ELT in Japan: Beyond Negative Fallacies*

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Abstract

Comparative studies are useful in identifying distinguishing features. In Japan, there is a widely accepted opinion that Japanese English language teaching (ELT) is not efficient in producing English proficiency. Common criticisms use TOEFL and Yakudoku as clear evidences of failure. This paper casts those criticisms into question and tries to show that these evidences are fallacies. First TOEFL, it will analyse the value of the criteria on which TOEFL test is based. Second, it notes the historical background and uniqueness of the yakudoku method. Through these arguments, this paper will identify the importance of devising original methods and reasonable goal setting, with consideration of Japan's characteristics and the social demands for the continual betterment of ELT in Japan.

1. Introduction

Although English is taught in almost all secondary schools, English language teaching (ELT) in Japan has a negative reputation among linguists, journalists and politicians for producing ‘low’ English proficiency (LoCastro, 1996; Kitao & Kitao, 1995; Nakata, 1990; Suzuki, 1999). Explanations range from lack of institutional support to the high pressure of entrance examinations and even to a lack of proficiency in English among Japanese English teachers themselves. However, the criteria which such critics base their idea is questionable. For example, as Cook (1999) writes, it is not appropriate for L2 learners to feel themselves to be failures by comparing their performance with their target model of native speakers’. He then endorses L2 users to have their own rights as genuine L2 users with citing Halliday’s (1968 in Cook 1999:165) statement, "[a] speaker who is made ashamed of its own language habits suffers a basic injury as a human being.” To endorse the right, this paper shall challenge two aspects of ELT in Japan that are most often criticised.

2. TOEFL and Yakudoku

Critics of ELT in Japan tend to use TOEFL scores as evidence of its ineffectiveness (e.g. Eigokyouiku, 1999). But, is Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) valid as criteria on which to base such criticism? What is the proficiency of language measured by TOEFL? This paper begins by addressing these questions, before moving on to a second common criticism, which concerns the Japanese traditional learning practice, the so called Yakudoku method, which is often interpreted as the grammar translation method. This method is widespread as a main strategy of language instruction in Japan. According to LoCastro (1996), yakudoku is often regarded as having a permanent negative effect on learners of English. Herein, the historical background and inefficacy of this method is to be investigated.

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3. TOEFL

As negative evidence, people often compare the ranking of countries in TOEFL scores. TOEFL is a test that is a requirement for any high school, university, and graduate students who hopes to study in English-speaking nations, such as the United States and Canada. According to 1997-98 results, Japan's average score was 498, a world ranking of 153rd out of 169 countries and an East Asian ranking of 25th out of 25 countries, that is, Japan is the bottom. The impact of this result is quite shocking. However, according to the comparative study method, a Japanese criterion needs to be impartially established and their Japanese TOEFL score needs to be analysed based on that impartial standard.

Firstly, there are fundamental differences in conditions of candidates from country to country. Table 1 focuses on countries in East Asia and shows the ratio of the number of candidates to the population and the value of cost (US$75) against the Gross National Product (GNP) per person, because these can reflect the different social backgrounds of the candidates. In China, for example, the cost of the TOEFL is 10% of GNP per person. This means that only Chinese elite will take the TOEFL test. Moreover, some governmental policies may also regulate examinees. Some national language policies can reflect historical experiences of colonialism of Western countries. In Hong Kong, for instance, English is used almost like a native language as well as a medium of instruction in higher education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
<th>The ratio of the number of examinee to the population (%)</th>
<th>The ratio of the fee for paper test (US$75) against the GNP per a person (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>N/A (less than 0.0001%)</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>10.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>6.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>0.0012</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea(DPR)</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>8.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea(ROK)</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>0.0023</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>20.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar(Burma)</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>0.0024</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>0.0005</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on 'TOEFL Test and Score Data Summary 1998-1999 edition' by Educational Testing Service and 'Saishin Sekaino Kuni (The country statistics in the world)' by Tujihara(ed.)(1998). This table doesn't report about countries that have colonised experience by the UK.

In Japan, TOEFL has the status of a sort of general English proficiency test. Candidates are not always students. There are wide ranges of purposes, beside study abroad, for which people take the test. Many companies which are concerned about job applicants' language ability require the applicants sit for some standardised proficiency test like TOEFL (see LoCastro, 1997). In some prefecture or municipal hiring examinations of teachers, some examinees may be released from the test of a specialised subject, in this case English, owing to the score. For these reasons, a large number of people in Japan, the largest in the world, take TOEFL. Moreover, note that, this number does not exactly represent the nationality of examinees. Japanese examinees that take the test in some other countries are excluded.
In addition, Kitao (1995) points out structural defects in TOEFL and states that its score is not a good indicator of language proficiency in relation to the ability to communicate in English. TOEFL consists of multiple choices may reflect a person's ability to carry on a conversation in English under certain situations or the results of a reading test. There is however not a clear operational definition in each section of the test, for instance, a test for listening proficiency requires some reading. The fact that there is no test of speaking proficiency in TOEFL is also a crucial point to be considered. Hence, it is clear that the interpretation of this statistic that tries to highlight the failure of ELT in Japan is undeveloped and not reliable.

So far this paper has outlined, the TOEFL score is invalid and meaningless as a criterion by which to measure English proficiency between countries and proof of the inadequacies of ELT in Japanese schools. It is therefore clear that the interpretation of critics based on this statistic create a misleading impression.

4. **Yakudoku: traditional learning practice**

A number of researchers claim that *Yakudoku*, the traditional approach for learning foreign language, causes the lack of proficiency in English for Japanese people. LoCastro (1996) characterises it as 'a kind of mental exercise which requires that the words in the English sentence be mentally rearranged and put into Japanese word order for the meaning to be grasped' (p51). Hino (1989) argues that the *yakudoku* habit is a severe handicap to the Japanese student, because it limits reading speed, thus reducing students' efficiency in comprehension. It is also said to harm the other language skills, listening, speaking and writing, because students trained in *yakudoku* reading employ the same strategy (in Henrichsen, 1990:107). *Yakudoku* seems to be an evil ghost possessing students. Why then has the *yakudoku* habit come to exist and is continuously employed in Japan?

As Henrichsen (1990) points out, foreign languages have traditionally been studied in Japan as ways of 'learning from others', the outside world, without necessarily being able to converse in them. Due to infrequent direct contact because of geography and a technical reason (the poor transportation system in ancient times), for example Chinese was studied only in written forms, but its word order and pronunciation was never learned. All that was needed was the content. Therefore, the grammar translation method which read sentences word-by-word was widely used and developed in Japanese style, 'yakudoku'.

Describing the grammar-translation method as the 'never-dying but usually decried' (p201) approach in universal sense, Cook (1999) argues that the role of the L1 in learning the L2 is inevitable in monolingual classroom settings. He maintains that use of the L1 is seen not as desirable but as a necessary evil and the L1 should be positively accepted as a useful medium in conveying meaning and to facilitate activities (p 202). It is almost inevitable for a Japanese teacher of English to fall into difficulties if they cannot use Japanese, especially in explaining grammar. From the viewpoint of communicative competence, Nakata (1990) states that Japanese English education based on the grammar-translation method might be a failure. However, hardly any clear evidence to support this idea can be found.

Historically, the Japanese have adopted passive and self-improving type of goal setting. They have and still do feel that they are like eager pupils of "the greatest empire in the world" (first China and now the USA) and the pedagogical practice 'yakudoku', in other words, grammar-translation method, continues to be involved in foreign language learning in Japan (Henrichsen, 1990; Suzuki, 1999). This traditional use of foreign language as a medium of internationalisation, according to social demand, leads to the logical consequence that the objective of ELT in Japan tends to reflect social and cultural aspects rather than technical and practical aspects. As long
as all we need is the content, *yakudoku* has proven an effective way of implementation, even though it has shortcomings. However, it is certain that, as social demands change, this traditional practice needs to be modified. The thing which should be blamed is not *yakudoku*, but sustaining this approach when it no longer meets current demands.

Recently arrived advanced technologies have increased accessibility to authentic language resources and brought greater variety of pedagogical methods into play. Moreover, due to the globalisation and internationalisation of Japanese society, there is a variety of new ways for Japanese people to use English, such as IT (Information Technology) English, e-mail English and business English. Considering the changing nature of the way in which Japanese people are encountering English, there has needed to be a shift in the emphasis of English Language Teaching towards practical uses. "Practical" means task-applied, active use of language for people to give and receive expressions and information (e.g. Miura, 2004). It is certain that today's Japan is moving beyond its traditional understanding of language teaching and learning, so current trends encourage teachers' skills as advisors and in raising students' self-directed learning.

5. Conclusion

According to the argument of this paper, critics' assumptions toward the reputation of ELT in Japan appears to be invalid, since it is based on spurious comparisons of the efficacy of English education among countries with incomparable English education traditions as well as comparing English proficiency with that of native speakers. However, comparing not test scores but countries educational systems, particularly Asians, can readily identify the character of ELT in Japan (Okihara, 2001). Comparing in this way also helps to implement a more suitable language education method in Japan, which reflects different needs in people's learning systems.

Through reconsidering the *yakudoku* method, it stated that the method devised for its own sake would become habitual. Also, though, when implementing educational methods, reasonable goal setting is vital. By understanding its characteristic feature and unique method according to today's reasonable and up-dated objectives, ELT in Japan can be a constructive influence on people's thinking and patterns of behaviour to cope with the Japanese society of the future where the flow of information and the pace of internationalisation will increase.

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