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English vs. English conversation

Language teaching in modern Japan*

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From the mid-1800s, at the end of the Tokugawa feudal period and the beginning of the Meiji era, English has been a singularly important foreign language in Japan which has, since that time, risen to international prominence, mirroring the rise of the English speaking world powers in the west. While English education was limited to the elites at this time, after World War II English education became available to the general public through the newly-implemented public education system. Today, English is considered one of Japan's most important school subjects, and English conversational skills are regarded as a highly desirable special talent. At the same time, most Japanese do not hide the difficulty they encounter with learning both written and spoken English. Even today Japan remains an essentially monolingual country and average person's ability to utilize English in any practical capacity is quite limited. This paper discusses Japan's idealization of native English speakers and the dilemma of learning how to speak like them while at the same time living in an isolated monolingual nation. The Japanese government struggles with appropriate strategies on English education curriculum, leaving considerable room for improvement in the education system. Without revising the current education plan, English will remain a weakness for Japan.

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Introduction: Japan's language policy

Because Japan is a predominantly monolingual nation, its language policy has mostly concerned the utilization of the Japanese language. Nevertheless, since the end of the feudal period and the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912), as Japan became an international power, English has been a significantly important foreign language.¹ Before going into details concerning the importance of English in Japan, the history of Japan's language policy will be briefly described.

Japan's practice of language planning and policy is relatively uncomplicated due to the strength of the idea of a national language, which has persisted since the time of the Meiji government. Gottlieb comments that “the Japanese language holds uncontested status as the national language, since except for certain ethnic minorities the overwhelming majority of those living in the Japanese archipelago are Japanese and the country has never been colonized” (2001:22). Historically, prewar Japan's language policy focused largely on a domestic policy that included implementation of a language standardization movement and script reform (in relation to the *genbun-icchi* “unification of the written and colloquial language” movement). Teaching of the Japanese language in the colonized areas was another focus of language policy. Table 1 summarizes implementations of Japanese language policies in colonized regions conducted by the Japanese government during the colonial period.

Table 1. Japanese language policy (adopted from Yamada 2006: 65)

Year of occupation	Target location	Implemented policy
1869	Hokkaido (Japan)	National language/standardization movements (The dialect abolition movements)
1879	Okinawa (Japan)	
1895	Taiwan	National language/Japanese education movements (Suppression of the local languages)
1910	Korea	
1914	South Pacific Islands, etc.	Japanese language education
1968	Ogasawara Islands (Japan)	(Suppression of the local languages)

1. English came to be considered an important foreign language after the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry at the Japanese port of Urawa in 1853. Although English has been considered one of the most important school subjects since the beginning of the Meiji era in 1868, Japan's education system has generally not succeeded in endowing its students with sufficient communication skills or command of the language.

English education began to be emphasized among the elites in the early Meiji period, when, as Koike and Tanaka (1995) report, it employed mainly the grammar-translation methods that are still the norm for English education to this day. In order to strengthen communication skills rather than translation skills, the now defunct Japanese *Monbushô* “Ministry of Education” (now restructured as *Monbukagakushô* or MEXT “Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology”) introduced pedagogical materials focusing on speech skills. Nevertheless, due to factors such as the nationalist movements and World War II, language policy concerning English remained relatively unstable until the post-war era. For example, Harold Palmer, a pioneer in the field of English language learning and teaching, was invited by *Monbushô* to be a “linguistic adviser” in 1922. Most English textbooks used in school systems were based on translations of English text to Japanese and little materials for training spoken English were available. Thus, Palmer introduced his Oral Method, a variation of the Direct Method of foreign language teaching whereby the target language is used as the language of instruction as much as possible. Palmer tailored his Oral Method to Japanese learners of English, working in Japan as the director of the Institute for Research in Language Teaching for fourteen years while creating and compiling pedagogical materials for Japanese elites. It seemed that English fever had taken over the educated Japanese population. However, the Oral Method did not become widely available in actual classrooms after all due to problems with its implementation. In order to be able to teach a language class according to the Direct Method, instructors were required to have a native or native-like English proficiency. Therefore, training of (non-native English speaking) Japanese instructors limited this approach (Imura 2003: 73–74).

Later, anti-English sentiments peaked with the outbreak of World War II, but the popularity of English education in Japan recovered soon after the war. After World War II, the Japanese government altered English education in Japan to make it more accessible to the general populace rather than to only a small elite. Ota states that since the war, with the imposition of mandatory middle school education, a much wider population has been exposed to English and, on average, almost the entire Japanese population will have at least three years of English education, over 90% of the population will have at least six years, and one third of the population will have at least eight years (1995: 244).

In the Japanese education system, formal English education starts at the first year of a junior high school, equivalent to the seventh grade in the United States school systems. After three years of junior high school education, English is taught for another three years at the high school level. It is worth noting that post-primary education, particularly at the post-secondary university level, employs competitive methods of student selection. Entrance examinations focus on specific subjects

such as English, mathematics, and Japanese, and the scope of the exam questions tends to be relatively narrow. The English teaching methods traditionally employed, even after the war, have continued to emphasize reading and writing skills with a heavy focus on grammar in order to prepare students for entrance examinations (for an overview of this discussion, see Gottlieb 2008). *Juken eigo* “entrance examination English” hinges upon grammar and reading rather than speaking and listening, and thus junior high and high school students studying for *juken* “entrance examinations” naturally train themselves with exercises that strengthen their reading and translation skills in order to survive *juken jigoku* “examination hell”. The topic of school English will be further discussed in the following section.

School English, courses of study, and unsuccessful results

Because traditional English study has been primarily concerned with passing examinations rather than becoming capable of speaking the language, the Japanese in general have developed a love-hate relationship with English (McVeigh 2004). Most Japanese students are unable to communicate with the language that they spend years learning, and this tendency does not change dramatically at the university level (for a discussion of the similar situation of English education in South Korea, see Park, this volume).² Due to the separation of school English (based on grammatical comprehension) from communicative English, English conversation has become recognized as a category of English learning separate from academic English. As a result, private English conversation schools have been established across the nation and have become quite popular. McVeigh interprets the Japanese word for English, *eigo*, as “English for Japanese” or “Japan-oriented English” and states:

[*Eigo*] is English for climbing the examination-education ladder (actually, *eigo* is a sort of non-communicative, artificial language designed for testing purposes). The non-Japanese version of English, or “non-Japan-oriented English” (*eikaiwa*) is “English for communication”. (McVeigh 2004: 215)

Such an interpretation makes quite plain the division in English education in Japan – *eigo* “English” and *eikaiwa* “English conversation”; *eigo* is something one needs to learn for examinations while *eikaiwa* is something one may take up as extracurricular skill training or a hobby.

2. Takao Suzuki, a leading Japanese sociolinguist, remarked that the English classes he himself enrolled in at Keio University after the war consisted entirely of English-to-Japanese translation. Students’ requests to the teachers for instruction on conversational skills were usually met with recommendations to attend English conversation schools in town. Suzuki reports that this seems to have been the case at most schools at that time (Suzuki 1999: 102).

The infamous *juken jigoku* “examination hell” places students under tremendous pressure, and the competitive nature of entrance examinations causes schools to focus on English material that is likely to be seen in the exams. Spurred by criticisms against *juken kyôiku* “entrance examination education”, the Ministry of Education introduced the *yutori kyôiku* “relaxed education” reforms (as opposed to *tsumekomî kyôiku* “cramming education”) in 1999. Under the relaxed education schema, schools adopted a five day per week schedule, and the number of classes and topics was reduced. The reformed curriculum for English shifted its focus to conversation and communication skills rather than reading comprehension, naturally influencing English education considerably. Table 2 illustrates the decrease in English grammatical items in the Japanese junior high school curriculum; the table is adopted from Moteki (2004: 23).

Table 2. English grammar introduced at junior high schools
(adopted from Moteki 2004: 23)

	1958	1969	1977	1989	1999
Sentence patterns	5 types 33 patterns	5 types 37 patterns	5 types 22 patterns	5 types 21 patterns	5 types 21 patterns
Total vocabulary	1100~1300 words	950~1100 words	900~1050 words	1000 words	900 words
Compulsory vocabulary	520 words	610 words	490 words	507 words	100 words
Grammatical items	20 items	21 items	13 items	11 items	11 items

According to Honna and Takeshita (2002), there has been a shift in some English language classrooms away from exam-oriented teaching and toward more communication-based teaching since the implementation of the relaxed education scheme. Following this trend, the University Centre Examination, the entrance examination used by public universities, has included a listening comprehension portion since 2006. Some private universities have started accepting TOEIC or TOEFL scores in lieu of entrance examinations; however, these exams still require extensive orthodox grammatical knowledge.³ In large part, despite the relaxed education schema’s reduced number of classes, school entrance examination

3. The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are administered by ETS (Educational Testing Service) in the United States. The former is intended to measure competency in English for everyday use in a business environment, and the latter for “academic” English. The TOEIC was developed following a request from Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry, and is a very popular qualification in Japan (Sergeant 2008: 131).

standards were not considerably altered, leading to contradictions in what English abilities are expected of students. For example, the goal for a junior high school graduate is to be able to converse in plain English including greetings and corresponding dialogues, as well as to have knowledge equivalent to the 3rd grade of *EIKEN*, or Test in Practical English Proficiency (Moteki 2004: 70). On the *EIKEN* organizer's website, the 3rd grade's example of recognition/use is stated as the "MEXT benchmark for junior high school graduates" (The Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), Inc. 2010). However, the *EIKEN* 3rd grade requires knowledge of about 2100 words while the current total vocabulary introduced for the junior high school level of study in the MEXT's Course of Study is only 900 words, as shown in Table 2. This type of gap forces Japanese students who would like to qualify for the *EIKEN* certificate or for high school entrance examinations to maintain a focus on translation and grammar if they want the opportunity of higher education, yet now with the added burden of doing so on their own time as schools have shifted their focus to ostensibly more practical conversational material. Overall, the likelihood of Japan's education system producing students with competent English skills remains "distinctly bleak" (Seargeant 2008: 131). English conversation, meanwhile, has grown into a separate discipline outside the Ministry of Education's jurisdiction.

The government has been well aware of the imbalance between English and English conversation teaching at schools. As a countermeasure, beginning in 1987, the Ministry of Education has made conscious efforts to strengthen students' communicative skills through such programs as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program.⁴ This program's purpose is to provide students with opportunities to interact with native target language instructors. Even prior to the relaxed education schema, the government attempted to increase the number of available JET teachers and to revise the English Course of Study guidelines (Japanese Ministry of Education 1991). Moteki states that the JET program and the employment of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs, whose primary job is to assist Japanese English teachers in English conversation classes) was innovative, as it created an environment where students could interact with native English speakers (2004: 24). As of the 2011 school year and implementation of the foreign language activities to cultivate children's communicative ability, MEXT started

4. The Council for Improvement of English Teaching was established in 1960, with the goal of providing students with oral communication skills, rather than English skills based on translation and memorization. The JET program is related to the council.

sending ALTs to elementary schools. With this program, elementary school children in grades 5 and 6 have once a week educational slot concerning foreign language activity, often involving an assistant ALT and a Japanese main teacher (MEXT 2010). Although there is no denying the unique interaction opportunities provided by ALTs, they contribute little to the overall improvement of English listening/speaking skills, as their work schedules typically allow for only one classroom visit per week to a class of 30 to 40 students, in addition to the fact that the qualifications for many ALTs do not include previous teaching experience. Suzuki (1999), in agreement with a number of education specialists, comments that mandatory English conversation classes, including those at the elementary school level, are ineffective. By engaging in conversation once or twice a week with a native English-speaking instructor, a student in a class of more than a few dozen will be introduced to a rather limited amount of expressions and vocabulary. Moreover, selected topics or stories may not be interesting to each and every student in the class (Suzuki 1999: 116). Thus, “the situation of English language teaching in Japan [remains] without much improvement” compared to the pre-war period (Koike and Tanaka 1995). Part of the problem is the lack of clear goals for conversational English education, as well as of a clear definition of what constitutes “conversational level” English.

The Ministry of Education, nonetheless, has been revising its Course of Study for school subjects including English to respond to the problems. For example, after the 1999 reform, the contents of junior high school textbooks were revised and restructured. Instead of introducing sentences directly connected to grammatical points like “This is a pen/This is not a pen”, or “I have a book/I do not have a book”, the revised lessons incorporated many situational dialogues containing relevant communication topics (Moteki 2004: 27). However, a number of educational specialists criticized the situational dialogues, which were based on the ideas of civil servants in the Ministry of Education, as too superficial and limiting to the students’ creativity. One example of these situational dialogues is “Hamburger English”, a textbook chapter set at a hamburger restaurant. The following is a typical example of the revised dialogue found in the new textbooks:

- Demi: Two hamburgers and two colas, please.
 Clerk: Large or small?
 Demi: Large, please.
 Clerk: For here or to go?
 Demi: For here.
 Clerk: Here you are. That’s five hundred and forty yen, please.
 (after receiving cash) Thank you. (cited in Moteki 2004: 38)

Despite the fact that it is full of idiomatic expressions, this type of dialogue has been criticized for being unrealistic as actual English conversation, as it is overly ritualistic and relies on rote memorization of idiomatic phrases and vocabulary that are applicable only to specific situations (Otsu 2006: 22–23; Naoyama 2006: 235). Needless to say, the fact that the new method still relies primarily on memorization has not done much to improve English abilities compared to the prewar period, when this approach was at least bolstered by a substantial amount of compulsory vocabulary. To some people, the dialogue in the example above may seem practically useful because this type of situation is one that students might expect to actually encounter. However, others argue that it is hard to imagine how these situational dialogues can further develop learners' conversation skills to allow for more complex discussions. Although the English curriculum reformation and the relaxed education schema were originally devised to move away from lessons based on the memorization of grammar, the contents of the revised textbooks are still similar to the old-fashioned memorization method in many ways. People cannot gain real communication skills by only learning how to deal with preconceived scenarios in a scripted, formulaic manner, because, as Otsu points out, “day-to-day” conversation is made possible among interlocutors not through the exchange of phrases, but through spontaneous communication in order to express their thoughts (Otsu 2006: 23).

Today, despite nationwide English conversation promotion in the form of programs like JET, in addition to academic reading/writing instruction in school, many scholars (e.g. Gottlieb 2008; Moteki 2004) report that Japanese school students' English skills remain low. Japan has not succeeded in improving its performance on standardized English tests such as TOEFL. Japan's TOEFL tests scores are among the lowest of the 25 Asian countries, tying with North Korea, according to data collected between 1999 and 2002 (data from the Council on International Educational Exchange, Japan, TOEFL Division, cited in Moteki 2004: 19⁵). According to *Economic and Social Dataranking* records of 2007, Japan has the lowest mean scores in all four sections of the TOEFL test – writing, reading, listening, and speaking: 28th out of the 28 countries. Table 3 indicates comparative results of TOEFL scores in East Asia from another source.

5. Moteki mentions that the TOEFL scores for the 1997/1998 period saw Japan tied with South Korea, yet the 2001/2002 results were even lower by 21 points in total scores (2004: 24–25). As shown in Table 2, Japan's listening comprehension rate abilities are the lowest (18) in these three countries. A larger data set of the same test results indicates that Japan's listening comprehension rate was the second to the lowest among the 30 Asian countries, second only to North Korea's listening comprehension rate (17) (data from the Council on International Educational Exchange, Japan, TOEFL Division, cited in Moteki 2004: 19).

Table 3. The 2001/2002 TOEFL scores in East Asia (data from the Council on International Educational Exchange, Japan, TOEFL Division, cited in Moteki 2004:21)

Country	Total test takers	Listening comprehension	Structure & written expression	Reading comprehension
Japan	84,254	18	19	19
S. Korea	73,093	19	21	22
China	22,699	20	22	22

Satonaka (2003) notes that it is those in their teens, many of whom are taking the TOEFL test to gauge their command of English or for study abroad purposes, who are dragging test scores down. According to his report, teen test takers' average scores are much lower than those of test takers in their 30s (Satonaka 2003:23). Moteki (2004) blames the Japanese government's relaxed education schema for the younger generation's decrease in overall English skills. As Table 2 in the previous section shows, after 1999 there were only 100 compulsory English vocabulary words required at the junior high school level. Considering that an average pre-school child acquires about 2000 words, a mere 100 English vocabulary items at the junior high school level seems an inadequate amount for serious expression or conversation, and this is certainly one cause of the overall poor results of Japanese TOEFL examination participants (Moteki 2004:28).

Beyond school English, *Eikaiwa* “English conversation” and English ideology

English teaching and learning in today's Japan is quite unique in its dichotomy between English as a conversation tool and as an academic discipline.⁶ While school English education practically functions to train students for entrance examinations, English conversation studied as an extracurricular activity puts less pressure on average students' shoulders. *Eikaiwa* “English conversation”, or “English for communication” in McVeigh's terms, is practiced by Japanese people who would like to acquire communication skills, in addition to the reading/writing skills they learn at school (2004:215). English conversation has been a common hobby among people of all ages, especially after the war, and a number of

6. No other foreign language is separated in this way. There is no “French” versus “French conversation”. Japan's leading private foreign language schools, Berlitz, GEOS, and ECC, list their available lessons by the name of the language such as *chûgokugo* “Chinese”, *kankokugo* “Korean”, *itariago* “Italian”, etc. English, however, is listed not as *eigo* “English” like other languages but specifically as *eikaiwa* “English conversation”.

private language institutions flourish in Japan. Private *eikaiwa* schools indeed have become very successful businesses in Japan, becoming even more popular and successful since the 1980s. At that time, the exchange rate between the American dollar and Japanese yen improved, making it easy for Japanese to go overseas, as well as contributing to a marked increase in the average Japanese household income, which meant that many people had enough extra money to afford enrolment in *eikaiwa* schools. Private English conversation instruction became highly popular among all generations, and the schools started to expand across the nation (see Kubota 1998: 296–297).

In an essay based on his experiences teaching English conversation in Japan, Douglas Lummis (1976) states that he had never heard the expression “English conversation” until he moved to Japan, and this division seemed quite odd to him. Lummis explains that he could not help but think that the English conversation ideology in Japan propagates exotic yet shallow images of native English speakers.

When I took my first English teaching job in Japan in 1961 I found the work embarrassing. Since then I have taught “English conversation” from time to time in language schools, company classes, and colleges, and I still find it embarrassing. I have struggled for a long time to try to understand just why the English conversation class is such an unsettling and alienating place ... I visited a conversation class at a major Tokyo language school and found that it fitted the stereotype almost exactly. (Lummis 1976: 17)

The images of “native speakers” portrayed in conversation classes are invariably Caucasians, Americans, hamburger-eaters, drugstore-patrons, etc. Lummis has criticized this type of ideology for helping to spread biased information about English speakers and English conversation around the world, and described practices such as private schools’ hiring of Caucasians from France or Italy as English conversation teachers for their appearances, not their English language skills, while non-Caucasian native English speakers, e.g. Asian Americans, were disfavoured for the same positions (Lummis 1976). This “native speaker ideology” has not changed very much since the time of Lummis’ writing. Seargeant states that the Course of Study guidelines of the Japanese educational system’s curriculum “look to the ‘native speaker’ countries as the oracle for orthodox English teaching practice, thus promoting a particular culturally-determined practice as universal”, and suggests, based on LoCastro’s claim, that “the native speaker” is modelled after Anglo-Americans (Seargeant 2008: 132; LoCastro 1996: 45). Hall argues that this ideology resulted in what he calls “academic apartheid” in the English higher education systems in Japan because “the term ‘internationalization’ merely means ‘having pure and unassimilated aliens on campus – the two-dimensional presence of the linguistically incapacitated, culture-shocked foreign newcomer as exotic

ambience” (1998:105–106). More than teaching experience or linguistic fluency, it is “the emblematic presence of a foreign culture in the classroom that is the defining factor in [foreign teachers’] appointment in schools” (Seargeant 2008:134). The native speaker ideology in Japan dictates that the normative English conversation teachers are Caucasian native speakers. A recent JET participant (2006 – current) from India, Ms Ankita Naresh, notes on the official JET web page that that this kind of ideology regarding native English speakers still exists today. She comments that she is often asked how long she stayed in the United States and is complimented on her “good” English (JET Programme 2010). In fact, most ALTs are from major English-speaking western countries.⁷ A relatively recent news story reported on a language school advertising English teachers who have “blond hair, and blue or green eyes” specifically (*Japan Times* 2007). As mentioned earlier, this type of “native speaker ideology” has not changed since the study of *eikaiwa*, or English conversation, first became a popular phenomenon in Japan. Referring to some earlier works on English conversation education in Japan, Kubota (1998:298) points out that by learning English, which is based on Anglo native speakers’ culture and society, the Japanese have internalized an Anglo view of the world that has been used as “eyeglasses through which the Japanese have viewed other ethnic groups” (see also Oishi 1990; Nakamura 1989; Tsuda 1990). While learning English, Japanese learners are also trained to identify themselves with the native speakers’ world views, despite the fact that becoming a Caucasian native speaker of English is not an attainable goal for Asian second language learners of English (Kubota 1998:298).

Eigo and seiyô konpurekkusu:

An inferiority complex about English and the west

The stereotypical belief, described by Lummis as “ideology of English conversation”, that ideal English speakers must necessarily be Caucasians, still exists today, as Asian- or African-Americans really face discrimination when applying for English conversation instructor positions in Japan (Lummis 1976; Suzuki 1999:144). Tsuda (2006) remarks that the traditional discipline of English studies in Japan idolizes the United Kingdom and the United States, creating an

7. E.g., 340 from Australia, 655 from Canada, 112 from Ireland, 254 from New Zealand, 699 from U.K., and 2759 from the United States. Much smaller numbers were accepted from China (11), France (10), Germany (7), and Korea (3), according to Jet Programme’s statement in 2006.

unnecessary *seiyô konpurekkusu* “Western complex”. People studying English in Japan tend to devote little attention to other English speaking regions of the world, in an attempt to become superficial westerners or “English nerds”, similar to overseas anime fans who tend to know little about actual Japanese language and culture.⁸ It is important to remind Japanese English learners that it is not the adoption of their instructor’s cultural values that confers legitimate English speaking skills. However, the Course of Study guidelines for English continue to deliver mainly Anglo-centred cultural topics even after the English education reform of 1999, creating a hereditary tradition of *seiyô konpurekkusu* “Western complex” across generations.

While the Japanese government suggests that a goal of its *eigo kyôiku* “English education” is to enhance Japanese nationals’ *kokusaika* “internalization”, materials used for English education are created to utilize English in western contexts rather than wider international contexts. A typical junior high school English textbook features situational dialogues with Japanese students interacting with their new friends from the west. The Japanese students never make any grammatical mistakes when conversing in English with westerners because the Japanese characters are speaking “model” English for the readers. Certainly Japan’s inferiority complex regarding English is exacerbated by having the unrealistic goal of being able to speak and behave like idealized native speakers. Indeed, the Japanese are quite apologetic for their limited English abilities. As reported in Lebra (1983), Japanese feel *haji* “shame” for not being able to speak English despite years of study. Because of their extensive English education, the Japanese feel they are obliged to be equipped with English communication skills. The combination of the Western complex and the Japanese feelings of shame among adults has increased the demand for a mandatory early English education program.

With the onset of the relaxed education schema, then-Prime Minister Obuchi stated, in January 2000, that English should be mastered by the Japanese people as the international *lingua franca* and that English should be designated as an official second language.⁹ As of 2002, MEXT began promoting English activities

8. As some modern English curriculum planners have suggested, school textbooks should not focus solely on topics related to the United Kingdom and United States. There are textbooks available that incorporate current world affairs (Suzuki 1999:98). These junior high and high school English textbooks include topics such as ethnic diversity, environmental issues, or the cultures and customs of other people around the world. Suzuki, however, mentions his concerns that these textbooks focus too much on social studies at the expense of English (1999:98).

9. Following the sudden death of Prime Minister Obuchi in May 2000, the discussion of making English an official second language ceased.

in elementary schools as part of its plan to foster international understanding.¹⁰ English activities in the elementary school system reflect the value Japanese people place on English conversation skills. Because the adult population is only equipped with *juken eigo* “examination English” and still suffers from an inferiority complex regarding their lack of English speaking ability, many Japanese parents wish for their children to begin English education at a very young age (Ichikawa 2006: 54). Parents tend to believe that their children will have a better chance of acquiring English if they begin English education earlier than the parents did themselves. Yamada cites a report from the popular magazine, *AERA* (2004, March 8th) which conducted a survey of 155 parents under age 35. When asked “when should your children be introduced to English education?” 34% responded “before age three” and 39%, “between three and six”. In total, 87% responded that their children should be introduced to English before they start elementary school. The reasons they chose for these responses were primarily “the younger the child, the easier foreign languages acquisition is”, or worse, “I don’t know why, but it feels right”. Compelled by social pressure to begin English education at a young age, the government responded by implementing elementary school English lessons despite not having a clear goal for what these lessons were to accomplish. This ambiguity is similar to the definition of “conversational level” English, reflecting idealized goals with little planning apparent in the actual implementation. Although many Japanese people have an inferiority complex about English, the precise reasons for the importance placed on English communication remain largely unclear. As residents of an island nation with a mostly monolingual population, the majority of Japanese do not need English language skills. Yet such skills, along with

10. According to the reports based on surveys conducted in 2005 on 22,232 public elementary schools, 93.6% (20,803 schools) employed some sort of English activity in their curriculum while only 6.4% (1,429 schools) did not (data from the National Institute for Educational Policy Research, cited in Kan 2006: 256). However, as the content of these activities is left entirely to the discretion of the individual schools and is not formally regulated, the calibre of these activities varies greatly across schools. Some schools held an “annual international event” which involved showing slides of foreign visitors’ hometowns, while others conducted regular classroom activities with assistant English teachers (ALTs) (Kan 2006: 265). Due to the limited number of native instructors, regular class time with an ALT may seem like a privilege to those who participated, but some fundamental problems regarding the use of ALTs for elementary school education have been raised. For example, very few ALTs have any formal training in developmental education or foreign language instruction for children. Moreover, considering Japan’s generally large classroom sizes, this method is not reported to be very effective at imparting to students any useful English communication skills (e.g., Butler-Goto 2006: 204; Tajiri 2006: 244). All in all, despite hopes of creating “internationalized” citizens by beginning English education at a young age, the current English curriculum in elementary schools has been criticized by many educators and linguists in Japan.

computer skills, have come to be seen as a facet of modern society, so that the general public feels that “they need to learn these skills in order to keep up with the world” (Yamada 2006: 100). Due to the resulting overwhelming public pressure, mandatory English education to elementary schools has been extended since 2011, although, again, without clear pedagogical objectives.

***Katakanago*: Katakana words and Japanese English**

Written Japanese distinguishes the etymology of words through various orthographic conventions. In general, native Japanese vocabulary is written in *hiragana* script, Sino-Japanese vocabulary in *kanji* “Chinese characters”, and non-Chinese loanwords in *katakana* script. Historically, Chinese culture influenced Japan very heavily from the 5th century, when a large amount of Chinese vocabulary began to infiltrate the Japanese language. Similarly, many European influences came into Japan after the 16th century, also bringing with them many new words. Because these loan words are written in *katakana*, non-Chinese loan words are often referred to as *katakanago* or “*katakana* words” (for further discussion about the symbolic value of loanwords in Japanese, see Morita, this volume). As it is in many other places in the world, English in Japan is often interpreted as a sign of modernity. Although most Japanese are unable to utilize English as a communication tool, having access to English-sounding vocabulary provides comfort to many who feel that they are supposed to have a better command of the language after extensive training during their formal education. The rampant use of Japanese English in today’s media may be a reflection of *eigo konpurekkusu* “an inferiority complex about English”. The use of *katakanago* is especially popular among younger people due to the sense of newness its use imparts, and the names of new products or popular song lyrics reflect this affinity. Pennycook (2003, 2009) investigates the use of English lyrics by a popular Japanese hip hop band and states that the English used in the lyrics projects the “global” identity of the band and thus the listeners. (For further discussion of global English in Asia, see Pennycook, this volume.) All in all, the point of using *katakanago* or *wasei eigo* “Japanese English” is to provide Japanese speakers with the feeling that they are utilizing English. The fact that many loan words do not necessarily retain their original meanings upon adoption into Japanese only serves to further distance the use of *wasei eigo* from actual English. In fact, many *katakanago* are quickly notarised, and there exist quite a few cases where these words make little sense to speakers of the original languages. Sanseido’s online *katakanago* dictionary presents an example: *serebu* “celebrity” does not only refer to famous people but also means “wealthy, sophisticated, elegant, gorgeous, etc”. In Japanese, the phrase *serebu-ken* means “an elegant



Figure 1. *Serebu-ken* “fancy dog”. Copyright© PR24 Pet. Permission for reprint received 2010. All rights reserved

dog” not “celebrity dog”, as many other speakers of English might assume. Figure 1 is one of the many results of a Google image search for *serebu-ken* “celebrity dog” (April 14, 2010).

This change of meaning of English loanwords is also accelerating as new loanwords penetrate into the usage of Japanese speakers faster with the aid of the internet. The relatively new English loanword *kaminguauto* “coming out” is an example of one such word establishing a different meaning in Japanese English. *Kaminguauto* means “to confess” in a broad sense where the content of the confession can include, but is not limited to, homosexuality, as opposed to the colloquial English usage of the word, which is almost exclusively limited to homosexuality. An internet search for the (Japanese) word *kaminguauto* turns up many instances of web forums where people confess their unique, hidden attributes. For example, in a forum entitled *katsura no kaminguauto* “confessions about hair pieces”, suggestions on how to confess that one wears a hair piece are discussed, while another forum named *nioi kaiminguauto* “confession about smell” abounds with posts of the smells to which the members are secretly addicted. Other common subjects of *kaminguauto* found in search results include *byôki* “sickness (depression, haemophilia, STD, eczema, etc.)”, *zainichi* “permanent ethnic Korean residents of Japan”, *saishokushugi* “vegetarian”, *shûkyô* “religion”, *kin-en* “non-smoking”, *zenka* “criminal records”. *Kaminguauto* is also used to refer to a situation where specific people are introducing themselves or being featured. For example, on the webpage of a private English school, the phrase *shôgakusei kaminguauto* is used to mean “the featured elementary school students” and is used when introducing the featured students’ academic progress at the school (School-T 2006). Similarly, *kenmin kaminguauto* is used to refer to “appearance of the people of a prefecture” in a popular Japanese TV show featuring the residents of specific prefectures (Yomiuri

Telecasting Co. 2010). Such loan words do not elicit the same meanings in English; however, most Japanese speakers are unaware that the loanwords do not retain their original meanings.

In his study of mixed Japanese-English advertisements in Japan, Haarmann (1989) describes how the actual meanings of English words are overshadowed by the public's positive feelings toward the sound of English. For instance, when advertisements end with English loanword phrases like "It's a Sony", "Kanebo for beautiful human life", or "Drive your dreams, Toyota", it is likely that viewers feel a sense of modernity associated with such uses of English, despite the fact that the meanings of such phrases may not be comprehended. The desire to be a part of the global community motivates this use of *wasei eigo* "Japanese English". A number of such examples are presented in Stanlaw's (2004) reports on "Japanese English" in pop songs, product names, and advertisements. Moreover, many Japanese speakers are unable to keep pace with the flood of newly adopted loanwords. According to a survey, 58% of Japanese respondents mentioned that there are increasingly more loanwords or foreign words; moreover, more than 81% of the respondents stated that they had encountered loanwords on TV or in newspapers that they did not understand (Ishino 1996). However, these survey results are a reflection of Japanese people's general admiration of and sentiments toward the English language. Despite the fact that many in the general public have accumulated anxieties toward school English, the use of English outside of school settings, such as in popular culture and media, is quite popular. The government and educators do not seem to have strategic pedagogical goals to equip Japanese with the desired levels of English communication skills. This lack is reflected in the lack of clear definitions for terms like "daily conversational skills" and the lack of planning regarding effective lessons for developing students' bilingual communication skills in a monolingual country. Feelings of "modernness" and "globalization", associated with the superficial use of appropriated English expressions, belie the fact that most Japanese speakers' English competence is too limited to allow them to realize why so much *wasei eigo* makes no sense to native speakers. Some scholars have suggested that the overuse of loanwords is actually working against the Japanese people, as they are often unaware of the differences between the newly reinterpreted meaning and the original meaning (e.g., Moteki 2004; Suzuki 1999).

Suggestions for English conversation ideology and identity

While “English language” is considered an important language in the eyes of the Japanese, it is always overshadowed by “national language or Japanese language”. For many Japanese people, the Japanese language represents the Japanese people’s identity while English is merely something used when dealing with foreigners. Although speaking English is not intrinsic to the Japanese people’s identity, “Japanese English” can represent Japanese speakers’ identities, as Japanese English is a uniquely Japanese construction. Park and Wee (2008) discuss the appropriation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) among hip hop musicians from non-English-speaking countries, including Japan. Such musicians “have little need to claim competence in English or appeal to hegemonic notions of standardness, because it is the very stigmatization of AAVE that allows it to effectively index identities of resistance and discrimination” (Park and Wee 2008: 248). However, non-English-speaking hip hop musicians are not able to construct their identities simply by reproducing AAVE in their performances. AAVE in a non-English language needs to be appropriated to project the identity of the non-English-speaking rappers’ cultural norms. This kind of linguistic appropriation could be applied in an educational setting. As discussed in the previous section, English has already been appropriated in the Japanese market, and the use of English in Japanese popular song lyrics and the commercial media has been widely accepted by the general public. A change of focus in English education that reflected a realistic use of English in Japan could help change users’ goals, and might decrease the inferiority complexes of English learners in Japan. The teaching materials used in Japanese school systems could work toward shifting the learner’s identity from “a non-native English speaker” to “a native Japanese learner of English”. This would reset the goal of learning English from “becoming like a native speaker” to “becoming an English speaker”. This does not mean promoting Japanese English in school systems; rather, environments and situations where English is being used in the teaching materials should be centred around Japan and not in some western country where English is spoken by ideal native speakers.

The English teaching materials used in Japanese classrooms are largely modelled after so-called Standard English spoken in either the United Kingdom or the United States, and they couple the “native English speaker ideology” with western cultural norms. Such English teaching materials index the identity of standard speakers, an identity ultimately unattainable by Japanese second language learners. “Native-like fluency” touted in English classrooms is almost impossible for students to acquire under current pedagogical methods; as a result, students are

encouraged only to copy and replicate “Standard English” models, as seen in the situational dialogue in Example 1. It seems that Japanese educational planners continue to ignore the development of English materials that would potentially enhance English language learning for Japanese speakers. Instead, the English education system continues to provide superficial band-aid solutions, such as “Hamburger English”. Likewise, English conversation education became popular because it seems to address the inability of so many Japanese to speak English. The superficial nature of both of these methods fails to acknowledge the fundamental problem with the “native speaker ideology”, namely the learners’ inherent inability to become native speakers of English. Some critiques of English education in Japan suggest that English teachers should be more conscious of “Japanese identity” when designing and employing their lessons (e.g., Suzuki 1999; Torikai 2006). For example, in many English conversation classes taught by American or British instructors, teachers tend to call their students by their first names or nicknames. In other cases, English teachers assign random Anglo names to their students. Rather than copying such foreign customs and creating pseudo-Anglo identities for the students, situations such as these would benefit from the continued use of traditional Japanese family names (Suzuki 1999: 153; Torikai 2006: 146). English teachers should realize that English spoken by Japanese speakers will always be “international English” rather than “native English” and that it is acceptable for Japan to have its own version of English. The purpose of learning English as a second language in Japan is not to become a native speaker but to be equipped with a communication tool. Teachers and textbooks do not have to try to fill classes with cultural themes specific to English speaking areas of the world. As proposed by Suzuki, Japanese English learners should first learn how to explain their own cultural values or historical issues (1999: 106). This opinion is easily supported, as these are likely topics to be raised by non-Japanese when opportunities for conversation arise. Additionally, Japanese people should not be trained only to interact with native English speakers; today, English is used frequently between non-native speakers. The goal of English acquisition should therefore be “communicative” ability and not “native-like” ability. By accepting that Japanese students are unlikely to attain native-like English abilities, Japanese-coloured English will become more acceptable as a communication tool, and Japanese people may be released from the burden of their inferiority complex about the West and English.

Conclusion: English and English conversation for the future of Japan

Although a few “master English speakers” stand out during the early post-Meiji era, English instruction in Japan quickly became focused on grammar and translation. Accordingly, speaking/listening skills have been a consistent weakness among Japanese English learners. Postwar education created the infamous *juken jigoku* “examination hell”, as a result of which teaching of spoken communication skills was overlooked. Moreover, after the implementation of the relaxed education scheme and major reformations of the mandatory education system’s curriculum in 1999, the allotted classroom hours for the instruction of all subjects, including major subjects such as Japanese, mathematics, and English, have been reduced considerably, and the required content for each subject has been diluted accordingly. A number of scholars have warned government officials and education planners to seriously reconsider the current curriculum under the relaxed education schema.

The prevalence of the “English complex” among the general public has goaded the government into initiating English activity programs in elementary schools since 2002. As this program was mandated without having solid curricula or goals, the activities vary from school to school throughout the nation, with the result that the time devoted to these activities may or may not be conducive to English learning. Additionally, the hours allocated for various other subjects were further sacrificed to make time for these English activities. Unfortunately, the future of Japan’s English education does not look very bright. The lack of regulation concerning the quality of early English education to which elementary school children across the nation are exposed means that the skills with which students enter junior high may vary considerably, complicating the teaching of English as a standardized mandatory subject. As many scholars have pointed out, there is significant room for improvement in Japan’s English education system, but without revising the current education plan, English will remain a weakness for Japanese people for the foreseeable future.

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