each answer only carries in its wake further questions, that there are no final answers. Finally, it should carry within itself the awareness that education never ends, that it is a lifelong process.

There is always the danger that in teaching the fine points of language—the nuances of meaning, the fine points of grammar, and the pronunciation of individual sounds, we may lose sight of the larger goals of education. As educators we should be most concerned with helping our students to know themselves and the world better so that they may live richer and more fulfilling lives whatever they choose to do. It was Mary Finochiaro (1974) who has stated the aims of a reformed TEFL perhaps best of all :

The world, our countries, our communities will survive with faulty pronunciation and less than perfect grammar, but can we be sure they will continue to survive without real communication, without a spirit of community, indeed without real communion among peoples ? (The Language Teacher XI : 12, p.8)

This applies just as well to education in general. Education in the 1990's must first of all be concerned with the creation of a functioning global community, which includes all and excludes none, and which can address the global problems affecting and afflicting all. Such a community will not recognize any foreigners, any outsiders, except those that may come from beyond the earth. In order to survive, and thrive, into the 21st century we must begin remaking education now. Perestroika begins at home.

Conclusion

This has been an attempt at glasnost' by a foreign instructor in Japan. The perestroika is up to the Japanese themselves. I hope that by writing this article, some may be stimulated to reexamine their own assumptions and premises. Because it is only through such reexamination and a consequent change in seeing and thinking that reform may occur. It is often only the outsider who can see certain truths about a country and culture. Because those inside it are blind to them.

The challenge in the coming years will be to orient English education in Japan away from the thousand year old tradition of word-for-word reading and translation (yakudoku), and of acquiring knowledge about English, which may not even be correct, toward acquiring the skills to actually use it to communicate, whether in writing or orally.

What often seems to be progress and innovation is in reality only a moving backward to methods long ago invented and long since forgotten. As Kelly (1976) states :

Ends and means vary from age to age. Education is in constant movement to suit the needs of its milieu, and the various parts of education tend to lag in their reaction to social demands, so that there is always scope for reformers; and one has the impression of constant improvement when what is really happening is a constant updating. (Kelly, 1976, p.396).

Whether it is a moving backward or forward, language education in Japan, and elsewhere, should be brought into line with the demands of a new era of intercultural communication in English, Japanese, or any other language. This would be the first step toward achieving a more effective means of intercultural understanding.

In such an era, linguistic skills alone and a common language will not always be enough. The people of the world will need to learn how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds more comfortably and effectively. They will need to learn how to communicate in a different way. They will need more than linguistic skills ; they will also need intercultural skills. In a real sense, they will need to reexamine and redefine themselves and others, and if need be, be willing to be, for example, less American, or less Japanese, but, in compensation, always more human.

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