

“A Historical Survey of the English Language Teaching in Japan—with special reference to elementary schools and junior high schools”*

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Dutch was the first foreign language seriously studied in Japan at the beginning of 19th century when the trade between Japan and Netherlands was active. English was first introduced in Japan by the Dutch. The first English school was established by the government in Tokyo in 1859, six years after Commodore Perry came from America to open trade with Japan.

English language teaching was given an impetus as the political and commercial intercourse between Japan and the U. S. became more and more intense. In order to catch up with the technological developments in the West, Japan began to teach science and technology in advanced institutions. The immediate measure taken by the government was to hire American and British instructors and import textbooks mainly from the United States. One of the well-known institutions was Sapporo Agricultural School established in 1876. William S. Clark, William P. Brook, David P. Penhallon and other instructors taught various subjects including English grammar, English literature, agriculture and economics, using English textbooks. Students had such a hard time, but their English ability was superb.

Dr. Edwin Reichaur, ex-U. S. ambassador to Japan made a critical

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survey of the English language teaching in Japan in his book, The Japanese Today published by Harvard University Press in 1988. He noted that up until the end of last century, Japan produced a large number of people who had a good command of English. After the turn of this century, however, the necessity for good knowledge of English diminished due to the fact that it had become possible to study science and technology through Japanese books and translations. Most foreign teachers were dropped as too expensive. English conversation and possibly English writing were all but ignored, because English was studied in order to read academic books and journals. The learning of English was discouraged during the last world war simply because English was the language of the enemy.

After the war, however, the situation drastically changed. The demand for the practical ability of English was strongly voiced by the business circles, because thousands of businessmen had to use English for business transactions. It was at this time when 'Oral Approach' advocated by Dr. C. C. Fries, then professor at Michigan University was welcomed as a savior. The mastery of oral aspects of English became increasingly important. It can be said that Fries 'Oral Approach' which was practiced mainly in junior high schools was successful in improving English pronunciation of Japanese learners to some extent, but it was not effective enough to produce good speakers of English. What was the obstacle? It may be that the entrance examinations for high schools and universities constituted a major block. High school students had to cram their heads with grammatical rules and vocabulary in order to solve difficult puzzle-like problems which even native speakers had a hard time solving.

Now, let me focus on the teaching of English in junior high schools. It was immediately after the war in 1947 when 6-3-3 school system was introduced that English was incorporated as a part of junior high school curriculum as an elective subject. Though elective, English has practically become an obligatory subject since most junior high

school graduates go up to senior high schools and English is a required subject for the entrance examination. In 1950's English was taught five times in the first year and four times in the second and third years per week. In 1977, however, the teaching hours were reduced to three times a week. But because of school events like athletic meetings or picnics, the actual number of teaching hours is almost two in public junior high schools. Due to the reduction of teaching hours, the textbooks got thinner and less time on practice tends to put more emphasis on the memorization of grammatical rules.

Next, let me discuss the making and content of junior high school English textbooks. Textbooks have been written according to a set of regulations prescribed in the Course of Study issued by the Ministry of Education. Grammatical items, vocabulary and collocations to be covered in each grade are stipulated. Textbook writers have been constrained by those regulations and stipulations when they write textbooks, hence the content of the textbooks has been rather restricted. But in 1993, with the revision of the Course of Study, all those regulations and stipulations will be abolished and the textbook writing is expected to be more free and creative. Drafts of textbooks have to go through strict inspection by the Ministry of Education before they are published.

There are currently only four kinds of textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education. The adoption of textbooks is decided by the representatives of each prefecture. Teachers practically have no say in the choice of textbooks.

A word on teacher training. College students who want to become teachers of English have to take certain required subjects including teaching methods, psychology of education. They are also required to take the subject on cross-cultural communication, because the purpose of teaching English is not only to teach the English language itself, but also to make students international-minded. Prospective

English teachers have to practice teaching for three weeks at high schools.

Let me shift the topic to the hot issue of teaching English at elementary school level. In Japan there are three kinds of elementary schools: municipal, private and those attached to national universities. Back in 1879, Arinori Mori, then Minister of education, endorsed the teaching of English in municipal elementary schools as an elective subject. This situation lasted until 1909, when English disappeared altogether from the curriculum of municipal elementary schools. From 1895 to 1905 English was taught in 6% of municipal elementary schools throughout the country. As to the teaching method, English teachers were required to master correct pronunciation and high practical ability of English, because English was taught orally by using objects or pictures, with reading introduced only after listening and pronunciation abilities were fully developed.

According to the survey conducted by the Institute for Research on Language Teaching in 1976, English is taught as a regular subject in approximately 75 % of private elementary schools and 4% of the elementary schools attached to national universities. In prewar days English was taught at relatively few private schools (less than 10%). After the war the number of private elementary schools where English was instructed increased drastically. In municipal or government-controlled elementary schools English has been excluded from the curriculum since 1909.

It was in 1972 when English began to be taught at municipal elementary schools as an extracurricular activity in Chiba prefecture situated east of Tokyo. At that time English was taught at only 15 schools. Now the number has almost doubled. The method has been team-teaching by Japanese and native instructors. This innovation has created a heated controversy in the press and among intellectuals as to whether English should be taught in elementary schools or not. In 1980 Dr. E. Reichauer voiced his views in the *Mainichi*, one of the

leading newspapers in Japan. He strongly advocated the teaching of English in the early grades of elementary schools. He elaborated his view in the above-mentioned book, The Japanese Today. Let me quote,

"In view of the particular difficulties of pronunciation for Japanese, the sounds of English or other foreign languages should be learned at an early age, when children can absorb them with ease.... Taking advantage of children's superior language-learning abilities, many of the hours of the English instruction in schools could be shifted from senior high school down to elementary school, where the study of English would be perceived as fun rather than a chore." (p. 392)

According to the Mainichi dated July 9, 1980, a suggestion was made by then Minister of Education to implement English education in elementary schools but this suggestion was not materialized.

In 1987, there occurred a big change in the circle of English language teaching. Due mainly to the efforts of then Prime Minister Nakasone, some 800 native speakers of English were hired to assist high school teachers. They are called Assistant English teachers (AET). The number of AETs has nearly tripled in recent years.

In various parts of the countries, AETs are being used to teach English at elementary schools in classes of "education for internationalization". In many cases, English is being taught as an extracurricular activity. In February, 1992 the Ministry of Education officially announced its intention to seriously consider the implementation of English in public or municipal elementary schools in the near future. Experiments are now underway in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades of two municipal elementary schools in Osaka to find out the effects of English language teaching at elementary school level.

Japan Association for the Study of Teaching English to Children

(JASTEC) has been conducting longitudinal experiments for the last several years. The results show that in all the four skills, those children who have been exposed to English before entering junior high schools are better than those who have not, especially in advanced years in high schools and that they have favorable attitude toward foreign people and culture. The implementation of foreign language in public or municipal elementary schools is a must to trigger drastic change in the structure of foreign language teaching in Japan.