

English as a Multicultural Language in Asia and Its Pedagogical Implications: A Case Study of Japan's ELT ¹

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Abstract: This paper discusses English as a multicultural language in Asia and what we can do to deal with this reality in English language teaching (ELT). Certainly, the essential thing about the current state of the English language is: there is no one English; there are many Englishes. At the same time, ELT across the world emphasizes English as an international language. In view of this situation, this paper explores some pedagogical issues involved in understanding and teaching English as a multicultural language for international communication.

In implementing this frame of reference in ELT, three challenging issues are noticed. (1) How we can understand and teach English, not as an American language or a British language, but as a multicultural language for international communication, (2) How we can train our students to be able to talk about themselves, their community and their ways of life in English, and (3) How we can encourage our students to become interested in the cultures of speakers of different varieties of English around the world. I will address these issues by taking a close look at Japan's ELT as a case study.

Keywords: English language teaching (ELT), Japan

1. English as a Multicultural Language

As we begin our discussion, I think it is very important that we have a clear and full understanding of the fact that contemporary English has two major characteristics or tendencies, the extent and magnitude of which no other languages have ever experienced in the history of linguistic dynamism: its global spread, including the world-wide expansion of ELT, and the development of a vast number of its national varieties (see e.g. Kirkpatrick, 2010).

People often find it difficult to comprehend the diversification part, but the diversification of English is the natural outcome of the international spread of the English language. They are two sides of the same coin. In other words, if there is to be diffusion, there has to be adaptation. So when American English or British English is transplanted or introduced to other countries, the language goes through an adaptive process of reculturalization or indigenization to get learned and used by local people there. The output of this intercultural adaptive process is the development of regional/local varieties of English, or Non-Native Speaker Englishes, which can be conceptualized as a major part of world Englishes or English as a multicultural language.

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The concepts of world Englishes (Kachru, Kachru & Nelson, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2010) or English as a multicultural language (Honna, 2008) encourage us to see that every variety, each variety is as good as another linguistically and culturally. As a matter of fact, Japanese could not speak English without Japanese features, or without the foundations of Japanese language and culture. These trends are witnessed in many countries in Asia and other parts of the world.

Furthermore, remarkably in Asia, non-native speakers use English more frequently with other non-native speakers than with native speakers. The interaction between native speakers and non-native speakers is very limited in this part of the world. It is not as frequent as imagined and assumed in ELT. Importantly, Asian speakers are taking advantage of this additional language and are exploring new dimensions of English use: phonetically, lexically, syntactically, semantically, and of course pragmatically. They are using English in Asian cultural contexts.

As a matter of fact, English is here to stay as an Asian language, as declared by Bautista (1996). Philippine Poet Gemino Abad once said: “The English language is now ours. We have colonized it, too.” (*Newsweek*, October 28, 1996, p. 41). When Japanese speak English with Filipinos or other nationals, there is no place for American culture or British culture. What happens in this situation is that Japanese behave like Japanese and speak English in Japanese ways, and so do Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans, Thais, Indians, and many other nationals. This is the basis of English becoming a multicultural language, each variety developing its own linguistic and cultural features, or for some people, identity.

2. Change in ELT Models

Thus, ELT models are changing in many countries in accordance with the current English language situation, or at least the needs for change are expressed explicitly or implicitly by ELT specialists. In Japan, for example, the American English Speaker Model, which has been practiced in public schools for a long time, is now being challenged and is beginning to lose its once strong power. In the American English Speaker Model, Japanese students are taught American English and are expected to become speakers of American English. However, there is a widely shared feeling among ELT specialists now in Japan that this is an unrealistic, unattainable, and undesirable program.

In view of the present role English plays as a world language, it is not necessary and it is not desirable to expect to produce American English speakers in Japan’s public education system. To adjust to this reality, the traditional model has to be changed or modified in favor of the Japanese English Speaker Model. In the Japanese English Speaker Model, students are given American English as a sample for acquisition, and are expected to become speakers of a Japanese variety of English. Actually, any other variety can be offered as a sample as long as it is understood and accepted as an international language, at least until Japanese English is fully codified. Yet, whatever good variety may be given, Japanese students are expected to become speakers of a Japanese variety of English.

The collective energy and time spent by a majority of 120 million Japanese who study English as a mandatory subject for some 8 to 12 years is truly enormous, and should not be wasted for nothing. There has to be a return for the effort. Japanese people should be encouraged to take advantage of the outcome of their educational experiences. One way to do so is to

recognize that Japanese people normally are expected to speak a Japanese variety of English. They should be advised that what they are learning or what they have learned can be a useful means of multinational and multicultural communication without some magical transformation to a native speaker mode.

It seems that Japan's ELT is now in the process of a paradigm shift from the American English Speaker Model to the Japanese English Speaker Model. There is a long way to go before the transition is completed. Nevertheless, a change in attitude toward English is constantly noticed among students, teachers, and business people who know varieties of English being used as an international language. Even high-school students sometimes show a positive response to what they are learning. Observing an English language class team-taught by a Japanese teacher and an assistant language teacher (ALT) from a native-speaker country, an ELT specialist from Australia had this to say:

I observed a number of English classes...and as an Australian I found it amusing to hear North American pronunciation being modeled as the correct pronunciation. After one class, I was talking to the students and I asked them whether they wanted to sound like their assistant language teacher [from America] or whether they wanted to sound like their Japanese teacher. I was very surprised when they all quickly said that they wanted to sound like their Japanese teacher. I should add that there was nothing wrong with this ALT! But the Japanese teacher in this class spoke excellent English and with an unmistakably Japanese accent (Honna, Kirkpatrick & Gilbert, 2001, p. 80).

Indeed, as students and teachers discover what possibilities this international language can give them, they gradually come to understand the concept of English as a multicultural language and develop self-confidence in a Japanese variety of English. This is noted, for example, in the results of a series of workshops on the present-day English language situation conducted for teachers. After attending such a seminar, one high-school teacher wrote the following. Actually, he referred to a desirable shift from the American English Speaker Model to the Japanese English Speaker Model and from grammar emphasis to intercultural communication experience.

I was once amazed at Vietnamese students' enthusiasm in trying to communicate in English, and wondered what made the difference. I have now realized that we had a wrong view of English. We will feel more at ease if we know that the important thing is to communicate in Japanese English, and build up and maintain a friendly relationship with different people. Teachers of English are to blame for the stress with which Japanese people speak English, because they are not tolerant toward students' grammatical mistakes and limit their freedom to speak. Such a stress involved in speaking English will be minimized if teachers appreciate the fact that a student has communicated in English. The first step will be to change teachers' concept of English (Honna, 2008, pp. 158-159).

And business people, who know the reality of the world, have a lot to do with the paradigm change. They are bringing feedback to ELT in schools and companies, based on their own

experience of English across cultures. Here is a comment by an influential member of Japan's business community:

Japanese businesses gain a tremendous amount of profit in countries where English is not their native language. We need to understand those people in their varieties of English. (Personal communication with a personnel department chief of a topnotch trading company, 2010).

Thus, all in all, a clear vision of English as a multicultural language for international communication is the most important part of the knowledge (enlightenment) that makes it possible for Japanese people to accept Japanese English as a legitimate variety of Japanese users of the language. These sociolinguistic ideas are beginning to gain support among students, teachers, and business people now in Japan. Their responses to the notion of Japanese English as a variety, or even to the idea of English as a Japanese language for international communication have become more positive these days than before.

Even so, a systematic description of Japanese English is difficult to provide here. As Ike (2012) points out, Japanese English is a developing variety waiting for its extended use and data accumulation. The author's definition of Japanese English (Honna, 2008) should suffice for the purpose of this paper.

1. It is a set of English patterns (covering phonology, lexicon, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics) that many students of above-average grades can produce after 8 to 12 years of training in school and college.
2. Flavored with an array of cross-lingual/cultural transfer features, it should be the basis on which Japanese citizens could build up further layers of knowledge and skills of English for their own specific vocational and professional purposes.

Actually, Japanese people often use English in their own ways. One domain is the use of English in Japanese language contexts. And word play is a *modus operandi* often employed in this domain. Some years ago, anti-nuclear plants demonstrators chanted "Noda is Noda" in front of the Diet against ex-Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, who decided to resume nuclear power plants in northwestern Japan. The Prime Minister's name was a homophone of "(Something) is No!" in English (Figure 1, left side).

The game is sometimes played by a leading company. "Suica" (Figure 1, right side) is the name of a prepaid electronic train pass issued by Japan's largest railway company. It officially stands for "super urban intelligent card." But to the Japanese ear, it sounds like a "sui-sui" card. Suisui is a Japanese sound symbolism of fast going, smooth going.



Figure 1. Examples of Word Play in Japanese

Likewise, “ecute” (Figure 1, right side) is the name of a shopping facility created by the same company in the compound of some of its major stations. It is supposed to be the acronym of “eki” (station), “center,” “universal,” “together,” and “enjoy,” the keywords they came up with for the shopping facility. But to the Japanese ear, it just sounds like “eki-cute,” meaning that the shopping facility in the station compound is a cute, attractive one. People seem to enjoy a bilingual pun in using English in Japanese language contexts.

Furthermore, Japanese companies are apt to highlight their corporate identities, company mottos, or business campaigns in English. Many of these phrases are created in accordance with traditional Japanese diction. Some emphasize Japanese national themes like dream, future, possibility, and so on.

1. Drive Your Dreams (Toyota)
2. Shift the Future (Nissan)
3. Make it possible with Canon
4. Inspire the Next (Hitachi)
5. Think GAIA for Life and the Earth (Sanyo)

Others may stress suggestive and humorous values:

6. Feel your future (Kyoto Sangyo University)
7. Color your days. (Tokyo Metro)
8. To be Your Best (Keio Railways)
9. Open Your Beauty (1) (TBC)
10. Have a Rice Day (Agriculture Ministry), etc.

As a matter of fact, Japanese have a long history of using English in Japanese linguistic and cultural contexts. The purpose of English used along these lines may be for intra-national communication, rather than international communication. But their extensive experience of manipulating English will definitely influence the way Japanese use English as an international language, which they are beginning to do more expansively these days.

The global spread of English has not resulted in the global acceptance or adoption of American English or British English as the standards of usage. Instead, it has established English as a multicultural language. At the same time, there have arisen some new types of problems. One of them concerns mutual communicability among speakers of different varieties of English. This is an actual and immediate as well as a potential concern.

While we promote and enjoy English as a multicultural language, we should be prepared to introduce intercultural accommodation training to ELT. (For further discussion, see Honna, 2012, 2014a.) The purpose is diversity management. While current English has a centrifugal tendency for intra-group activity, it also has a centripetal force for inter-group communication. When speakers of different varieties of English get together for information exchange and mutual understanding, it is most likely that many of them are strongly motivated to want to explain their speech patterns and understand those of others. They are eager to learn how they can achieve these objectives.

This is where intercultural/intervarietal diversity management education comes in, to help them help themselves in this endeavor. These pedagogical efforts are needed to improve our competence in using English across cultures. In a larger sense, globalization prompts multicultural encounters in a symbiotic human society, which is developing in many parts of the world. Therefore, what is needed, as social and interpersonal skills, is not the capability of one-way conformity, but the capability of mutual adjustment.

3. Output-based Approaches

This being said, output-based approaches to ELT should be explored. As a matter of fact, Japanese people need English as an international language to talk about themselves and their ways of life with people from different national and cultural backgrounds. Emphasis on self-expressive and explanatory communication skills in ELT has world-wide implications. If the world's ELT is culturally Anglo-American oriented or dominated, what is going to happen when Japanese and Vietnamese meet?

When they meet, it is unlikely that they will be talking about London or New York.

Naturally, Japanese will be interested in Vietnam and Vietnamese in Japan. Thus, we need to be trained and prepared to discuss our ideas, values, and why we do what we do in ELT. English is said to be a language for information exchange. But if we are not ready to give our information in English, we cannot take advantage of the power given the language. At the same time, if we intensify output practice in ELT, we will certainly help stimulate development of Japanese patterns of English. And we will have to be ready to cope with this inevitable situation in a linguistically and culturally proper way.

Indeed, given an opportunity, Japanese students and citizens can often display a remarkable command of English. This tendency was demonstrated by participants in an Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC) conducted in Japan. The ESSC is a competition of stories and essays written in exactly 50 English words. It was first proposed by Professor Peter Hassall of Zayed University, UAE (Hassall, 2006). In 2013-2014, one showcase was sponsored by The Japan Times as its feature event. (<http://st.japantimes.co.jp/>) It was a good exercise for Japanese students to learn to express themselves in English. A sizable number of schools and colleges

encouraged their students to submit their stories to the site, with general citizens finding it as a useful forum for their self-expressive activity. Here are some pieces reproduced from the website. The titles were created by the author for the purpose of this paper. Originally, these essays were written about the given themes of summer, food, and friend, respectively:

1. Family Cooking

“My grandfather is now making oyako-don for the family. I love all kinds of donburi because I think that sauce over rice is the best match. It’s [→It] gives me satisfaction and energy. My grandfather cooks for us every Tuesday. It is a very happy day for him and for us.” (By a junior high school student)

2. The Cicada on a Summer Day

“The cicada lay on its back in the corner of the road. Its silvery stomach gave off a dull glimmer under the setting sun. Its delicate wings now rested on the ground, tired and forgiven. It lived one summer; I had lived fifteen. With luck, I shall live some more.” (By a senior high school student)

3. Childhood Friends

“Getting old means losing friends, he muttered to himself returning from the funeral. In the photo on the chest, his wife was smiling as usual. Suddenly he missed old friends from childhood. How are they doing? He boldly circled “attend” on the long neglected invitation card to the class reunion.” (By a housewife)

As these stories show, Japanese students and citizens can often get excited about using English to express their feelings and thoughts. Some students said that while writing stories about themselves and their surroundings, they discovered that they could say in English what they could not have said in Japanese. This can be interpreted as a good statement of their awakened awareness of English as an additional language.

In view of the fact that students and general citizens can often find it fun to express themselves in English, we should be reminded again and again how important it is for us to organize opportunities for our students to use English as much as possible in Japan’s ELT environment. The Extremely Short Story Competition is just one of them.

Another approach that can be used for self-expressive and mutual understanding purposes is an e-mail exchange project. Actually, the culture of English cannot be restricted to that of the United States, Britain, or any other “native-speaker” country. We want our students to become interested in the cultures of their communication partners from different national backgrounds.

Before I retired from active teaching, Prof. Qi Fang of Shenzhen University (China) and I often organized a Japanese-Chinese English language communication exercise for an intensive period of one month, every year, during which our students exchanged emails asking and answering questions about their cultural differences. Here is an example of a Japanese student asking a Chinese student a cultural question. In this case, the Japanese student also explains a Japanese point of view about gift-giving.

...I have a question to ask you. My brother is married to a Chinese lady, so I have many Chinese 'relatives.' When they come to Tokyo, they bring us a lot of presents and souvenirs. Certainly we are very happy to receive them. But we are often surprised at the way they show us their presents. While presenting their gifts, they open the boxes and bags themselves and start explaining how precious and how expensive their presents are. It seems to us Japanese that they are too direct and boastful. They seem to be a bit rude. Could you kindly tell me how we should understand the situation?...

Here is an answer by a Chinese student. For the Japanese student, this message is a valuable learning experience of a certain part of Chinese culture.

...Actually, Chinese people often give precious and expensive presents to their friends. They consider something precious as the symbol of the friendship...Also, giving something precious is a reflection of Chinese people's breadth of mind. If we give friends something small, we are regarded as penny pincher[s]. The gift-giving custom isn't made to do the boasting, but to show the kindness of the giver. As the proverb says, "I am the happiest person when a friend visits me coming all the way from a far country" in Chinese, Chinese people must give the best and the most expensive presents to their friends...

In spite of the short period, Japanese and Chinese students covered a wide range of topics and seemed to enjoy their "written conversations." After the practice, Japanese students made comments, which are summarized here.

1. We were impressed at the English abilities Chinese students showed.
2. We came to know that Chinese students were really interested in Japanese things.
3. Chinese students were proud of their culture and well-versed in it.
4. This Japanese-Chinese communication experience reminded us that we are close to each other.
5. With this experience it became clearer that English is a language for Japanese and Chinese communication as well as one for international communication.

Likewise, Chinese students said:

1. It was good to talk with Japanese students personally.
2. We understood well that English is a useful language to communicate with Japanese.
3. It was an interesting educational project.
4. We wished that we could have had a longer period for this project.

All these reactions seem to suggest that Japan's ELT should make every possible effort to create various kinds of intercultural communication opportunities for educational purposes. Exposure to these opportunities will definitely enhance our students' awareness of English as an international language for self-expression and mutual understanding across cultures. And it

is encouraging to see an increasing number of teachers in Asian countries doing similar projects with their students for international communication and understanding education.

When I talk about English as a self-expressive language with students and business people, I introduce to them some poems by Asian poets. The purpose is to let them think about English as such. The one by Kamala Das (1934-2009) always works as a good reminder.

Don't write in English, they said, / English is not your mother tongue.../[But]... The language I speak / Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness / All mine, mine alone, it is half English, half / Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest. / It is as human as I am human.../...It voices my joys, my longings, my / Hopes...(Gargesh, 2006, p. 106).

Another poem by Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) uses some Indian English features and still communicates a strong message. Japanese students and citizens are pleased to learn that they can say what they have to say using patterns best fit to them.

I am standing for peace and non-violence / Why world is fighting fighting / Why all people of world / Are not following Mahatma Gandhi / I am not simply understanding.” (Gargesh, 2006, p. 106).

4. Pragmatic Issues

Last but not least, one practical issue should be addressed. Even if we understand English as a multicultural language for international communication, it is still very difficult to practice it to its fullest extent. The difficulty is often noticed in the field of pragmatics.

A serious case was found in a website page of a leading Japanese company. When its financial management scandal became public a couple of years ago, the company came up with an announcement on the Internet in Japanese and English to explain its position on the discreditable behavior. But two versions were quite different in terms of apology. While the Japanese version expressed apology for the misconduct, the English version did not. The language used in the latter was that of evasion and deception for self-defense, apparently intended to mitigate the gravity of illicit acts conducted by the company. (For details, see Honna, 2014b.)

How did it come about that what was expressed in Japanese was not expressed in English? Where did the difference come from? No doubt it came from the perceived disparity of the concepts of apology in the Japanese and English languages. In traditional Japanese society, apology is a culturally sophisticated sign of regret and repentance.

In native-English-speaking countries, some Japanese experts of international business communication claim, this principle does not apply, and self-defense is emphasized more than apology. Japanese business people seem to follow their advice.

For common sense to prevail, Japanese people have to dissolve the discrepancies often created in the use of multiple languages. Japanese companies should not let their principles and policies fluctuate depending on the language they choose for communication. They should know that saying different things in different languages in these important management areas is a questionable act. In view of the fact that this practice is occasionally seen in English in Japan,

Japan's ELT should play a role as a rectifier in this pragmatic field.

In fact, this episode seems to indicate how difficult it actually can be to use English in our own ways, linguistically and culturally. Then, what can Japan's ELT do to improve the situation? My suggestions are these.

1. We should remind ourselves again and again that English is the language to express our own culture, not to imitate others.
2. The fallacy that Japanese and English are so different that we need to have a different point of view when we use each language should be dispelled.
3. At the same time, two-way linguistic and cultural amalgamation should not be discouraged.²

When I talk about these issues with students and business people, I share with them what Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), the great African writer, said almost 4 decades ago.

My answer to the question, can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?, is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?, I should say: I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so (Jenkins, 2003, p. 171).

Of course, the novelist was talking here about creative writing, but I think he was also talking about how we can deal with English as a multicultural language. As a matter of fact, this quotation and some self-reflective questions such as the following seem to provide students and business people with healthy food for thought.

1. Why do you think Chinua Achebe says that it is neither necessary nor desirable for an African to be able to use English like a native speaker?
2. Would you think it is unnecessary for a Japanese to use English like a native speaker?
3. Would you think it is undesirable for a Japanese to use English like a native speaker?

In some cases, the Achebe effect is remarkable. Students and business people can begin to see English as a multicultural language, not as a mono-cultural language. Some students may disagree with the idea of English as a multicultural language introduced in the lecture/seminar. But when they graduate from college and experience the reality of the world as business persons, they say they come to realize that English as a multicultural language is the fact. Thus, discussion of the idea of English as a multicultural language in schools, colleges, and companies should be helpful for future global citizens to prepare themselves for the actual English-language environment surrounding the present multinational and multicultural symbiotic society.

² "Two-way linguistic and cultural amalgamation" means creative incorporation of appropriate English expressions into Japanese and appropriate Japanese expressions into "Japanese English."

5. Conclusion

In order to recognize English as a multicultural language and to use it as an international language, diversity management should be developed in ELT by means of intercultural literacy training. Furthermore, creating English-using opportunities is indispensable in Japan's ELT to let our students learn English as an intermediary language across cultures. At the same time, Japan's ELT should be well prepared to accommodate a Japanese variety of English as an output of its endeavor. And these remarks may apply to many other countries in Asia and across the world.

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