

Developing an Oral Comprehensive Examination for the Understanding of Japanese Society as an Alternative for a Graduation Thesis

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Abstract

This paper examines the recent discussions of Nihonjinron (theories of the Japanese) in the fields of TESOL and of sociology in order to find out what is needed to enhance an understanding of Japanese society. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it analyzes the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture agenda treat Japanese as a 'unique society' and 'Western Societies' as a whole for comparison. Secondly, it proposes a series of questions to make adult learners of English improve intercultural communication skills based on their individual observations and communication with others rather than based on knowledge from authoritative theories on societies.

Introduction

This paper is motivated by a simple statement made to a professor by a Japanese university student who was about to graduate from his school in Japan. He told his professor that he learned a lot about other cultures and his Japanese monolingual and monocultural society. When the professor told me about the story, I was shocked to hear that both the student and his professor believed that Japan is a monolingual and monocultural society. This belief was acknowledged by a study by Hinenoya (2000) that most of 108 adult Japanese involved in his study living in North America accepted ethnocentric descriptions about Japanese culture and language. For example, the Japanese are shy, inward and group oriented.

The research on the topic of Japan as a multilingual and multicultural society increased in the 1990's, for example, Maher and Yashiro (1994). A Ph.D. thesis concerned with cultural assumptions in Japanese policies on the teaching of English (Hashimoto 1997) appeared a few years later. Hoffer and Honna (1999) dealt with the status of English in Japanese society. The article described the current status of English in Japanese society. It started with the current

phenomenon where 'loanwords became more and more frequent as the English requirement gave more and more Japanese a level of facility in the language' since Japan made the study of the English language all but required during junior and senior high school 50 years ago. Because of this path, 'English has impacted on most areas of language usage in Japan and fills several functions or roles in that usage' (Hoffer and Honna 49). This paper looks at how the accommodation of loanwords from English for the enrichment of the Japanese language. The thesis describes how English in Japanese Education has been used in the reproduction of specific social values by the Japanese Ministry of Education since English became the primary foreign language in Japan. Although both have different ways of describing the current status of English in Japanese society, it is clear that English education has never been used for mere communication by the MESC but used to promote the beliefs that Japan is a monolingual and monocultural society.

Recently in the literature of TESOL, there has appeared a series of stereotypical descriptions of the Japanese adult learners as traditional, homogeneous, and group-oriented (see Kubota, 1999 for the recent discussion). Most of these arguments have taken for granted that all adult learners in higher education in the western countries have shown individualism, self-expression, and critical thinking. A school of sociology has clearly shown in recent years that the stereotypical behavior of the Japanese applies only to the elite in Japan (see Mouer and Sugimoto 1986 for the discussion). This paper first looks at the current status of English in Japan.

Current Status of English in Japan

Hoffer and Honna (1999: 48) states the current status of English in Japan: Japanese has primarily absorbed loanwords from China and, more recently, from English. Over the past five decades, the number of English loanwords has grown geometrically from near zero to over 30,000. Clearly, English has diffused into almost all aspects of Japanese society, from ordinary conversation to governmental documents. Yet in neither the Chinese nor English borrowing situation was there any strong or prolonged intimate contact between the two cultures. Perhaps the voluntary nature of the absorption has muted, to some degree, the reactions against the pervasive presence of English in the school system and of borrowed words in almost all areas of Japanese life.

English was introduced to Japanese education as a required subject in junior and senior high school about 50 years ago. There has been an increase of emphasis on understanding written texts of English as well as the role of English among all subjects that students have to take for entrance examinations for high schools and universities. 'The use of Chinese did not extend beyond the elite classes to the ordinary farmers and others' (Hoffer and Honna 50). The use of English texts has extended from textbooks of subjects such as science and social sciences into all educational settings. Also, English loanwords appear in

international travel books, advertisements and popular magazines. For example, new words are constructed from loanwords with Japanese inflectional endings such as 'daburu' from English 'double' (increase) plus the verbal ending 'ru'. Another example is acronyms such as ABC for American or Australian Broadcasting Company (50-52). As a matter of fact, because these acronyms have been used both orally and in texts with Japanese translated words only, not many people know how they were formed originally without referring to dictionaries of new words in Japanese published annually.

However, neither Chinese nor English have changed the syntax nor phonology of the Japanese. None of the loanwords are pronounced in the original Chinese or English but in Japanese ways. When it comes to using these words in communicating with speakers of Chinese or English, the Japanese way of pronouncing these words is not comprehensible to the speakers of either of the languages. With regard to reading the texts written in Chinese and English, it is not possible to understand the exact meaning of the text in Chinese or in English because of the syntactical differences among the three languages. With regards to writing in English, one's knowledge of Chinese and English loanwords can rarely go beyond one's skills in translating Japanese to English sentences.

This raises a key question: Does a resident¹ in Japan need to use English in everyday life and if so when? Since a standardized variety of Japanese was created and taught in the new school system under the Meiji government in the latter half of the 19th century, it is rare that a standardized variety of Japanese is incomprehensible in Japan. However, many learners abroad who studied Japanese through textbooks of this standardized variety have found out that there are no native speakers of this variety to whom these learners can talk. In other words, most of the Japanese outside of the Tokyo metropolitan area are aware of the fact that they have to use the standardized variety when traveling outside of the area where they speak their own variety of the language. There is no need for a resident in Japan to use any word from English to live, shop and work as long as they can speak the standard variety of Japanese in addition to a regional variation of Japanese in their own community.

Statistically speaking, the number of residents of Japan traveling abroad has been increasing year by year. But even when they travel, they tend to travel less than a week at a time and in an extreme case², they do not even stay in a foreign country long enough to speak a word of English.

Since Japan was considered a country with great success in business in the 1980's, the number of people who are able to communicate in Japanese has increased significantly. By any account, opportunities for speakers of Japanese to communicate with speakers of English in everyday life is in a way an illusion. For example, they pay tuition to speak English in a private English school. Then, what would be the purpose of learning English at school? The foremost reason for learning English is to pass an entrance examination for high schools and to

eventually secure a better salaried job or to advance their economic status. The 1994 version of Japanese government policies in education, science and culture (Ministry of Education, 1994: 194) states:

Increased priority has been given to communication skills and international understanding in foreign language education under the new Courses of Study. For example, lower secondary schools may now add another hour to the time devoted to this subject area each week, bringing total class hours to four per week. At the upper secondary school level, the new subject of 'oral/aural communication A, B, and C' has been introduced.

The 1994 Ministry of Education Course of Study Guidelines allots the total number of hours for English in the three years of junior high school and three years of high school. An academic year is supposed to have 43 weeks in Japan. A simple calculation of 4 hours a week in a junior high school (4 hours x 43 weeks x 3 years = 516) and 5 hours a week in a high school (5 hours x 43 weeks x 3 years = 645) adds up to 1,161 hours of English classes.³ Ideally speaking, this amount of time is enough to cover the basic structures of English by any number of methods or approaches. But the results at the end of high school are far from ideal.

Competence, in at least written English, became a critical factor in a pass or fail at the entrance examinations for higher education and, for many Japanese students, a high test mark is almost exclusively the only purpose for study (Hoffer and Honna 54).

Therefore, a common claim that the Japanese know how to read and write English but not to communicate is far from the actual situation. What they are required to know at school is to read English texts through constant translations from English to Japanese based on their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in English. What's worse is that even one's knowledge of IPA (International Phonetic Alphabets) about how a word should be pronounced is more important in distinguishing two underlined words in a multiple choice test than in producing these words orally!

In universities in Japan, writing a thesis is a regular requirement for graduation. However, many Japanese professors have lamented the lack of writing skills in Japanese for decades. One of the common weaknesses in writing is considered to be a lack of proper citations. As we can see in any graduation thesis in a university, citations in a literature review section sometimes merge into the sentences of a student's own writing without quotation marks, as if the citation is her or his own words. If this is detected even in an essay of a student in a North American university, she or he might be expelled from her or his course. What is necessary in a Japanese school is a type of expository writing class from high school to help students distinguish creative writing from expository writing (see for example, Futaba, 1987 for the discussion of writing). After being introduced to the process of expository

writing, it should become easier for students to write reports and essays than the current situation.

One of the major problems in writing a thesis that some professors see in Japan is that students cannot express in their own words what they have learned from the lectures and texts. This could be due to the heavy load of classes (Johnson 1996). In universities in Australia, each class requires students to listen to a lecture and then to attend a tutorial session for discussion so that students fully articulate what they have learned in their own words and consequently that they are able to write their own essays at the end (Sugimoto 2000). The importance of this process of input, feedback and output has been discussed in the recent studies of second language acquisition (see for example, Futaba 1994 for the discussion).

The importance of developing an oral comprehensive examination concerning Japanese society as an alternative to a graduation thesis is (1) that students learn the theories about Japan through lectures and books, (2) that they get feedback through not only their seminar teachers but also their own experiences of intercultural communication in and out of their own societies, and (3) that they have to produce cohesive writing to prepare for an oral comprehensive examination before they graduate. If this process can be set, no student will rely on their view of their own country based solely on *Nihonjinron*. From this standpoint, this article proposes a series of questions for the oral comprehensive examination as an alternative to a graduation thesis.

Questions for the oral comprehensive examination

Direction: Prior to the oral comprehensive examinations, prepare to discuss your answer to each question with examining professors and another student of different gender based on your studies and experiences in this faculty. Your answer will not be judged from just saying yes or no to each question. The professors judge how you communicate with another student and the examining professors.

Question 1 Suppose that a being from a different planet arrived in Japan and wanted to meet a typical Japanese, one who best typified the Japanese adult population. Who is the typical Japanese you think this 'being' would pick? One answer was given by Sugimoto (2000: 10) that the alien would come closer to the 'center' of the Japanese population by choosing a female, non-unionized and non-permanent employee in a small business without a university education than a male, unionized, permanent employee with a university degree working for a large company. Why or why not?

Question 2 According to the book entitled *The Anatomy of Dependence*, Doi (1973) said that the Japanese feel no need for any explicit demonstration of individuality. Loyalty to the group is a primary value. Giving oneself to the promotion and realization of the group's goals gives the Japanese a special psychological satisfaction. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Question 3 According to the book entitled *Japanese Society*, Nakane (1970) wrote that the Japanese attach great importance to the maintenance of harmony within the group. Relationships between superiors and inferiors are carefully cultivated and maintained. The vertically organized Japanese contrast sharply with Westerners, who tend to form horizontal groups which define their membership in terms of such criteria as class and stratification which cut across hierarchical organization lines. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Questions 4 According to Ishida (1983), intergroup competition in regard to loyalty makes groups conform to larger national groups than their own and facilitates the formation of national consensus. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Question 5 According to the statement made by the President of the United States in 1995, dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 made the Japanese surrender faster thus saving the lives of thousands of American soldiers and people in colonized Asian countries. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Question 6 According to Ide (1979), the male language is supposed to be coarse, crude, and aggressive, while the female language is expected to be soft, polite, and submissive. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Question 7 Suppose that four individuals, two from Japan and two from Germany, get together. Those from Japan are Mr. Toyota, who is a business executive of a large corporation in Tokyo, and Ms Honda, a shop assistant in a small shop in a small town in Shikoku. Those from Germany are Mr. Mueller, who is an executive director of a large firm in Frankfurt, and Ms. Schmitz, a clerk in a small firm in a small town in northern Germany. We assume that they can communicate in a common language. Which pair would be most similar in their thought and behavior patterns? According to the subcultural model of Sugimoto (1997) the close pairs may be Mr. Toyota and Mr. Mueller on the one hand and Ms Honda and Ms Schmitz on the other. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Question 8 Is Japan a monolingual and monocultural society? Do you agree? Why or why not?

The list of questions is a starting point. Questions on the list should reflect the core curriculum of the study in each faculty. However, the examining committee of professors should consist of two (possibly one male and one female) in different courses of study. Also, questions should be collected prior to this oral comprehensive examination. For example: (1) one question can be collected from each member of the faculty including full-time and part-time members; (2) a curriculum committee discusses a complete list of questions and divides them into several categories depending on the emphasis of its curriculum; (3) in the beginning of the second semester of their third year, a student from each seminar class can be recruited on a voluntary basis as a trial examinee; (4) a group of these students is given a list of questions at the end of July so that the

group can discuss the questions freely during the summer holidays; (5) for an experimental session in October, two students and two professors gather to hold a session in a room equipped with a tape-recorder; (6) while the curriculum committee listens to the tape, an individual assessor evaluates the student's performance on the basis of 1-100. They should use 1-100 because the final grades at FIC and UNI employ this scale and it is easy to understand this scale when shown to other members of their faculty. (7) When they finish listening, points of individual assessors are written on a white-board. When there is a significant discrepancy in any part, they have to discuss why until they reach a consensus on the assessment.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I have tried to examine the current status of English in Japan as well as the way English is taught within a faculty in order to find out what needs to be developed for the particular needs of a faculty of a university. There is a need, however, to find out if any of these claims in this paper reflects the current society in Japan. This should be done not by questionnaires or surveys but by ethnographic studies to reveal what people do in each institution rather than what they believe they do. What an adult learner needs to acquire is individual skills not only to discover similarities and differences between behavior of her or his society and that of other societies but also to communicate with people coming from other backgrounds in order to understand each other.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, I use the word 'resident' to include everyone living in Japan instead of 'Japanese' since there are a significant number of non-Japanese citizens who are entitled to education. These residents include 700,000 Koreans as well as new immigrants such as Iranians in Japan.
2. For example, in a so called 'bullet trip' to cheer on the Japanese team in the Olympics or World Cup soccer games, members of this tour leave Japan Friday night, arrive in a country to sit in a stadium on Saturday and leave the country on Saturday night to come back to Japan on Sunday.
3. Honna (1995) made a different calculation for those who aim to study for university entrance examinations. 'The average number of hours spent by individuals studying English for six years is 10 hours/week x 52 weeks/year x 6 years = 3,120 hours.'(59)

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