

ENGLISH LEARNING AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Over the end of the second millennium some Japanese politicians were trying to see how to cope with inadequacies of Japanese language with the current developments in the global world. Some tried to see if the Japanese people can overcome this barrier by utilizing English more extensively. This paper is an attempt to provide an overview of the current situation of English with a backdrop of globalization and global communication in Japan. Then, I shall try to show the general attitudes of Japanese college students to this new situation. Finally I will consider some consequences of a bold proposal to give English the status of the second official language before concluding the presentation by emphasizing the need to think of language education in ethical terms.

Keywords: English learning in Japan, cultural identity in Japan, Arinori Mori, global language

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The spoken language of Japan being inadequate to the growing necessities of the people of that Empire, and too poor to be made, by a phonetic alphabet, sufficiently useful as a written language, the idea prevails among us that, if we would keep pace with the age, we must adopt a copious and expanding European language. The necessity for this arises mainly out of the fact that Japan is a commercial nation; and also that, if we do not adopt a language like that of the English, which is quite predominant in Asia, as well as elsewhere in the commercial world, the progress of Japanese civilization is inevitably impossible.¹

This is an often quoted passage in a letter from a young Arinori Mori, the Meiji-era politician and the first Minister of Education, asking Prof. Whitley, an American scholar at Yale, about the possibility of changing the national language into English. For a small country in the Far East, which had just opened its doors to the western powers, it was paramount to get access to all the knowledge and technologies available to the west. As history witnessed, his concerns about his native tongue turned out to be groundless. After more than a hundred years, a proposal of his line is dying hard. It is true his is an exceptional case, but an argument for prioritizing English in education and business has been repeated in Japan till today, which itself shows how special this language has been to the Japanese. English is, however, not an issue among just Japan and western powers any longer, but in fact has become a concern for Japan and all other countries. It is no longer a bilateral communication between a non-English speaking country and English speaking country, but a multilateral one where people speak Englishes rather than English. Mori's proposal did not gain enough support to be implemented and as Japan secured a financial and military basis later in the Meiji era, Japan changed the teaching languages from English to Japanese step by step at the Imperial University of Tokyo. The very scholar who Mori wrote to did not favorably respond to his proposal, instead suggesting that Japan raise and perfect the vernacular language "so as to be the worthy instrument of an advanced civilization." (Mori: III 421)

As for his other suggestion to make English more simplified in terms of irregularities of verbs and nouns for a better acquisition by the Japanese, Prof. Whitney did not buy it, either, for "[t]he new English ... would seem laughable and absurd to the speakers of the old, and those

who used it would be visited with the contempt of the latter. Nor do I think there would be any appreciable gain to set off against this loss." (Mori: III 416) With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to criticize this kind of discourse based on linguistic insularism, but this was an age when English language was primarily the properties of British and American people. As this conference attests, the adoption of "simplified English" as was termed by Mori, has proven to produce far more gain than loss in non English-speaking countries.²

In this paper, I would like to provide an overview of the current situation of English with a backdrop of globalization and global communication, then, will go on to show the general attitudes of Japanese college students to that. Finally I will consider some consequences of a bold proposal to give English the status of the second official language before concluding the presentation by emphasizing the need to think of language education in ethical terms.

I. A GLOBAL MEANS OF COMMUNICATION?

It seems to be an irrefutable fact that English has now become a global (or world) language. As is seen here in this article, the author employs English as a medium language in this international convention as every other author else does. His social contacts with the scholars and academicians after the presentations would be necessarily in English. He also may be wandering on the streets after the convention, interacting with the local people, hopefully in a quickly-learned Turkish, but actually, mainly in that all-purpose vehicle of ideas of English. Why? Or some of you may ask somewhat rhetorically following your subject position, "Why not?" This is the question David Crystal has grappled with in his *English as a Global Language*, the subtitle of which may be succinctly added "Intelligibility or Identity?" Actually all of his efforts are directed to the way the balance is struck between the fundamental values of multilingualism and a common language. In his ideal world, one can be bilingual without being detrimental to his local, cultural identity, while they can stick to their own regional cultures, making the best use of the international medium of language that is English, to go up the social ladders. (Crystal: 8) For the intelligibility side, he stresses the sheer volume English has been occupying in the political and cultural fields worldwide, and for the identity side, he takes up the dangerous aspects this globalization of the language may result in. The latter

¹ A letter of Arinori Mori to William D. Whitney. (Mori: I 310) This bold proposal certainly did not go without criticism. In the preface of his grammar book of Japanese, Mori's contemporary Tatui Baba, claimed the introduction of English would result a gulf between two classes, the wealthier of which would occupy the social and political top tier by acquiring the newly introduced tongue smoothly compared to those who have not much resources and time to adapt themselves to learning it. (Tatui Baba, "Preface to Elementary Grammar [sic] of the Japanese Language, with Easy Progressive Exercises" in Mori: I 298-304).

² *Encyclopedia Americana*, Volume 3, pages 311 to 313. Quoted in <http://ogden.basic-english.org/encamer.html> (2005/06/23).

includes the seemingly automatic elevation of the native speakers of English to the expense of the non-native speakers, and “linguistic complacency”, which is a propensity to smugly stick only to English. It is widely known that English speakers in U.S. or U.K. are often less motivated to learn foreign languages. With a good reason, that is. After thus stressing the importance of examining both sides of the coin, Crystal declares, “English is now so widely established that it can no longer be thought as “owned” by any single nation.” (21) A likely scenario to come eventually, he says, would be the creation of a “new form of English” called “World Standard Spoken English (WSSE)”. (137) An ideal picture features the representatives from Calcutta, Lagos and Los Angeles, who, while using their respective versions of English among themselves, will switch to using WSSE at the conference table. (139) WSSE is not an isolated concept in the propagation of the international usage of English and we have a couple of antecedents and rivals of it.

A. BASIC ENGLISH

Basic English was introduced around 1930 by C. K. Ogden for the purpose of “provid[ing] an international secondary language for general and technical communication.” With a limited vocabulary of 850 and a simplified grammatical rules, Basic English was widely accepted in so-called “expanding circle” countries,³ where English was prevalently taught at school, especially when many countries were being reconstructed from the ruins of the Second World War.⁴ That was well before the discourse of the international language was colored by the post-colonial attitudes. It was when criticism against the linguistic imperialism was hardly voiced and the international language movement was not properly linked with the over-all

3 Based on Braj Kachru’s classifications of English speakers, David Crystal draw the three concentric circles of 1) the inner circle for the countries where English is the primary language, 2) the outer or extended circles for those where it plays as an important “second language” role and 3) the expanding circle for those where it has a major status in education. (1998:53-4).

4 <http://ogden.basic-english.org/rules.html> (2005/06/23).

1. Plurals are formed with a trailing “S”. The normal exceptions of Standard English also apply, notably “ES” and “IES”.
2. There are four derivatives for the 300 nouns: -”ER” and -”ING”, and two adjectives, -”ING” and -”ED”.
3. Adverbs use -”LY” from qualifiers.
4. Degree is expressed with “MORE” and “MOST”. Be prepared to find -”ER” and -”EST” in common usage.
5. Negative adjectives are formed with “UN”-
6. Questions are formed by inversion and by “DO”.
7. Operators and pronouns conjugate in full.
8. Compound words may be combined from two nouns (milkman) or a noun and a directive (sundown).
9. Measurement, numerals, currency, calendar, and international terms are in English form.
10. Technical expressions required and customary for the immediate task are included in the locally used form.

advancement of American civilization. It doesn’t follow that Basic English had no potential seeds of linguistic imperialism when we are reminded that Winston Churchill was very keen in promoting for it to be an “international auxiliary language”. (Phillipson 1992: 169) Also Basic English was seamlessly integrated into the teaching of English for the Commonwealth member countries.

B. ENGLIC

The idea of “Englic” (from “English-like language”) was introduced to cater for the specific needs of the Japanese people by the Japanese linguist Takao Suzuki more than thirty years ago.⁵ It is different from Basic English in that this is to do less with pedagogic techniques and principles than with the learner attitudes. Being strongly against the monolingual tendency the world is going to slip into, Suzuki lodges a protest to the unquestioning acceptance of English in the Japanese society, which just a glance at the flooding commercial messages in the media can show. You cannot watch a TV program or take the train without encountering English conversation school promotional activities in one form or another. Englic is one of the nativized Englishes, a near equivalent to Australian, Indian, West African, Caribbean, Singaporean Englishes and others with a single difference that it is not enough mature to be labeled as a variety of English yet. Englishes mentioned here are in most cases spoken with the full or nearly full capacity as the official language with the colonial legacy in history. Not so with Japan. Much of criticism leveled against linguistic imperialism is not wholly applicable to the Japanese situation, an ironic consequence following which will be dealt with later.

Through his academic career, Suzuki was an adamant advocate for the cause of multilingualism and an invincible opponent to the trend towards a monolingual society. With his patent directness nearing a kind of vulgarism, he insists in playing a fare game. It is better to have a common language than otherwise, he concedes. And the best candidate for that looks like to be English, but we (native speakers and non-native speakers alike) have to distance ourselves equally from it. To keep the present English as it is, is to guarantee a special position of the native speakers of English and that is not fair. Idioms are what makes a language what it is by the very reason that they are the very expressions deep rooted in the local linguistic circumstances. So, he smilingly says, we have to make a rule not to use idioms in Englic. Every irregularity being abolished, it is okay to say “I goed to school with my child” in Englic. (Suzuki: 104) A big word is preferable to a simpler verbal phrase, for it

5 Other proposals in the same line are “Japalish” by Takesato Watanabe and “Engranto” by Makoto Oda.

often happens that we are more familiar to the former through the school lessons which, at least in Japan, have tended to put emphasis on reading, grammar and vocabulary rather than verbal communication. Thus a baseball game is “postponed”, rather than “put off”. Englic is in this way a language both native and non-native speakers needs to make efforts to learn (and unlearn) to master it.

His argument, though, is more theoretical and attitudinal than practical and pedagogical. Actual Englic examples are only fragmentally presented (no Bible passages, for example, rewritten in Englic) and there is virtually no mention to the grammar and pronunciation system, which is indispensable if Englic is to be taught in education. Furthermore, it is not very clear whether Englic is just a localized English found in Japan or something which can be universally adopted by the rest of the countries. Still his argument was and remains influential in its uniqueness.

C. GLOBISH!

It happens all the time: during an airport delay the man to the left, a Korean perhaps, starts talking to the man opposite, who might be Colombian, and soon they are chatting away in what seems to be English. But the native English speaker sitting between them cannot understand a word.⁶

This is because they are talking in a common language called “Globish.”⁷ Globish is a portmanteau word of globe and English proposed by a Frenchman J. P. Nerrière. It is a midway language between Basic English and Englic in terms of formality. Not so organized as the former nor so formless as the latter. It is also a midway product between a natural language like English and an artificial one like Esperanto. In an interview with a Croatian linguist, Nerrière describes his Globish, First of all, it is not a language. A language is the vehicle of a culture. It carries a heritage coming from history. Actually it also shapes the way we think and act, it is the DNA of a culture. Globish has no such ambition, it is only a tool to communicate internationally. It is simple, hence needs only a limited investment to master it at the proper level. It is enough for whatever need you may have. It might not be always elegant, but it serves its purpose. On top of that, as opposed to Esperanto, it is not artificial. It derives from the observation that some kind of English is spoken everywhere. Instead of fighting this reality, and dreaming of something better, it aims at taking advantage of it. It capitalizes on it. English

is there, in France, in Croatia; what is the best thing we can do with it?⁸

It is consisted of 1,500 words, a double of the vocabulary of Basic English. It is noteworthy that in common with the underlying principle of Englic, Globish is not meant to be a simplified version of English, but he can dare to point out that even Americans and British should learn it to communicate with the speaker of Globish so that no single party would gain in expense of the others. Here again, though, there is no guarantee the Globish eventually turns to be a French version of Englishes instead of assuming the position of the global communication tool as it claims to be.

II. ENGLISH LEARNING AND THE ISSUE OF IDENTITZ

As someone who has been teaching English for about twenty years in higher education in Japan, I would like to shed a light on an ideological issue pertaining to one’s identity. It would be a naive educationist who can dissociate English from its political, economic and ideological attributes. There are many theories on why English took the present status, but more or less they are along the line with “in the right place at the right time” hypothesis: that is, Britain was in the center of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and America was the leading actor in the electronic revolution in the twentieth century. (Crystal: 110) At some stage of history, English was, and still is, equated with modernism, freedom and prosperity especially in the developing countries in Asia, West Indies and Africa. With the rise of post-colonialism from 1960’s onward, a belief in the neutrality of English has been shattered and many began to rethink the meaning of teaching English. Although this paper has no space to spare these developments centering on the issue of linguistic imperialism, it would be beneficial to survey the ELT related arguments.

Critical to the dichotomy of Center-Periphery relationship embedded in the Makerere report, Phillipson lists the five fallacies which pertains to English Language Teaching (ELT) (185), which are 1) the monolingual fallacy, 2) the native speaker fallacy, 3) the early start fallacy, 4) the maximum exposure fallacy, 5) the subtractive fallacy. His argument is mostly applicable to those former colonized countries, but it is noteworthy that these listed fallacies are being promoted in Japan, too, in a little downscaled degree. (e.g. an introduction of English into the primary education and the employment of ALT’s at the secondary education).

6 <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/04/21/features/Blume22.php> (2005/06/23).

7 <http://www.jpn-globish.com/index.php?lng=fr> (2005/06/23).

8 <http://www.jpn-globish.com/articles.php?lng=fr&pg=171> (2005/06/25).

I have conducted a little survey about English learning and identity of the university students to see how the present day generation is coping with the current of global communication and what role English seems to play in their mind. The response is given by the percentage on a Richter scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Question	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)	mean
1 English is a global language at present.	3	5	8	29	55	4.3
2 English is a must skill in my future career.	4	9	8	37	40	4.0
3 To speak English is cool.	7	6	10	27	50	4.1
4 English is a must skill in getting a job.	2	5	23	48	21	3.8
5 English is worthy of investment outside formal college education.	7	5	29	42	16	3.5
6 Japanese are not very good at learning English	5	7	36	25	27	3.6
7 English will be needed more and more.	3	3	16	40	37	4.0
8 English education should be started at elementary school	12	14	20	20	32	3.4
9 English should be an elective subject at college.	17	30	39	7	5	2.5
10 The present English status was brought about mainly due to the colonial rules in the past.	5	6	33	36	20	3.6
11 When I switch the language, I feel my identity is also switched.	11	16	48	16	7	2.9
12 Japan should continue to facilitate English education.	5	6	31	30	28	3.7
13 No problem in using Japanese accented English	23	28	18	16	10	2.5

The trend here can be summarized as follows:

1. About 80% of them more or less agree with the view to see English as the global language and thus feel the necessity of it, especially eyeing a job market situation.
2. More than half of them are feeling more or less the level of English of the Japanese are not high enough.
3. Majority in number are those who feel the pressure of using the proper (translated British or American).
4. Those who think speaking English does not affect their identity much are (interestingly) not so many.

Here is a portrait of an ordinary Japanese college student in their first or second year, based on the data above. They take for granted the status of English in the linguistic ladder,

and deem it crucial to have competence in English in order to survive in the paths of their career. English, though, is not a big psychological hurdle for them as it is seen in some former colonized countries where “they find themselves torn between the claims of Western values and their indigenous cultures, between English and the vernacular.” (Canagarajah: 1) English for them is not the language of the former colonial ruling country, nor a glue language which unifies the people with various tribal dialects. Although some alarming reports are made public by those scholars of the anti-linguistic imperialism camp, English has been, first of all, the language of the entrance examination for most Japanese, and not something to shake up their identity.

III. ENGLISH AS THE SECOND OFFICIAL LANGUAGE!?

One of the most extensive debates over English education in Japan during the last decade has been over a proposal to make English the country’s second official language. In January 2000 the Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals for the 21st Century submitted the final report which includes the following proposal:

English has become the international lingua franca, a process accelerated by the Internet and globalization. So long as English is effectively the language of international discourse, there is no alternative to familiarizing ourselves with it within Japan. Even if we stop short of making it an official second language, we should give it the status of a second working language and use it routinely alongside Japanese. Publications and announcements of the National Diet and government organs should be published in English as well as Japanese as a matter of course. Transmitting them to the world via the Internet will be done in English.⁹

Japanese is not still given a formal status of the official language in the constitution or somewhere else. It was customarily acknowledged to be such like other countries. There was no external pressure or internal demands from the below. The proposal was very loosely termed in the following lines. But the responses were immediate and sensational. These few lines out of thousands sparked a heated discussion immediately, and it was exactly what one of the

⁹ <http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/21century/report/htmls/7chap6.html> (2005/06/21).

architects of this proposal, Yoichi Funahashi (a journalist with Asahi Newspaper), aimed at, as he called it a “shock therapy”. In a subsequent book titled “A Daring Proposal of the English as the Second Official Language (Aete Eigo Koyogoron)”, he sums up the controversial points on this issue as follows (196-210):

[Counter argument 1] (these counterarguments are recreated from various materials with no specific references to the original authors).

What counts is not the language but the contents it conveys.

[Defense 1 by Funahashi]

What counts IS both the conveyer and the conveyed. Plus it can be argued human thinking and emotions are not wholly independent of the words we use. Too much emphasis on the “contents first” argument may lead us to where no encouragement of a foreign language is possible.

[Counter argument 2]

Why do we have to give English a privileged status?

[Defense 2]

English is no longer regarded as the first foreign language in Japan, but an international, world language. It does not have a privilege in the sense it is a hegemony language, but its speciality is in its common usage around the world.

[Counterargument 3]

Why do common people have to be involved with it? It is more to do with the qualifications of the elite leaders such as parliament members, bureaucrats, diplomats and top company executives than the general public.

[Defense 3]

Lack of accountability that is to blame for these economical and political disorders in the last decade. By providing them with English competence, which allows to more smoothly communicate with the world, the general public will become more powerful individuals.

[Counter argument 4]

How about “English divide”? Only those who are competent in English can be qualified for the top positions of the society.

[Defense 4]

We have to make utmost efforts for this not to happen. By giving it an official status to English, it would be easier to provide for financial and institutional support, which is virtually very scarce. Our proposal is all the more meaningful in setting a long-term goal, by making

efforts to reach which we can avoid a more threatening English divide in an international society.

[Counter argument 5]

It will give a destructive effect on the quality of Japanese language.

[Defense 5]

It’s time we parted from this kind “zero-sum” game. The deterioration of Japanese language, as is often deplored on the readers’ forum on the newspaper, has to be dealt with separately from the issue of English. To have a second measure in us would definitely enlarge our perspectives and it is not a bad idea to have “an intellectual body guard” with us.

[Counter argument 6]

It’s Americanization in ideas and thought. We have to defend our culture and identity.

[Defense 6]

Antipathy to, and threat from English goes down to creating the sense of threatened identity of the Japanese. We would like to seek for enlightened self-interest of Japan and open identities of the individuals to deal with it. It is self-interest, but it is not closed. It is to guard the Japanese identity, but it is an open identity, which can be channeled to multiculturalism and multiracialism. We should be very careful using the idea of identity, for, to quote Mario Vargas Llosa, “cultural identity can be a very dangerous concept if not properly used. It is, in one sense, a dubious construct from the societal view, and in another sense, a possible threat to freedom, the most precious value of the human beings”. The points raised here are more qualitative than quantitative, more attitudinal than theoretical, and more discursive than practical.

IV. ACTION PLAN TO CULTIVATE “JAPANESE WITH ENGLISH ABILITIES”

The steps needed to implement the proposal in a lesser degree (it didn’t mention the second official language at all) were provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2003 in the form of the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities”, with the focus on communication and understanding of foreign cultures:

In such a situation, English has played a central role as the common international language in linking people who have different mother tongues. For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language. In addition, English abilities are important in terms of linking our country with the rest of the world, obtaining the world's understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence and further developing our nation.¹⁰

The first-ever numerical goals to be met by English teachers were introduced by this plan: TOEFL 550 and TOEIC 730 or over. Native speakers of English are recommended to attend junior and senior high school classes more than once a week. Here we should be well aware of a possible danger to over-rely on the native speaker as Phillipson quotes in explaining "the native speaker fallacy": "A teacher is not adequately qualified to teach a language merely because it is his (sic) mother tongue." (195) The plan encourages the effective usage of the newly established period of Integrated Study by increasing the English conversation in elementary school. It is a rather slow decision in light of the fact that China and Korea had already started the early stage English education. The rationale behind this early stage theory does not go unquestioned by Phillipson, who claims "The effect of the application of this tenet has been to consolidate English at the expense of other languages, to perpetuate dependence on aid and expertise from the core English-speaking countries, and to raise an insuperable language barrier for the mass of primary learners." (209). There are several conditions which ensure the success of early stage education. Canadian education is made successful "where the learner's mother tongue is not at risk, qualified bilingual teachers are available, alternative programmes exist, and societal motivation transmitted via the parents is strong." (208) It is a matter of question whether it is true to Japan. Ohtsu and Torikai, in their pamphlet, question the validity of the critical point theory itself in the EFL environment of Japanese society, where it is not a language of daily life but that of a school subject. (16-30)

¹⁰ http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/15/03/03033101/001.pdf (2005/07/04).

V. CONCLUSION: ETHICS IN ELT

Despite repeated efforts to innovate the over-all English education system to adapt to the rapid progress in technology and business, the end result is not as favorable as was expected. This would be the very reason which initiated the daring proposal of Funahashi and others and triggered MEXT to publish the action plan to cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities". The effect is not that immediate, but it is known the TOEIC score is being counted in consideration for one's promotion in many companies, obviously spurred by the remarkable success of the Nissan Motor Company, which, after accepting foreign board members, had made English a working language. Whether Englic or Globish, it will be more commonly used around the world as many more countries join this trend towards globalization. Local resistances are predictably strong in some places, but may not be insurmountable. But it is important to know there is no language which is neutral enough to be a fair tool to be used by every party. Simplified Englishes, thus, assume that a global language also requires so-called native English speakers to adapt themselves to the strange regularities of the simplified grammatical rules. Still this is something still yet to be seen, for these suggested substitutions have not proven their linguistic relevancy in the academic way.

Politicians tend to think of foreign language in light of national security, businessmen in light of productivity, and educators in light of performance. I think there should be one underlying principle towards language acquisition, which can be best termed "ethical". This ethics can be derivative and transferable in most cases from other fields of human activities, but I would think language education should be ethical in the sense that it teaches the attitudinal aspects of language as well as technical aspects of the four skills.¹¹ It is this kind of discipline that is at work when a Japanese student speaks with a native speaker of English without being unreasonably ashamed of himself skipping all the articles, or when they learn the importance of both English and endangered languages in, say, Brazil as well, in the same way that they imagine of some endangered plants in the rainforests. It will be, then, our responsibility to teach not only how to use English (simplified or Globish) in various practical situations, but also how well (not skillfully) to use it. It is a tool for communication after all. But we need

¹¹ Morizumi (2001) calls it "Linguistic position" (Gengo-kan). It is to do with one's position which values the following statements, positively or negatively: Someone who speaks English is an internationally-minded person; Queen's English is authentic and beautiful; Language education should concern itself with the acquisition of the four skills; Learning a language pays only when it serves you in a real life; etc.

to focus on the un-utilitarian aspects of the language, too, such as the roles it played and is playing historically, which will cover the following areas:

- 1) Global languages and Local languages
 - 2) Language and Identities
 - 3) Linguistic Imperialism
 - 4) Endangered Languages
 - 5) Power: Empowerment and Enslavement through Language.
- A language teacher's job is demanding this much.

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