

## Language, Society and Gender: The Problem of Foreign Language Education in Japan

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### ABSTRACT

Japan is a highly ethnocentric and male-dominated society, and this fact plays a crucial role in language education. It has been recognised that there is a problem about the education of English as a Foreign Language in Japan, as most students are not capable of oral communication in English. However, many strategies to produce a more effective way of teaching English have been unsuccessful since there is a lack of perspective on the relationship between language education, the society and the individual. For example, the current language education in Japan does not incorporate the process of language learning which can be the social field where people, particularly women, can realise an independent self. This paper is an attempt to examine how the problem of language education reveals the social structure and gender relations that enter personal life.

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### I. Introduction

Nowadays the relationship between language and gender is an important element in a variety of disciplines and forms a parallel with a new direction that searches for the relationship between language and power in society. The term 'gender' indicates that differences and inequalities are created by social and cultural practices not by genetic and biological attributes.(1) However, it should be acknowledged that it is not possible to make generalisations about the problem of gender. You cannot discuss the problem of women's subordination in society

generally and summarise the debate in a way that applies to everybody.

This paper is a part of my research into how the problem of foreign language education reveals social structures in Japan. In other words, the culture and the society that create and maintain women's inferiority in themselves reflect on the way in which foreign language education contributes to Japanese society.

## II. Problems

My initial question is "Why has foreign language education in Japan been unsuccessful?" More precisely, it is "Why has the education of English as a Foreign Language in Japan been unsatisfactory for many people, particularly those who want to be able to communicate orally with native speakers?" To judge

whether the education is successful or not might be a subjective matter. Some people might say that the education has been good enough to support the industrialisation and the so-called internationalisation of Japan. My seven-years' experience as a lecturer in English at universities in Tokyo has provided me with opportunities to examine the problem from different perspectives.

Before discussing these different perspectives, let me explain the current condition of EFL(English as a Foreign Language) in Japan. English is a compulsory subject at the secondary level and often in universities.(2) English is one of the subjects in the entrance examination to state and private high schools and state universities and often to private universities. Students can also choose either German or French for the entrance examination. However the number of students who choose those languages is very few. Since entrance examinations are highly competitive, the weight of the English examination is massive and this phenomenon leads a tendency to provide incomprehensible English tests, which native speakers can not get high score. Those tests do not seem to ask students' communicative ability but the ability to memorise certain patterns of questions.

About 20 years ago there was a change in English teaching at the secondary school: British English text books were replaced by American English ones. This shows that foreign language education reflects realities that the nation faces and indicates the way it chooses for the future. Now foreign language education in universities faces a new aspect. According to Government guidance, from 1993 universities have choices about the foreign language curriculum. Until then two-years' credit in a foreign language was required for all university students no matter what their major subjects were.

Currently there are two directions in the choices of curriculums; one is to supply a minimum of foreign language courses for economic reasons, and this is observed in state universities and small private universities. Another is to supply foreign language courses that focus on oral communication. Probably it is too early to predict where these directions will lead foreign language education and what kind of impact this will have on Japanese society. However, the change is interesting enough to consider the background and examine the various elements from different perspectives.(3)

### III. Different Perspectives of English Education in Japanese Society

Five specific points are indispensable to arrive at an understanding of the problems of English education in contemporary Japan: EFL; the relationship between language, individuals and contemporary Japanese society; the role of oral communication in that society; ethnocentrism, nationalism and male-domination, and language for the realisation of women's independent self. These elements relate to and are entangled with each other to create the stage where English education plays a crucial part in the society.

#### 1. EFL

First of all, the difference between EFL and ESL(English as a Second Language) should be understood clearly. For ESL learners, acquiring English is a serious and urgent matter for survival in an English language environment. On the other hand, for EFL learners, English is usually one of the school subjects that they have to study for credit. These different attitudes toward English influence the atmosphere in the classroom. EFL learners

"study" English in the artificial setting of the classroom.(4) This should be a starting point in the discussion of English teaching in Japan. Even though it is widely advocated that studying English is necessary to produce an "internationalised" society, on the personal level it cannot be a priority for life in Japanese society. If people have to study a foreign language in artificial settings, they need some definite and concrete motivation. In the case of Japanese students, passing an entrance examination or meeting course requirements for a diploma are most decisive reasons for committing themselves, and form the limits for that commitment.

There are several conflicts in the concept of foreign language teaching in Japan. The idea of ESL, a modern and Western

invention, has been introduced to Japan mainly through foreign teachers who are native speakers of English, and Japanese teachers who have studied ESL methodologies abroad. However, the numbers of such teachers is still small, particularly in universities. Often the academic background of Japanese teachers of English language is literature in universities. They might think that they teach language when they would rather be teaching literature. This kind of attitude is reflected in their way of teaching: translation from English to Japanese to appreciate original texts even though they are beyond students' comprehension.

On the other hand, there is not yet a clear picture of EFL teaching among teachers with ESL background. It is often observed that native speakers of English think their classes do not function as well as they expect. There are two points in this issue. The first is that most native speakers do not recognise the difference between EFL and ESL. Even if they do, it is very difficult for them to find their roles in EFL circumstances. The second point is that there is a cultural problem that surrounds them. Students are not used to the Western style of teaching and colleagues do not cooperate with them because of a lack of communication skills in English. Foreign teachers find themselves isolated, receiving little support from the rest of the school community.

Besides those elements that cause problems in EFL, there is another specific aspect that should be discussed but has been neglected in Japanese society. It is the gender of teachers. The number of female teachers decreases as the level in education increases. This phenomenon is observed in most countries of the world. In Japan, female teachers of foreign languages have created a characteristic perspective in the hierarchy of teachers. The proportion of female teachers of foreign languages in universities is extremely large compared with teachers of other subjects. In the background, there is a traditional attitude toward literature and language. Those subjects that are not regarded to contribute to the growth of the nation directly are not always respected. As a result, there has been room for women to participate in teaching as language teachers. It should be noted that at least half the foreign language teachers in universities are part-time. Sometimes they have as many classes as full-time teachers, but they do not participate in making decisions about the curriculum of the department. The system of part-time and full-time contracts, which is widely observed in business in Japan, is one of the characteristic components of Japanese society. The system is maintained for economic convenience. Women are expected to contribute to Japanese society as workforce of less-paid and insecure position.

Every year the number of part time teachers of foreign languages is controlled to meet the enrolment numbers.

## 2. The Relationship between Language, Individuals and Japanese Society

In 1992, there were two incidents that gave me opportunities to consider the relationship between language, individuals and Japanese society. One was news from outside Japan. The Korean government announced that students could no longer choose Japanese as a foreign language subject for the entrance examination to universities because Japanese is not considered a suitable language for academic disciplines. The message is that the young generation of Korea do not have to study Japanese to gain international competitiveness. ( It should be acknowledged that Korea has the modern history of Japanese occupation and people were forced to learn Japanese by the Japanese military). A crucial point about the incident is that the issue of an entrance examination subject does not remain on the level of foreign language education but involves the social and political issues of one nation. For the sake of national policy, individual choice of foreign language is neglected.

Another incident was the case of a junior high school student in Tokyo. The Japanese boy whose father is Japanese and mother American was brought up in a bilingual situation at home. It is reported that his English teacher at the state junior high school gave him a low mark for his English saying he did not do well on the tests. Besides, his classmates discriminated against him just because he was "different". They even said to him that he must have the AIDS virus because his mother was American and their teachers did not even try to protect him from such discrimination. The boy was

forced

to change to a private school and his parents took the issue to courts. (5)

When I heard the news I was shocked, but at the same time I recognised it could happen any time in the middle of Tokyo which, ironically, is an international city. One of my colleagues, who spent a couple of years in the US with her family, told me a similar story. She said that after they came back to Japan, her sons had to suffer discrimination from their classmates just because they had had "different" experience. She herself also had some difficulty with the school community. It is said that to

avoid such discrimination some people even hide the fact that they have been overseas. Recently discrimination in school has been widely reported. It reflects deep psychological aspects and in many cases discrimination depends on finding a certain "difference" in a person.

The aim of school education to produce a younger generation who are "internationalised" does not reflect reality. Obviously there is an inherent contradiction in a situation which a society that requires students to master English at the same time allows discrimination against people who have an English background. Does this mean that Japanese society needs English as a language but not people of the language? If so, is it possible for the society to have a language without accepting any influence from the people who use the language? (6)

When we consider language learning in the broad sense, to master another language means an encounter with another world. It contains the process of recognising and dealing with "otherness". The acknowledgment of otherness gives a person the chance to review one's native language, culture and society with a critical

mind. In Japan so much weight has been placed on techniques to receive a good mark in tests, keeping language learning merely on the level of acquiring the tools or skills of a language, that young people are deprived of the pleasure of encountering a new world and the respect and understanding of "otherness". (7)

### 3. The Role of Oral Communication in Japanese Society

In the EFL curriculum, the courses are usually divided into the following categories: grammar; composition; reading; and conversation. Teachers are supposed to teach one of them or combination of them in a course. However, what actually occurs in these courses is almost the same: translation from English to Japanese or from Japanese to English. It is still firmly believed that translation is the best and only method to measure a learner's level of understanding. This is an example that indicates the priority of giving marks in English teaching.

The language of translation, which is written language, is another important element as an influence on English learning. In Japanese society, written language is more respected than spoken language. The talent of expressing one's own opinion orally in public is not always appreciated. There is a tendency to regard people who speak up in public "too often" as egocentric or superficial. "Talkativeness" is supposed to belong to women's nature; women talk "too much" without thinking. This attitude toward spoken language is reflected in a Japanese word that means

fluency in speaking a foreign language; a Japanese onomatopoeic adverb *perapera* contains a nuance of superficiality. Accordingly, it is partly believed that the practice of reading original texts and translating them into proper Japanese is the most appropriate way to learn English in Japan; the practice of speaking and listening can be done abroad when oral communication becomes necessary.

#### 4. Ethnocentrism, Nationalism and Male-domination

It is well known that Japan is a male-dominated country. The male-domination that combines with ethnocentrism and nationalism shapes a distinctive feature of Japanese society. As mentioned before, Japanese ethnocentrism is observed in the contradiction of attitudes towards English as a Foreign Language and people with English background. Against the Government advocacy of an "internationalised" society, English can be an element of "differentness" that triggers discrimination in Japanese society.

Moreover, English education contains discrimination in itself: contemporary Japan has chosen English for the "internationalisation" of the society, depriving the younger generation of the opportunities to learn other languages; foreign teachers and female teachers remain marginal in spite of the demand for their skills; and lastly English learning is controlled to remain on the level of acquiring tools and skills. What then is the "internationalisation" that Japanese society aims at? As long as English education is concerned, it seems to be a re-organisation of Japanese ethnocentrism, nationalism and male-domination.

#### 5. Language for the Realisation of Women's Independent Self

I have a hypothesis that women are better than men at acquiring foreign languages. This does not relate to only test scores. It is about the ability to accept "differentness" in the world. When I was counselling exchange students to universities in the US, I noticed several points. Since male students were more goal-oriented than female students, their expectation of the life in

the US was too high. The most serious concern was how they could use the experience after they came back to Japan. As a result they could not enjoy life, thinking of themselves as losers or blaming American society. Certainly studying abroad does not mean only attending classes; it includes social life, too. Overseas students have to handle a totally different life style by themselves. The TOEFL score does not help them with this. Some male students were too proud to adjust to new environments. They preferred to be in groups of Japanese students, otherwise they

easily felt isolated in American society.

Women and foreign languages have one aspect in common: both of them have a marginal existence in Japanese society. From childhood, Japanese women are not expected to achieve anything special in Japanese society to the same extent that men are. What they are expected to be is good daughters, wives and mothers who live a subordinated existence in the male-dominated society. If they disagree with such a social concept, they have to suffer for it. For these women, learning a foreign language is encountering a new world that tells them that the concept of value is not definite but relative. They discover the joy of using a foreign language and accept the culture and people more easily than men because they are never at the centre of their own society. Therefore foreign language acquisition becomes a means of realising their independent self, and this is exactly the decisive aspect of language that empowers marginal people. By studying English education in Japan, we can both learn about a part of Japanese society and observe how the power of language can change it and its people.

#### NOTES

1. See Cameron (1985), esp. 'The case of gender: grammar and sexist ideology' pp.62-71 and Miller (1976, ch.3: Sex and Gender).
2. About Education System in Japan, see The Association of International Education, Japan (1991).
3. Cf. The editorial (31st. August, 1993) of Asahi Shimbun, which is one of the major Japanese newspapers. The title is "The change to Education of 'English that can be used'". The article is based on the report about English education in the secondary school by the government (Education Ministry). However, there is nothing new about the suggestions to produce students who can speak English. Particularly, the argument that students' consciousness is most important to produce 'meaningful' conversation is lack of the perspective in understanding of the relationship between language education and the society.
4. Cf. Orton (1990, p.6) 'The difference between ESL and EFL'.
5. I do not yet know how the problem has been settled.
6. See Chen (1990). The similar argument about how Chinese government has tried to introduce English as a tool without

having the influence of the culture.

7. In my case, I began to enjoy learning and using English when I came to know native speakers and became friends with them in university.

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