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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>McOmie, William W.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>長崎大学教育学部人文科学研究報告, 50, pp.87-102; 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>1995-03-20</td>
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<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/33323">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/33323</a></td>
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Language learning／teaching: a polyglot’s perspective

William W. McOmie

Before I became a language teacher, I was a language student. Besides studying my native language English at school, I studied Spanish. Then, in college and graduate school, I studied first Russian and then some German, French and Chinese. After graduate school I taught Russian and worked as an interpreter and translator between English and Russian. Then I began teaching English as a foreign language and have now taught for some fourteen years in five different countries. During that time I have also studied German, French, Egyptian Colloquial Arabic, and Japanese in succession. However, besides ‘studying’ those languages, by virtue of living in a country where they were spoken, I was also able to learn them outside a classroom through daily practice in listening and speaking. In the case of Egyptian Arabic and Japanese this latter method was dominant. This much experience learning other languages has earned me a reputation as a linguist, a speaker of several languages. It has also given me a polyglot’s perspective on language, culture and communication, and on language learning and teaching.¹

This article will set forth some basic ideas about language, culture and communication and explore their implications for both language learning and teaching, in particular for English as a foreign language in Japan. Being fundamental, they may seem obvious, but as they underlie our assumptions about language, and hence, our approach to learning and teaching languages, they are worth examining. I look at language learning and teaching as merely opposite sides of the same coin. As Gilbert Highet has said, “teaching is inseparable from learning.” Assuming the truth of that premise, I offer some of my own views on language teaching and learning based on some 40 years experience as a language learner and teacher, including my native English.

The Nature of Language: speech or writing?

Language, as its derivation from the Latin word ‘lingua’, or tongue, implies, is speech. It is first of all a sound system, a meaningful pattern of sounds. It is only secondarily a writing system, which imperfectly represents those sounds. The exact origins of human spoken language will always be speculative. It seems to have developed somewhere

¹ This article is based on a talk given at the 25th Annual Workshop for Japanese teachers of English held at the Language Institute of Japan in Odawara, Japan in August, 1993.
between 20,000 and 100,000 B.C. when *homo loquens*, the speaking ape evolved. The earliest means of writing, on the other hand, date to only approximately 5,000 years ago. This clearly shows the precedence of speech over writing. In addition, the fact that among the some 4,000 or more living languages in the world today, many of them still have no writing system, or are using one that was only recently invented, or borrowed, demonstrates the independence of speech from writing.

The English alphabet is based upon the Roman alphabet, which was derived from the Greek alphabet, which was in turn derived from the Phoenician alphabet. The Cyrillic alphabet used to write Russian and several other languages was also derived from the Greek alphabet. The Arabic, Hebrew and Phoenician alphabets ultimately take their origin from the North Semitic alphabet. Thus, all of the modern alphabets shown in Figure 1 share a common ancestor and are more or less distantly related to each other. Indeed, the English word alphabet comes from the name of the first two letters in the Greek alphabet 'alpha' and 'beta', which in turn come from the Phoenician names, 'aleph' and 'beth.'

Figure 1  Several modern alphabets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modern Roman</th>
<th>Greek form</th>
<th>Greek name</th>
<th>Cyrillic form</th>
<th>Hebrew name</th>
<th>Arabic form</th>
<th>Arabic name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aa</td>
<td>α</td>
<td>alpha</td>
<td>Αα</td>
<td>'aleph, 'alef</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>'alif</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bb</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>beta</td>
<td>Ββ</td>
<td>beth</td>
<td>bā</td>
<td>bā</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Cc           | γ          | gamma      | ΓΓ            | gime
| Dd           | δ          | delta      | δδ            | délaeth      | thā          | thā          |
| Ee           | Ε          | epsilon    | ΕΕ            | zayn        | khā         | khā          |
| Ff           | Ζ          | zedia      | ΖΖ            | vaw, waw    | hā          | hā          |
| Gg           | Η          | théia      | ΗΗ            | hein         | dā          | dā          |
| Hh           | Θ          | theta      | ΘΘ            | tehn         | dḥā         | dḥā          |
| Ii           | Ι          | iota       | ΙΙ            | yod, yodh   | rā          | rā          |
| Jj           | Κ          | kappa      | ΚΚ            | kaph         | zāy         | zāy          |
| Kk           | Λ          | lambda     | ΛΛ            | lamedh       | sin         | sin         |
| Ll           | Μ          | mu         | ΜΜ            | mēm          | shin        | shin        |
| Mm           | Ν          | nu         | ΝΝ            | nūn          | săd         | săd         |
| Nn           | Ξ           | xi         | ΞΞ            | samekh       | dād         | dād         |
| Oo           | Ο          | omicron    | ΟΟ            | 'ayin        | ṭā         | ṭā         |
| Pp           | Π          | pi         | ΠΠ            | pā            | zā          | zā          |
| Qq           | Ρ          | rho        | ΡΡ            | pā            | šāy         | šāy         |
| Rr           | ΢           | sigma      | ΢Σ            | sade, sadhe  | 'ayn        | 'ayn        |
| Ss           | Σ           | tau        | ΣΣ            | tōp          | ghāy        | ghāy        |
| Tt           | Τ           | upsilon    | ΤΤ            | rēsh         | ūl          | ūl          |
| Uu           | Ψ           | phi        | ΨΨ            | sin          | qāi         | qāi         |
| Vv           | Χ           | chi, khi   | ΧΧ            | shin         | kāl         | kāl         |
| Ww           | Ψ           | psi        | ΨΨ            | lāv, lāw     | lām         | lām         |
| Xx           | Ω           | omega      | ΩΩ            | 'ayn         | ṭā         | ṭā         |
| Yy           | Υ           | shin       | ΥΥ            | shin         | kāl         | kāl         |
| Zz           | Ω           | shin       | ΩΩ            | shin         | kāl         | kāl         |
None of these different alphabets represent the sounds of their respective languages perfectly and completely. Any one wishing to learn how to speak one of those languages must first learn by ear and tongue how to distinguish and pronounce its various sounds. One may learn this before and separately from, or together with, its writing system, but one should not learn it after the writing system is taught, unless there is no other choice. The separateness of speech and writing may seem obvious to many. Nevertheless, from my experience I am convinced that because spoken language and written 'language' are usually taught together, many language learners and teachers alike may come to assume that they are the 'same.' Moreover, because of the generally greater prestige of the latter, the spoken language is still often not considered a proper object of study, and so is taught mostly in its more formal, and 'correct' but also more stilted and unnatural written form. Actual spoken discourse is often full of pauses, false starts, repetition, conversational lubricants, and back-channel messages, or aizuchi, and so tends to be very different from most textbook 'conversations.'

The idea that language is speech, and not writing, and should be taught as such, on its own terms, and if need be, separately from writing, was a radical one in the United States 50 years ago and is still, I believe, a somewhat radical notion in many countries of the world today, especially those where writing has high prestige, such as Egypt and Japan. However, in English we still learn to speak our 'mother tongue' (even if not actually our mother's tongue) generally before we learn to read and write it. The Japanese child also learns to literally 'speak a tongue,' 話す 'hanasu,' 'to speak, or talk.' The characters for written language 文, 書 do not contain this 'tongue' element. Thus, our languages preserve a distinction that we may have forgotten.

Language, Culture and Education

Some may regard peoples who lack a written language as 'uncultured' or 'uncivilized'. However, in the anthropological sense of culture as the sum total of the way of thinking and behaving of a society, they are not at all 'uncultured.' They may have a sophisticated and complicated culture, which is simply not written down. In this sense, no human beings are without culture, and language becomes an inseparable part of culture. It is inside culture, and so surrounded by it, and shaped by it, at the same time as it shapes it. Nevertheless, in the specific case of a particular language and culture separation is possible, and occurs quite frequently. A particular language may be separated from a particular culture. A good example of this is English. There are now many varieties of English in the world, British, American, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Indian, Singaporean, Japanese, as well as sub-varieties within those, and they are all the result of the same English language migrating to other countries and becoming part of a new and different culture.

Another meaning of the word culture in English, and other languages, is that of 'being educated, sophisticated, refined in one's tastes and judgements, or in a word
'cultured.' Thus, there is an implied link between culture and education. In Japanese 'culture' in that sense can be expressed as 文化 'bunka' or 教養 'kyōyō.' Here the link between 'writing', 'education' and 'culture' is clearly expressed. This link poses a contradiction between the need to train students of language in listening and speaking skills, and the desire to also teach them how to read and write the target language. Strictly speaking, one does not need to learn how to read and write a language in order to learn how to speak and understand it. However, because the learning of foreign languages often takes place in the context of an educational system, where students learn to write their native language, it is natural that they are also taught to read and write the foreign language. However, this practice then often leads to the unspoken assumption that 'foreign language learning equals learning to read and write a foreign language.' In Japan, this has traditionally meant learning the English 'equivalents' of Japanese words and expressions and then translating.

**Sound versus Symbol**

I am not advocating that it is enough for students to learn how to understand and speak a foreign language, and that they need not learn how to read and write it. They should certainly learn both, and cannot claim to have fully mastered a foreign language until they have mastered all four skills. Nevertheless, I do think that the pronunciation, intonation and stress pattern of the target language should be learnt and thoroughly practised, before reading and writing skills are taught. The writing system, or some other phonetic script, may be learnt simultaneously with the sound system of the target language in order to assist the learning process. But if the proper pronunciation, intonation and stress patterns are not learned first, then the writing system, the spelling of words, may later interfere with the proper pronunciation of the target language. This is called graphophonemic interference. Its opposite, phonemographic interference, also exists. Some examples of both types of interference are shown in Figure 2. Although the sound and writing systems have a mutual influence on each other, they are essentially separate, the latter being an arbitrary and incomplete representation of the former.

**Figure 2** Graphophonemic and phonemographic interference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phonemographic interference</th>
<th>Graphophonemic interference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/gonna/ = 'gonna' (going to)</td>
<td>'going to' = /going to/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/wannabe/ = 'wannabe (s)'</td>
<td>'faux pas' = &quot;fox paws&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ya/ = 'ya' (you)</td>
<td>'news' = นิวส์</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ka:/ = 'ca' (car)</td>
<td>'peçopah' = &quot;pektopah&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to minimize their interference with each other, students should be taught to keep them separate, and to remember that 'sounds and letters don't agree,' especially in
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a language such as English or French. However, even in a language like Japanese, with a very phonetic writing system in the two syllabaries, katakana and hiragana, the correct pronunciation, intonation, and stress pattern is not apparent from the written symbols themselves, but must be learnt aurally and orally, from listening to and imitating the sounds that the symbols merely represent. In Figure 3 are written in Roman letters several examples of the same words and word groups that belong to different languages and have different meanings depending only on their manner of pronunciation, intonation and stress.

Figure 3  Identically written, but differently spoken

a. sono mama pronounced as /SO no MA ma/ = Italian “I'm a mother.
   sono mama pronounced as /sono mama/ = Japanese “as it is”

b. ana pronounced as /? ana/ = Egyptian Colloq. Arabic “I”
   ana pronounced as /ana/ = Japanese “hole”.

c. miru pronounced as /MI : ru/ = Russian ‘to the world’
   miru pronounced as /miru/ = Japanese ‘to see’

d. also pronounced as /also/ = English ‘also’
   also pronounced as /al’zo/ = German ‘so, thus, therefore’

Of course, if the Arabic, Japanese and Russian words were written in their own script, and in a context, one should know how to pronounce them correctly, but, again, only if one had already learned the relevant sound system. All full writing systems, including the Chinese, are based on speech, a fact that many language learners and teachers may still not recognize.

Examples such as the above demonstrate that although words may look the same, they are not necessarily spoken in the same way, nor do they necessarily have the same meaning. The written word itself is not necessarily a sufficient guide to the pronunciation and meaning, and in any case never a complete guide. Native speakers of a particular language generally master its sound system before they begin to learn its writing system. In this way, they follow the natural order of the evolution of human language from speech to writing. They learn how to write the words that they can already say, and, in the case of English, learn the spelling conventions that will tell them how to say words that they do not know. Of course, in some cases, they may still mispronounce unfamiliar words, but if they are reading at the appropriate level, such words will be few. Even though they have already learned to speak their language, they must still learn how to read and write it. Then they will discover the written ‘language’ to be somewhat, or even very different from the language that they learned to speak.
Dividing Up the World

Another very important feature of language is the way that each language arbitrarily divides up and names the human body and mind and the surrounding world and conceptualizes therefrom. Generally speaking, the more closely related two languages are the more similarly they divide up and conceptualize the world, and the more they use similarly looking and sounding, cognate words to do so. Conversely, when two languages are more distantly related or not related at all, such as English and Russian, or English and Japanese, it is more likely that their linguistic division of the world and its grammatical representation and conceptualization will also be more different. Figure 4 shows some differences in the range of meaning of some English, Russian and Japanese words.

Figure 4  Ranges of meaning for words in three languages

a. English 'nose' =? Russian 'nos' =? Japanese 'hana' (human)
   English 'trunk' vs. Russian 'khobot' vs. Japanese 'hana' (elephant)
   English 'beak' vs. Russian 'nos' vs. Japanese 'kuchibashi' (bird)

b. English 'arm' =? Russian 'ruka' =? Japanese 'te'
   English 'hand' vs. Russian 'ruka' vs. Japanese 'te'
   English 'foothill' vs. Japanese 'yamate'

From the above examples it may be seen that even at the simplest level of naming body parts, both human and animal, the range of meaning of the 'same' word in different languages is correspondingly broader or narrower. In example a. above, English uses a different word in all three cases, but the Russian and Japanese words have a greater range of meaning, but also differ from each other. Thus, none of the words are 'equivalent' to each other in meaning. In example b., both the Russian and Japanese words can mean either 'arm' or 'hand' in English, and are thus more similar in their range of basic meaning than the English words. In addition, the Japanese 'te' can be used figuratively as 'yamate', but in English it is 'foot' that is so used.

At a more abstract level of meaning, (Figure 5) the English words 'like' and 'love' convey an important distinction between a relatively moderate preference for something or fondness for someone and a strong or very strong preference or fondness. In German, however, the verb 'lieben', the counterpart of the verb 'to love' in English, conveys too strong a meaning to be used in some of the senses in which it is used in English. For example, the English sentence, "I love going to the beach in the summer" should not be expressed in German by the verb 'lieben', as it would sound strange and have too strong a meaning. On the other hand, in Russian, the cognate verb 'lyubit' 'may be used in either the sense of 'like' or 'love' in English. Finally, in Japanese the words 'suki' or 'daisuki' may be used in the sense of 'like' or 'love' in English but the verb 'ai suru' conveys a
stronger meaning than 'love' in English and thus is not used except in the sense of 'to love very much' and so not as commonly as 'love' in English. The word 'love' in English is also commonly used as an affectionate ending in a letter to a friend, or even as an affectionate term of address to a stranger in British English, which usage has no counterpart in Japanese 'ai.'

Figure 5   Range and intensity of meaning of words for 'like' and 'love' in four different languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>like/be fond of</th>
<th>love</th>
<th>love very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>gefallen/mögen/gern(e)</td>
<td>lieben</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>nravit'sa</td>
<td>lyubit'</td>
<td>ochen'lyubit'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>suki</td>
<td>daisuki</td>
<td>ai suru</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the above examples should make clear, there is really no such thing as exact equivalency in meaning between words in different languages. Each word has its own range of meaning and usage which may overlap with the range of cognate or other words in other languages, but is rarely, if ever, exactly the same.

The above table is only a rough approximation, and, of course, the range and intensity of meaning for such words will vary among different generations and individuals. Nevertheless, it remains one of the the most important tasks for the teacher to acquaint himself with such different ranges of meaning and usage in the target language and the students' native language in order that he may explain the differences clearly and then test his students' understanding of them. In a class of students from different linguistic backgrounds, this task is, of course, much more complicated. But in a college classroom of Japanese English students with nearly identical educational background and false beginner/intermediate level in English, a consistently recurring pattern of errors may be easily perceived. In Figure 6 I offer a sampling of some typical kinds of errors collected from the essays of my second-year English composition students.

Figure 6   Some Typical Japanese Mistakes and their Corrections

1. *Club activity was very hard but I success.
   My club activities were hard, but I succeeded.
2. *She hangs stopwatch and puts on training wears.
   She has a stopwatch around her neck and is wearing a track suit.
3. *I went to shopping to buy some wears.
   I went shopping for some clothes.
4. *When I knew that I passed entrance examination I was happy.
   I was very happy when I found out that I had passed the entrance examination.
5. "I had been studied English for six years before I had entered first grade of this university.
I studied English for six years before I entered this university. (as a freshman, first-year student)
6. "You had better visit Dutch slope in Nagasaki.
You should go and see Dutch slope while you're in Nagasaki.
7. "Albert Einstein was a famous scientist, and he was dead in 1955.
Albert Einstein was a famous scientist, who died in 1955.
8. "Severe teachers are almost disliked by students.
Strict teachers are disliked by most students.

These sentences contain several different kinds of errors, or differences from standard American or British English. I will limit my discussion to the most important ones. In the first sentence, although 'club activity' is understandable in English, it sounds like it is only one particular activity and is rather vague because it does not specify which club, and what kind of activity was "hard." The mistaken use of 'success' as a verb is very common among my students, probably because it is a common Japanese loan word which can be verbalized with 'suru' and also because the 'equivalent' word 'seiko' in Japanese can function either as a verb or a noun.

In the second sentence, the use of 'put on' in place of 'wear' is also very common. This mistake stems from ignorance of the differing range of meaning and usage of those two words in English. 'Wear' is used to indicate a 'state of wearing something' either at a particular moment of speaking or during some period of time, or repeatedly, day after day. In contrast, 'put on' is only used to indicate the 'action of putting something on,' which is followed by 'the state of wearing' it. In Japanese, both those usages are covered by the one verb 'kiru', either as 'kiru' = put on, wear, or as 'kiteiru' = wear, to be wearing. For this reason, Japanese students become confused about whether to use 'wear' or 'put on' to express the two ideas of 'state of wearing' or 'action of putting on' and they need to be explicitly taught the difference in their meaning and usage.

In the third sentence, the use of 'wear' as a noun in the sense of 'clothing' is possible, but also much more restricted in standard American or British English than in Japanese English. It is limited to such uses as 'Menswear' or 'swimwear' in a department store, and is not used so commonly or generally to mean 'clothes' or 'clothing' as in Japan. Perhaps this is because of the identically pronounced, but differently spelled 'houseware', 'hardware' or 'software' and the plural form 'wares', which might lead to confusion in American or British English. Since this latter word does not seem to exist in Japanese English, a more generalized use of 'wear' does not lead to confusion. Given a random confusion of the verbs wear/put on with the verb 'kiru' in Japanese, one would expect as many instances of 'wear' being wrongly used for 'put on', as the reverse, but, in fact, the reverse case seems to be much more common. I probably first became aware of this
distinction between state and action through studying Russian. In that language that

distinction is signaled by the related verbs 'odevat'sa' (to wear, to be wearing) and

nadet', 'to put something on.'

In the fourth sentence, the use of 'know' in place of 'find out' is the same kind of

mistake as the substitution of 'put on' for 'wear', except in the opposite direction. For

some reason, 'find out' is generally not used in the sense of 'know' to indicate a 'state of

knowing', as is 'put on' for 'wear', but is rather confused with its close cousin 'find.' In

addition, the use of 'know' and 'learn' to distinguish between state and action in English

is also not generally recognized in Japanese English, and so 'know' generally has to serve

a dual role.

In the fifth sentence, the passive past perfect is used perhaps because this student

confused the meaning of 'study' with 'teach' and did not realize that from a student's "I"

perspective studying is active. However, it may also reflect her experience of studying in

Japanese junior and senior high school as being largely one of passively 'being taught'

English. The second past perfect 'had entered' is, of course, not necessary, since it refers

to the point of time after the period of studying. Finally, the use of 'grade' instead of

'year' for university is very common among my students. Since in Japanese one also says

'ichinensei, ninensei' and so on, such a mistake is not likely the result of direct transla-

tion from Japanese, but rather the too narrow teaching of 'nensei' as 'equal to' grade in

all cases. In American English, it does in fact mean 'grade' in elementary through high

school, but then again, Grades 1 through 12, and not as in Japan, Grades 1-6, 1-3, 1-3.

Once one enters college one becomes a freshman, or first-year student, after which the

only grades are A, B, C, D and F, or 'seiseki.'

In the sixth sentence, the use of 'had better' in place of you'd better, or 'should' or

'ought to' is a typical feature of Japanese English, which I have heard and seen written

over and over again in ten years teaching English in Japan. It comes from a too direct

translation of the form 'shita hoo ga ii' in Japanese, and the too simplistic teaching that

you'd better = you had better. In fact, the two forms are not equal, except in the sense

that the former is a contracted form of the latter. The actual force of meaning of the lat-

ter, pronounced as 'you HAD better' is stronger and may sound like a warning or threat,

rather than a mere suggestion, or reminder. Thus, although it is grammatically correct,

its usage in Japanese English in the sense of a suggestion to do something, to native

speaker ears often sounds like a warning or threat that if you don't do that something

some unpleasant consequences may result. This difference in meaning could be crucial in

a conversation, and can only be properly taught through speech, not writing.

The seventh sentence presents another common example of the confusion between

'state' and 'action' in English. In this case that distinction is signaled by the two differ-
ent grammatical forms of the same verb 'to die', and 'to be dead.' This usage is paral-

leled in Japanese by the two verb forms 'shinu' and 'shindeiru.' In Japanese, the same

past tense form as in English is used to indicate the action or fact of someone's death.
Thus, the source of this error is probably the mistaken analogy with 'to be born,' another point of difficulty for Japanese learners.

The eighth example is an extremely common error that Japanese students of English make. Here again the reason for this error probably stems from the fact that Japanese learn in school that the Japanese word 'hotondo' equals the English word 'almost,' and so make the mistake of using it whenever 'hotondo' is used in Japanese. However, the range of meaning and usage of 'hotondo' is larger than 'almost,' and also includes 'most', 'mostly,' and 'almost all.' Thus, 'hotondo' does not equal 'almost,' and yet most Japanese adult learners of English seem to think it does. Thus, the difference in usage of these two words in English and Japanese needs to be carefully taught and thoroughly practised in college-level or higher classes, since it is, unfortunately, not being learned at the lower levels.

As my analysis of these common mistakes, or differences between Japanese English and American or British English shows, one of the greatest problems for students of a foreign language is to learn exactly what the ranges of meaning and usage of the different words and expressions in that language are and how they differ from that of the 'equivalent' words and expressions in their native language. Perhaps the first lesson to be learned is that there are no real equivalents, that each 'equivalent' word likely has a greater or lesser range and force of meaning, and also has different nuances and connotations. One reason that such a lesson is not being learned has been suggested by the linguist Takao Suzuki: "It is the lack of realization on the teacher's part that meaning and usage in language have structure, and that this structure varies from language to language." One way for the language teacher to become aware of this variation in structure is to study comparative linguistics. Another way is to study different languages. Given such awareness, the teaching of 'equivalents' between languages and the translation based on them, and the overreliance on often inaccurate, and unreliable bilingual dictionaries, would likely decline. In Japan use by high school students of lists of the most frequently appearing English words on college entrance exams, or 'tangocho' that give only a single English 'equivalent' for a Japanese word, without giving a definition of the actual meaning and showing its full range of usage, may be helpful to pass college entrance examinations in English, but they do not further either oral or written mastery of English, and quite likely hinder it.

What would further that mastery is for Japanese students of English to use monolingual English learners' dictionaries that define and give many examples of the meaning of English words in different contexts. However, even those dictionaries often fail to give a full and accurate definition of words based on a structural analysis of the language that would serve as a guide to their actual range of meaning and usage. As Suzuki has also noted, the results of such analysis by linguists have not yet contributed much to dictionary editing or language teaching.
Some Additional Linguistic and Cultural Factors

Besides the above linguistic, cultural and educational considerations, my experience as a language learner and teacher has made me aware of other linguistic and cultural factors that influence the degree of interest in and the methods of study and mastery of foreign languages of learners in different cultures. Learners of English in each country that I have taught in have their own linguistic and cultural, as well as personal, strengths and weaknesses, or 'handicaps' as language learners.

Compared to German, Russian or even Arabic speakers, Japanese speakers face more linguistic handicaps in learning English. Besides the well-known lack of distinction between 'l' and 'r' in Japanese, there is the confusion between such words as 'hood' and 'food' or 'who'd.' Furthermore, the absence of the 'v' and 'th' consonants and the syllables /si : / = 'see', /ti : / = tea, and /tu : / = 'too,' together with the English language's ability to end words with consonants, other than 'n,' and to cluster consonants together, and its strong syllabic stress and reduction of weak syllables present many problems for Japanese learners. In addition, the use of a five-vowel system in Japanese, as opposed to the RP English 12 vowel system (Figure 7) also means that Japanese learners must learn to pronounce more than twice as many vowels. To give some idea of the overall challenge facing Japanese learners, English has 40 phonemes (with 600 or more different spellings!) compared to 20 for Japanese and can form more than 8,000 syllables of 1-7 phonemes compared to only 105-113 syllables of 1-3 phonemes in Japanese.

Because of the great difference between the English and Japanese sound systems, the many English words that have been taken into the Japanese language usually sound too different from their English counterparts to be useful as communicative tools with native English speakers. However, once the English sound system has been mastered, Japanese speakers should become able to understand and pronounce the English counterparts of English 'gairaigo' in Japanese and easily 'translate' between the two. All of the above differences in the sound systems of the two languages are also accompanied by great differences in the grammatical, lexical and semantic systems as well.

Most Japanese learners also have a handicap of six years of junior and senior high school English which prepared them for college entrance examinations but which did not teach them to speak English. Moreover, some of the English that they learned is different from contemporary American or British English and so may not be very useful for communication with native speakers.

In terms of linguistic strengths, the Japanese enjoy a very high literacy rate, and this is probably one reason why the reading and writing of English has been traditionally more stressed than speaking and listening. However, the oft-repeated adage that the Japanese can 'read and write English, but not listen and speak' does not bear up under close examination. They can read English, but usually only slowly and with over-reliance on translation and the use of dictionaries. As for writing, there is more to it than merely
putting English words and sentences onto paper. The examples of Japanese writing in English that I have given above are only a small part of the problem.

On the level of cultural factors, Austrian, Egyptian, Japanese and American foreign language learners provide an interesting contrast. In Vienna, some of the Austrian students at the language school that I taught at wanted to be taught only by speakers of British 'Oxford' English. I remember one woman in particular who actively tried to undermine my authority as an English teacher by telling the other students in the class that the English I was teaching them was 'incorrect' and not, of course, 'Oxford English.' However, it soon became obvious from her comments that she herself had little idea of
what 'Oxford English' actually was. She insisted that speakers of 'Oxford English' did not use contractions, but always said "I am, or It is." Yet I was teaching standard British English (albeit with a somewhat American accent) from a textbook that was, of course, full of such contractions. She nonetheless refused to recognize it as 'Oxford English.' Her linguistic snobbery about some non-existent 'Oxford English' was preventing her from learning the standard British English of educated speakers. She was an extreme case, but as others also had a strong preference for British English and an aversion to American English, without perhaps having a clear idea of what either was, such an attitude qualifies as some sort of cultural-handicap in my mind.

The contrast between the learning and speaking styles of Egyptian and Japanese learners of English is particularly revealing. The main problem that I had as a teacher of English in Egypt was to keep the students in my class from answering out of turn or all at once. If I called on one student to answer, another student would usually answer first. The students seemed to be in competition with each other for my attention and to be the first to show that they knew the answer. My major task as a teacher was to discipline them to think a little before answering and to answer when I called on them, and not before. If I asked a question to the class as a whole, I would usually receive several answers all at once. Contrast this kind of teaching situation, to the typical class of Japanese learners of English, and the influence of culture on learning style becomes abundantly clear. As is well-known by all foreign teachers of English in Japan, group-inhibition and individual reluctance to answer questions, even when called upon to do so, and the frequent consulting with other students before answering is the typical classroom behavior of Japanese students. It is also the complete opposite of the typical Egyptian situation. In a Japanese classroom the major task of the foreign teacher is to stop the students from thinking so much, and worrying whether they will give a wrong answer. My Egyptian students never seemed to be worried about giving a wrong answer. For them, the important thing seemed to be being the first with an answer, any answer. They wanted to get my attention and stand out, as much as Japanese students generally desire not to stand out.

This contrast between Egyptian and Japanese classroom behavior is also evident outside the classroom. Egyptians of all classes were generally very eager to speak English to me on the street, in shops, on trains or wherever I went, even if their ability to speak English was very minimal. On the other hand, Japanese are generally reluctant to speak English to foreigners even though they may know more English than most Egyptians. Thus, there seems to be a real irony in the fact that most Japanese have more knowledge of English than most Egyptians, but also less confidence about using it. Instead of giving them confidence in using English to communicate with foreigners, their six years of English study in school and the college entrance examinations seem to give them a sense of inferiority and insecurity about using it.

In contrast to all the above cases where German, Arabic or Japanese speakers are at
least motivated to study English, most American native speakers of English lack sufficient motivation to even enter a foreign language classroom. There appears to be less demand in the United States for foreign languages, especially those perceived as difficult, than there is for English as a foreign language in other countries. There used to be, and probably still are, more teachers of English in Russia, than there are students of Russian in the United States, even though Russia was (and is) such an important country.

Unfortunately, many American and other native English speakers are content to let others learn English rather than make a real effort to learn a foreign language, especially beyond the beginning level. In other words, an important cultural handicap for many English native speakers is lack of enough motivation to even begin to learn a foreign language, much less continue studying it to an advanced level.

However, in fairness to those native speakers who do make an effort to become fluent in a foreign language, one must also admit that they may be deprived of the opportunity to practice by the presence of so many others who want to speak English with them. This may also deprive them of the motivation to learn a foreign language, beyond the basic level. As an example of this, in Egypt I never learned more than the colloquial Arabic that I needed to survive there, partly because almost all the educated Egyptians I met spoke English and would not speak Arabic to me.

International English

Of the ten most spoken languages in the world, English is clearly the most international, with at least as many non-native as native speakers, and if less fluent speakers are included, perhaps as many as three times more, for an estimated total of between 700 and 1400 million speakers worldwide. (Figure 8)

The rapidly expanding role of English as the number one international language in the last few decades has fulfilled the need for a world-lingua franca in our increasingly interconnected 'global village.' French, not shown in Figure 8, has 70 million native speakers and an official language population of 220 million, making it second to English as an international language. English inherited its role as the number one international language from French, and now increasingly threatens to undermine its traditional role as a diplomatic and scientific lingua franca. English, besides the political and economic advantages it enjoys, also has a linguistic edge. It has a complicated verbal tense system, but mostly lacks verbal conjugation and noun inflections, and has no grammatical gender in nouns and articles. It combines a basic Germanic vocabulary, with a largely Latinate, or French, political, economic and scientific vocabulary. Its overall vocabulary is more than 50% based on Latin and French. Thus, it is a link language between the two main linguistic branches of western Europe: Germanic and Romance.

Non-native speakers from all over the world have a need to learn English, even if only for instrumental reasons, for business or professional needs. Unfortunately, it is not so well suited for some learners, especially Japanese learners, for example, because
of its more complicated sound and spelling systems. In that respect, Spanish or Italian would be much easier for them to learn, as they are also easier foreign languages for English native speakers to learn. The latter is not a significant international language, but the role of Spanish in that capacity seems likely to grow in the future and so it would be a good second foreign language for Japanese to learn, along with English. In addition, Chinese, with a billion speakers, Korean and Russian, as Japan's nearest linguistic neighbors in Asia, promise to be increasingly important languages for Japanese to learn in the future.

Conclusion

From my perspective as a polyglot, who has now, unfortunately, forgotten as many languages as he learned, the great emphasis on learning English in Japan is fully justified
by its great value as an international language. At the same time, however, its role in Japan as a school and entrance examination subject hinders its being taught as both a spoken and written means of communication with English native speakers, and probably other non-Japanese speakers as well. It is much studied, but more in its written than spoken form, and with results that often diverge from standard American or British English. Thus, reform of English education in Japan is urgently necessary if the goal is to be the learning of English for intercultural and international communication, with English native-speakers especially. Along with this reform, the learning of other foreign languages, free of the pressure of entrance examinations, should also be encouraged. For English may be the number one international language now, but as other international languages have risen and fallen, it may not always be. And, after all, the whole world does not yet speak English, and probably never will, nor want to. And that is as it should be. The joy of language learning and speaking should not be limited to English alone. For each language has its own genius, its own richness, and unique world view, and can be studied and appreciated for those qualities alone, irrespective of its value as an instrument of communication with other human beings. To know one foreign language well is a valuable asset, but to have a good command of two, three, or more foreign languages is an invaluable advantage.

References
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