



Title	English as a Language of International Communication: an Analysis of the Status of English in Japan
Author(s)	Fujita, Takemasa
Citation	経営と経済, 60(3), pp.123-138; 1980
Issue Date	1980-12-25
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10069/33866
Right	

This document is downloaded at: 2019-09-19T02:54:38Z

English as a Language of International Communication:
an Analysis of the Status of English in Japan

By
Takemasa Fujita

1. English as a Foreign Language

1. 1

In the Meiji era, English, along with other major Western languages like French and German, was taught and studied as a tool of Japan's modernization. "Catch up with the West" was the national motto and learning of modern Western languages was considered as a vital necessity to attain this goal. Foreign languages were means to take in information about advanced foreign civilizations. There was strong urge to learn a foreign language in order to absorb the knowledge and skills of the West so as to bring about development long due for the nation of Japan.

In the early Meiji period whenever a foreign ship entered a Japanese port, whether the ship was Dutch, American or Russian, it brought with it information new to Japan. It didn't matter which country brought this new information. Whatever arrived in Japan demonstrated to the people the innovations of the West. And all things from the West served as models to imitate to promote development of the nation. Not only did Japan absorb but almost worshipped whatever originated in the West. Soon Japan started learning from the West with immense zeal and energy.

The Meiji Government employed foreign specialists in order to make Japan a modern nation. According to statistics there were 119 Englishmen, 16 Americans, and 50 Frenchmen on the list of the Government's foreign employees as of the fifth year of Meiji, i. e. 1872. They were all experts in their respective fields such as laying

railways, building ships, constructing lighthouses, telegraphy, mintage, agriculture, manufacturing, and education. The Government also sent selective youths to the Western countries for the purpose of study.

The Government-employed educators made an important contribution to the development of the Japanese public school system. Foreign instructors also occupied important posts in the Government institutions, such as Kaisei School, which is the predecessor of the present Tokyo University.

1. 2

Foreign languages in the Meiji era served as necessary vehicles to import information from the advanced West. They were prerequisites in Japan's higher education. The Government-hired American and British instructors taught courses in sciences and liberal arts in the English language. In Tokyo University in the first half of the Meiji era, native as well as foreign professors used textbooks written in English. A graduate of Tokyo University wrote in retrospect, "Except for the courses in Chinese and Japanese classics, all other courses were then being taught in English. Whether alien or native, instructors all used English as the medium of instruction. It was as if the use of Japanese was prohibited."¹⁾ Soseki Natsume, one of the most celebrated novelists of the era, bore testimony to the same effect as follows:

"When we were students, we learned everything through the medium of English. Geography, history, mathematics, zoology, botany, and all other academic subjects were learned from textbooks written in the foreign language. Many of our seniors had to write their examination papers in English. Even in our time mathematics was taught in English. It was the vogue of the time to use English even where Japanese would do just as it was the vogue to carry a watch with a gold chain, to have a beard and whiskers, and to wear Western-style clothes. Japan then simply could not afford

her youths higher education in their mother tongue. So the matter was not how many hours a week we learned English but that we learned all academic subjects in English. »²⁾

1. 3

It is to be noted that nation-wide learning of a foreign language takes place only when the nation of the language is recognized as more advanced in culture and civilization. When Japan opened the door to the rest of the world after two and a half centuries of national isolation, the most advanced nations, i. e. the nations from which Japan felt the widest cultural gap, were Great Britain, the U. S. A., Germany, and France. Therefore, English, German, and French were recognized as the foreign languages for Japanese to learn.

Above all, English was given the highest priority. English was learned not only for importing modern knowhow from the English-speaking countries but for the purpose of importing Western culture at large. In the field of literature, for instance, it is well-known that Meiji intellectuals read Dante, Tolstoy, Maupassant, Cervantes, and other Continental writers in English translation.

1. 4

Now that Japan has caught up with the West in all aspects of modernization, or has even outrun the West in some realms such as recent economic events show, it can be safely said that the use of English as a tool for Japan's modernization has done its job. Still today it is a salient fact that though English is officially an elective subject in compulsory junior high school, more than 99 per cent of Japan's junior high school students study it for three years. In senior high schools, colleges and universities, English courses, though optional, are just as well attended. It seems that in Japan today English is being studied not so much as a tool as it used to be but as an end in itself. It is also a fact that English is considered to be one of the most important subjects in the entrance examination of colleges and universities. What seems to be the

value or values of foreign languages, English in particular, to the people of Japan today?

1. 4. 1

As to the status of English in Japanese education, a great controversy was aroused in 1974 by Mr. Wataru Hiraizumi, member of the House of Councillors and Vice Chairman of the Committee of Cultural Exchange in the Liberal Democratic Party. His drastic reform plan of English teaching caused an upheaval of responses among educators and intellectuals. He proposed that English should be eliminated from the entrance examination subjects of colleges and universities, that English be an elective subject in secondary school, and that only five per cent of high school students in Japan study English intensively. The reason for his proposals was that he felt too much time and money have been wasted in teaching English using ineffective methods to the students who show little interest and aptitude for learning it. Thus, the nationalistic school of thinking represented by Mr. Hiraizumi denounces the learning of English for the general public. Nationalists suggest that only government officials, diplomats, mass media correspondents, overseas business representatives, and other specialists, whose jobs require English competence should be trained in English.

1. 4. 2

In defense of English education for the general public, President Ogawa of Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) points out that the Japanese are such a monoracial and monolingual nation that without learning a foreign language the Japanese would be half-blind to how other people's minds work. He cherishes the view that the study of English in and of itself has the virtue of expanding the Japanese mind. Professor Shoichi Watanabe of Sophia University, who openly refuted Mr. Hiraizumi, maintains that English is valuable as an intellectual tool because it is structurally and culturally different from Japanese. He reminds us that the fundamental purpose of education is to nurture the potential for

learning a foreign language in the individual, not necessarily to bring about instantaneous readiness for speaking the language. In spite of Mr. Hiraizumi's proposal to abolish English from the college entrance examinations, English is proved to be the most trustworthy indicator of applicants' scholastic aptitude. Professor Tsugiyoshi Torii of Kansai University of Foreign Studies, an authority of English teaching in Japan, insists judging from his long experience that English is more precise than Japanese or mathematics in assessing the applicants' aptitude. Ultimately, it might be safe to say that Mr. Hiraizumi's reform proposal and the ensuing dispute only confirmed what may be termed as the educational value of English in Japan.

2. English as a Language of International Communication

2. 1

There was observed a status change in English and other foreign languages in Japan in the middle of the Meiji period when Japan had served out her apprenticeship to the advanced civilizations in the West. English rendered to Japanese its place as a medium of instruction in higher education, but firmly established itself as an indispensable academic subject in high schools and colleges.

Japan's miraculous postwar growth in economy, which doubles every seven years, has made Japan an economic superpower in the world—the third largest in terms of GNP, next to only the U. S. A. and the U. S. S. R.. Her industrial success is flooding the world with Japanese cameras, radios, television sets, motorcycles, cars, ships, steel and all sorts of other industrial goods. Japan has become the first or at least the second largest trading partner of almost every country. Japan's economic interdependence with other nations, along with Japanese Government's positive policy toward internationalization of the nation, demands a language for international communication.

2. 2

English is the de facto language of international communication for the Japanese for a number of reasons. First of all, it is the most popular foreign language in Japan. In Japanese vocabulary are found thousands of loan words from English—more than from any other foreign language. No other foreign tongue has been so extensively taught for so extended a period of time in Japan. It has been, and still is increasingly, the most influential foreign language to the Japanese people. Secondly, speakers of English, both as a native language and as a second and foreign language, are more numerous than those of any other tongue save Chinese, and they are most widely and strategically distributed over the earth's surface. Thirdly, the fact that English is so precise and convenient for commercial use, the preeminent language of science and technological progress, the official language of international aviation, and so on greatly enhances its practical value. Even Russian propaganda to the Far East is broadcast in English, as are some Chinese radio programs. Indeed more than 60 per cent of the world's radio programs are broadcast in English, and it is also the language of 70 per cent of the world's mail.³⁾ We cannot help agreeing with Dr. Marckwardt who said: "English is without question the closest approach to a world language today."⁴⁾ Thus, it is necessary for Japanese to acquire a working knowledge of this international tongue which will help us to communicate with all peoples of the earth.

2. 3

Japanese people today stand in dire need of international communication skills. Though on the surface the need seems to be met somehow or other, in reality the language barriers that confront this country seem almost insurmountable and impenetrable. Only recently Professor Edwin O. Reischauer of Harvard University, distinguished Japanologist and former American Ambassador to Japan, had this to say about it: "In contrast, almost no Japanese politicians

and relatively few government officials, businessmen, or intellectual leaders can speak with their counterparts in other countries beyond the level of a few social pleasantries... Of the many dozens of cabinet ministers I have known in Japan over the past two decades, I can think of only three who could conduct a truly serious intellectual discussion in English. Of the hundreds of professors of history, including Western history, I have known over the last four decades, I can think of not very many more.... In international meetings, moreover, Japanese ability in the language of the conference, which is English, is likely to rank at or near the bottom among the participants. Inevitably the voice of Japan seems less loud and distinct than it should be."⁵⁾

2. 4

Japanese political and economic circles tend to ascribe the blame of the Japanese poor international communicative performance to the ineffective educational system. The Japanese educational system does not produce a sufficient number of competent English speakers even though it allows almost all Japanese to study English for six years in junior and senior high school, and many for further years in university. Frustration and resentment on the part of business and political circles against the meager results of English teaching in Japan led to such an extreme reform plan as Mr. Hiraizumi's.

2. 5

There are other nationalists who ask seriously why the Japanese should take all this trouble to learn to speak other people's tongue and why they should not encourage foreigners to learn to speak the Japanese language. This claim is mostly undercurrent, but it is strong enough to remind us of the Japanese militarists' language policy in Korea, Formosa and Indonesia during and before the Pacific War, in which Japanese imperialism forced the peoples to learn Japanese.

The number of foreigners who study Japanese today is considerably increasing according to statistics. For example, "Very few

foreigners have learned Japanese, but here again the increase from virtually none a generation or two ago has been spectacular. Someone has calculated that, whereas in 1934 there were only thirteen scholars in the United States capable of making substantial use of the Japanese language, by 1969 there were five hundred."⁶⁾ But it is also true that there will be a limit to the increase: "In the early twentieth century many Chinese went to Japan for their higher education, but now, except for a few aged remnants of this phase of history, almost no Chinese know any Japanese. Knowledge of Japanese in the rest of the world is even less. There is only a handful of scholars and diplomats in Europe who know the language and even fewer in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. In parts of Australia Japanese is now quite extensively taught, and it has spread to many American universities, but even then university students of the Japanese language in the United States number only a twenty-fifth as many as students of French."⁷⁾

It is certainly encouraging to know that International Labor Organization (ILO), in its 66th annual conference held in Geneva on June 4, 1980, adopted Japanese as one of its official languages. Nonetheless, it will be far too much to expect Japanese to become so international in a foreseeable future that millions of foreign nationals will scramble from their side across the language barrier far enough to be able to engage in intelligent discourse in Japanese.

2. 6

Mention should also be made of the charge of cultural and linguistic imperialism in connection with English as a language of international communication. The unfairness is sometimes pointed out that, whereas Japanese people must make tremendous efforts to master a foreign language, native speakers of English, and, for that matter, speakers of other major international languages—the U. N. official languages in particular—do not necessarily have to. They enjoy a position of cultural, linguistic, and even psychological supremacy over the Japanese and other peoples who must learn to force their

own speech- and thought-ways into the mold and patterns of the dominant language.

Comparison of some American and Japanese data on foreign languages learning in the respective academic institutions will bring home the point.

* Only 15 per cent of American high school students now study a foreign language.

(*Cf.* Virtually 100 per cent of Japanese counterparts are studying English.)

* Only one out of 20 public high school students studies French, German, or Russian beyond the second year.

(*Cf.* Practically all Japanese study English for six consecutive years in junior and senior high school and many for further years in college or university.)

* Only 8 per cent of American colleges and universities now require a foreign language for admission.

(*Cf.* English is without exception the most important subject in the entrance examination to the colleges and universities in Japan.)

The above-quoted American data are from "A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, November 1979." The report has this to say: "Americans' unwillingness to learn foreign languages is often viewed by others, not without cause, as arrogance."⁸⁾

2. 7

It follows that a language for international use should be neutral, i. e., it should not be a language of any national group. Historically, this is the reasoning behind hundreds of attempts to create artificial languages like Esperanto and Interlingua.

2. 7. 1

Yet even these deliberately constructed languages are not free from the charge of linguistic imperialism. It is pointed out that they lean too heavily in the direction of European and American nations, and carry too little in the way of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and

other Asian and African words and habits of thought. One reader of *the Mainichi Newspaper* wrote in its 'Readers in Council' column (June 20, 1980): "I read Mrs. Mori's article 'Esperanto is the international language—anyone can use it on an equal footing with anyone else.' (June 10, 1980) But I cannot agree. For one thing, Esperanto leans too heavily on Western languages. Acceptance of Esperanto as the international language implies acknowledgement of the superiority of Western languages, which will contradict the Esperantists' belief in neutrality."

2. 7. 2

Another objection to the adoption of an artificial language like Esperanto is that it has not developed all the thought-carrying machinery and shades of meaning that natural languages have had a chance to work out for themselves over a period of many centuries. A natural language allows for the whole range of human intelligence and responsiveness, and it is far richer and more expressive than is any individual's capacity for using it. Therefore, if we are to have a universal language, as the argument goes, it must be a natural language.

It is interesting to note that Margaret Mead, a most distinguished American anthropologist, once proposed adopting as a language of international communication "the language of a small, politically unimportant, non-European literate people."⁹ Her sage suggestion, if carried out with the consent of all nations of the world, would solve the whole Babel problem.

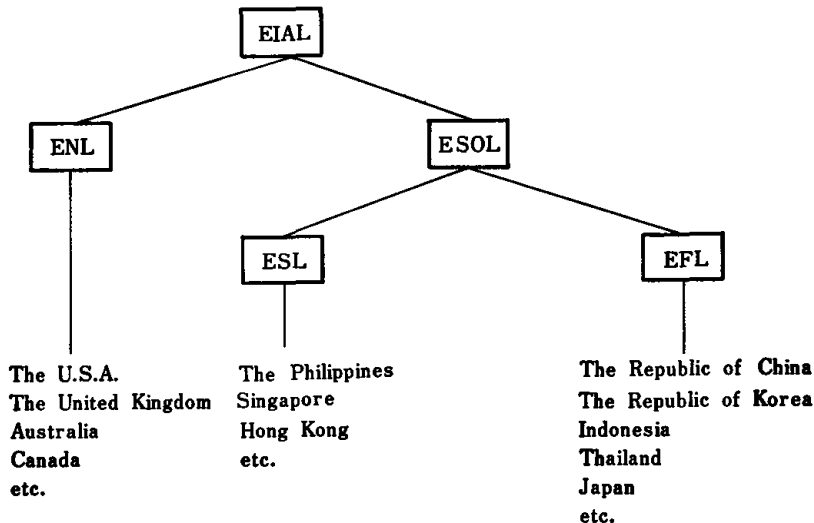
2. 8

We must seek a more realistic and practical solution to the problem of an international language for the Japanese. Recently, we are seeing some hopeful signs. One is from implications of a research project now being conducted at the East-West Center in Hawaii concerning "English as an International Auxiliary Language." Another is the movement among some awakened members of JACET for the establishment of "Japanese English". A third is the advocacy

of "Englic" as an international language by Professor Takao Suzuki of Keio University.

2. 8. 1

English as an international auxiliary language (EIAL) is, according to Mr. Larry Smith and other researchers at the Culture Learning Institute of the East-West Center, the term that covers all native and non-native varieties of the English language: "It covers American English, Philippine English, Chinese English, Korean English, Japanese English..."¹⁰⁾ And each non-native variety is defined as follows: "A person from the Philippine Islands speaks his own Philippine English in order to communicate with people from other countries, a person from Japan speaks his own Japanese English in order to communicate with people from other countries and so on."¹¹⁾ The following diagram conveys the general idea of EIAL.¹²⁾



ENL: English as a National Language/ESOL: English to Speakers of Other Languages/ESL: English as a Second Language/EFL: English as a Foreign Language

The assumption is that no one variety of English is superior or inferior to the others—each variety is equal to the other. “Even American English spoken by the Americans as a native language theoretically does not necessarily have any more prestige than the others.”¹³⁾

2. 8. 2

“Problems Surrounding Japanese English” was the title of a panel discussion, which made the highlight of the 17th annual convention of the JACET.¹⁴⁾ The first panelist defined Japanese English (JE) as English spoken and written by the Japanese. The second commented that JE is sometimes called “Japlish” and refers to English expressions peculiar to Japanese users. The third panelist proposed that Japanese teachers of English should establish “Standardized Japanese English” (SJE) before it deteriorates into a pidgin. Professor Masanori Higa of Tsukuba University, advocate of SJE, made some concrete suggestions: (1) In phonology, SJE should substitute most resembling phonemes for ones that are not found in Japanese speech sounds, thus for voiced and voiceless /th/ phonemes, for example, SJE should substitute /d/ and /t/. (2) In syntax, SJE should avoid complex structures and should use simple sentences. (3) In culture-related utterances, SJE should not only use some native English expressions but also introduce forms which are specific to Japanese culture, thus instead of “How are you?” SJE should internationalize its Japanese counterpart “Are you healthy?” and so on, just as the Japanese word “Ippon” or “Waza-ari” is now internationalized in the internationalized game of Judo.

Someone from the floor commented that the whole idea of JE had a defeatist’s viewpoint and insisted that English teaching in Japan should aim at Standard English (by which he meant the English of native speakers). In their responses to this comment all the three panelists agreed that JE is not the same thing as broken English or pidgin English and that a perfectionist of the ‘all or nothing’ type often proves himself to be a real defeatist.

2. 8. 3

"Englic" which means English as a language of international communication is, according to Professor Suzuki, its advocate, not the same as the mother tongue of the British, Americans, and other English-speaking peoples. His main points in summary are: (1) In default of an ideal international language that is equidistant to all people who use it, we must make an effort to bring the native English language a little closer to our own ideal, otherwise the native speakers enjoy an unfair advantage at the expense of non-native speakers' toil and moil. (2) English as an international language is the common property of all who use it and so non-native speakers of English have a right to contribute to the making of a better language out of the existing makeshift (i. e. native English), better in the sense that it would be easier to speak, write, etc. for non-native speakers. (3) The important thing, however, is that this international English (i. e. Englic) is by definition also the property of native speakers of English, so they too have a perfect right to try to keep it closer to their own language, as most of them are doing now, some consciously and others without knowing it. Figuratively, this is a kind of linguistic tug-of-war between parties of conflicting interests.¹⁵⁾

2. 9

International cross-cultural communication can be likened to a communication apparatus that is equipped with both a receiver and transmitter. The receiver of Japan's apparatus has been working effectively. Owing to this, Japan was able to absorb the necessary information from the Western civilization, and thereby achieved her modernization. However, the transmitter of Japan's communication apparatus is not doing its job properly. Something must be wrong with it. Because of this, the voice of Japan is often too weak to be heard and misunderstanding and false images of Japan are rampant especially in the West.

Today it is increasingly pointed out that emphasis in English teaching in Japan should shift from the receptive skills to the active

and productive skills of speaking and writing, and that the study of English should be export-oriented rather than import-oriented. The Japanese must learn to export information, to explain themselves—what they think, feel, and intend to do—before they expect to be understood.

It must also be pointed out, however, that the difficulties that Japanese have in speaking English are more cultural in origin than linguistic. Japanese do not trust spoken language as much as the Westerners do. In Japanese society, modesty is always regarded as the best virtue and frank exchange of one's ideas, open discussion, accurate remarks and criticism are better avoided in most cases. A man of fewer words is far more trusted and deemed of superior quality. In schools and colleges, moreover, pupils and students are barely encouraged to ask questions, give their opinions, discuss problems frankly, exchange ideas, etc.. This negative cultural conditioning toward speaking in Japanese is easily and naturally transferred. A reticent person in his or her mother tongue cannot be expected to become talkative in other tongues.

In the context of the Japanese ethnography of speaking, the advocacy of Japanese English or "Englic" as a language of international communication for the Japanese, as described in 2. 8. 1, 2. 8. 2, and 2. 8. 3, will make it easier on the Japanese psychology. If the goal of English study is to become like a native speaker, the learner will *most of the time suffer from an inferiority complex* because of the gap between his or her reality and the ideal. He or she will forever suffer from the symptoms of "I'm not OK, you're OK" in terms of Thomas A. Harris's transactional analysis. What the Japanese student needs most is the affirmation of "I'm OK" in his or her own English. If this psychological need is supplied by the redefinition of English for international communication in the new terms of Japanese English and Englic, it will greatly help the student to initiate speaking English on his or her own terms.

Once the student starts speaking in another tongue, he or

she will gradually realize that other peoples have other ways and other attitudes in the use of the language, the greatest difference being that verbal communication is expected. If this diametrically different culture is brought home to the student's mind, it will be a very easy thing for the Japanese initiator of English speaking to adapt himself or herself to their ways without losing his or her identity. For, after all, Japanese superb reflexivity in the sense of "Do in Rome as the Romans do" has made Japan what she is today.

NOTES

1. Doi, K. et al. p. 74
2. Natsume.
3. Broughton, G. et al. p. 1
4. Marckwardt.
5. Reischauer. p. 384
6. *Ibid.* p. 381
7. *Ibid.* p. 382
8. Perkins. p. 12
9. Mead. p. 19
10. Otsubo. p. 37
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *JACET Newsletter* No. 33
15. Suzuki in *Japan Times* June 24, 1979. See also the 'Readers in Council' column of its July 15, 1979 issue for his comment on some of the readers' discussions that ensued from his article.

REFERENCES

- Broughton, G. et al. 1978. *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. New York, McGraw-Hill.
- Doi, K. et al (eds). 1969. *100 Years' English Studies in Japan Vol. 1* (in Jap.) Tokyo, Kenkyusha.
- Farb, P. 1974. "Repairing Babel" in his *Word Play*. New York, Bantam Books.

- Harris, T. A. 1967. *I'm OK—You're OK*. New York, Avon Books.
- Hiraizumi, W. & Watanabe, S. 1975. *A Great Dispute on English Education*. (in Jap.) Tokyo, Bungeishunju.
- JACET Newsletter No. 55* 1979. pp. 8-12
- Marckwardt, A. H. 1965. "English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language" in Allen, H. B. (ed). *Teaching English as a Second Language*. New York, McGraw-Hill.
- Mead, M. 1974. "One World—But Which Language?" in *Language and Culture*. Tokyo, Asahi Press.
- Natsume, S. 1911. "How to Learn a Foreign Language" (in Jap.) in the January issue of *Gakusei*.
- Otsubo, Y. 1978. "English as an International Auxiliary Language: Theoretical Difference between EIAL and ESL/EFL/ESOL" in *Research Bulletin No. 27*. Nagasaki, Faculty of Education Nagasaki University.
- Pei, M. 1979. *All about Language*. Tokyo, Seibdo.
- Perkins, J. A. 1979. "Strength through Wisdom: A Critique of U. S. Capability. A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, November 1979" in *The Modern Language Journal* Vol. 64 No. 1.
- Reischauer, E. O. 1977. *The Japanese*. Cambridge, Harvard University.
- Sapier, E. 1931. "The Function of an International Auxiliary Language" in Mandelbaum, D. G. (ed). 1970. *Edward Sapir Culture, Language and Personality*. Los Angeles, University of California.
- Suzuki, T. 1979. "Native Speakers Don't Own English Language: Eliminate Fuss over Pronunciation, and Englic Becomes Truly International Language" in *Japan Times* June 24.