

## 研究報告

## – English as an International Language – Is EIL Natural, Neutral and Beneficial in Japan?

Kolawole Waziri Olagboyega\*\*

### Abstract

This paper explores whether English language teaching and learning is natural, neutral and beneficial in Japan. The paper discusses English Language Teaching (ELT) practices as cultural practices. It describes how the teaching practices themselves represent particular visions of the world and thus make the English language classroom a site of cultural politics, and a place where different versions of how the world is and should be are struggled over. It did not stop, therefore, with an analysis of the wide cultural gaps between North American or European approaches to language teaching and those in Japan. Rather, we explore the understanding of these in relationship to one particular aspect of the discourse of English as an International Language (EIL), namely the view of English language teaching as development aid, a view which often carries with it an unquestioned belief in the innate superiority of Western teaching practices and the innate inferiority of local practices such as the practices in Japan.

### 1. Introduction

Due to the geographical expansion of the British Empire in the past and the predominance of the USA in the present, English has acquired the status of a world language <sup>(1)</sup>. English is an international language in both a global and a local sense. An international language is one which serves for wider communication, used by native speakers of other languages, and in this sense “English is the international language *par excellence*” <sup>(2)</sup>. The discourse of English as an International Language (EIL) is the discussion of the social, economic, and political ramifications of the spread of English throughout the world, as well as the pedagogical discussion of English in its various contexts of use.

According to Pennycook <sup>(3)</sup>, the spread of English is largely “considered to be natural, neutral and beneficial”. ‘Natural’ in the sense that its spread is “seen as a result of inevitable global forces”; ‘neutral’ from the assumption that “once English has in some sense become detached from its original cultural contexts (particularly England and

America), it is now a neutral and transparent medium of communication”; and ‘beneficial’ for those who have English language ability, though arguably not beneficial for those who have a lower level of proficiency, and cannot gain access to the career paths and social positions available to English speakers <sup>(4)</sup>.

It is the question of whether EIL is natural, neutral and beneficial or not that will be examined here, in the context of English in Japan. According to Kachru’s categorization of countries in which English is used, Japan is situated among the ‘Expanding Circle’ countries <sup>(5)</sup>. In Kachru’s model, countries in which English is used are categorized as either ‘Inner Circle’, being countries where English is the native language, ‘Outer Circle’, where English is the second language, or ‘Expanding Circle’ where English is primarily learned as a foreign language. Being in the ‘Expanding Circle’ tells us that in the Japanese context the English language is a foreign language. We will begin by looking at the English language policy in Japan; its connected discourses and consider them against Pennycook’s “natural, neutral and beneficial” suggestion <sup>(6)</sup>.

---

Received July 20, 2011

\*\* Dr. Kolawole Waziri Olagboyega is a Full-time Associate Professor of English for Academic Purposes at Akita International University. He also Teaches (Part-time) in the Graduate School of the Faculty of Engineering and Resource Science of Akita University, Japan.

## 2. The English Language Policy in Japan

In the tradition of the Meiji era (1868-1912), English has been taught in Japan as a classical language (like Greek and Latin), viewed as a source of valuable information and perceived as a one way channel for the reception of western thought, not a two-way channel transmitting Japanese ideas back to the world<sup>(7)</sup>. In the post-war era, efforts towards making education more egalitarian encouraged the teaching of English as a set of formal rules to be mastered and memorised. Law<sup>(8)</sup> argues that these ideologies have resulted in “a set of teaching priorities and procedures which over time have become stiff and inflexible, and which now create considerable resistance to the introduction of new purposes and methods.

However, according to Riley<sup>(9)</sup> there have been many calls since the 1980s from within Japan for changes in the Japanese educational system in general, and in the teaching of English in particular. English language teaching in Japan traditionally has been based on a teacher-centred approach with the term *Yakudoku* used to describe the particular grammar-translation method widely employed in Japanese schools.

As a result of the continued calls for educational reform, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MOE) put into effect changes in the teaching of English in junior high schools in 1993 and high schools in 1994. The changes were based on a 1989 revision of MOE guidelines<sup>(10)</sup> and included the adding of a new high school subject, Oral Communication, consisting of courses in listening, speaking and discussion<sup>(11)</sup>.

Then in 2002, the newly named Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) produced a document entitled “Developing a strategic plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English abilities’”<sup>(12)</sup>. The plan calls for greater emphasis to be placed on “the cultivation of fundamental and practical communication abilities”. It lays out communicative attainment targets for school students, which range from an ability to hold ‘simple conversations’ at junior high

school level, and an ability to hold ‘normal conversations’ at senior high school level, to graduates leaving university with an ability to effectively function in their chosen occupational field in English<sup>(13)</sup>.

These changes were aimed at promoting oral communication as the primary goal for English education. A term which has been commonly adopted for the new courses, and the new approach to English teaching now encouraged in Japan, is ‘communicative language teaching’ (CLT)<sup>(14)</sup>.

There is an assumption inherent in the CLT method that the goal of students of ESL/EFL is the ability to communicate in English with a high proficiency. This simply is not true in most Outer and Expanding Circle contexts. In Japan, proficiency in English communication is just not necessary for daily life and survival in Japanese society (although, ironically perhaps, CLT has been adopted by Japanese educators). McKay notes context as being CLT’s biggest challenge to worldwide adoption, as “teachers outside of the Inner Circle [...] question the appropriateness of the approach for their particular teaching context”<sup>(15)</sup>. The adoption of CLT in Japan is natural in the sense that it was implemented by the Japanese government of their own free will. It is not entirely neutral, since it is a method developed in the Inner Circle countries rather than developed in Japan, although it is neutral also because it is only a method of teaching, and instructors still have the freedom to interpret it as they wish, and also use other methods alongside it in their classrooms. As for beneficial, CLT’s benefit to the student goes hand-in-hand with the benefits of learning English in Japan, and the language’s place in Japanese society and business. For Japan as a whole, the focus on communicative language skills prepares “students to interact with the international community, which has obvious economic and political benefits”<sup>(16)</sup>. English language ability is beneficial for a small number of Japanese, who choose to study or work abroad, or work in Japan in jobs which specifically require the use of English. For the rest, English may not necessarily be a benefit, but neither is it a negative ability to have.

### 3. The EFL Teachers and Culture Materials in Japan

Since English is an international language used for wider international communication, it is natural to combine English lessons with teaching about different world cultures, such as where English is used as an L1 and an L2. When choosing culture materials for class, the teacher has a choice between materials based on the target culture, the source culture or on international culture. According to McKay 'Target culture materials' "use the culture of a country where English is spoken as a first language" such as the US, UK or Australia; 'Source culture materials' use the learners' own culture to inspire its content; and 'international target culture materials' use "a great variety of cultures in English- and non-English speaking countries around the world" <sup>(17)</sup>.

In Japan, "textbooks have become more culturally diverse in content and illustrations", covering many global topics and introducing students to countries and cultures other than those of the Inner Circle <sup>(18)</sup>. This is beneficial to students, who will learn more about the world and the international contexts in which EIL is used; but "students may be uninterested or puzzled" by what is presented to them since it is unrelated to their own context, and it also presents a problem for teachers who, according to McKay, "may not have access to additional information needed to explain some of the cultural references" <sup>(19)</sup>.

Furthermore, the textbooks may be based on international culture, but the listening materials connected to such textbooks are "conventionally recorded in North American Standard English", creating a conflict between the cultural content – "a Korean boy and his Japanese host mother" – and language teaching, as they "are conversing in 'perfect' American English" <sup>(20)</sup>. So, despite an attempt at neutrality in a cultural sense, ELT textbooks rely on the standardized forms of English, promoting Inner Circle varieties of the language, and grasp to the assumptions of the 'superiority' of native speakers of English.

Muroi <sup>(21)</sup> investigated how English textbooks used in Japan raise students' social awareness by examining nationalities of characters that appear in ten textbooks. She

found that there are only a few instances where non-native speakers of English appear in the textbooks; about 90 percent of the characters are from Inner Circle countries. She also points out that there is not a proper balance in terms of characters' religious and regional variation, arguing that more emphasis should be placed on Asian countries and cultures. Thus, in the Japanese EFL context, much emphasis is put on "native speaker" and "native culture", and even though more communication in English is taking place between non-native speakers <sup>(22)</sup>, greater attention of students is drawn to communication between native and non-native speakers.

However, there is also a positive attempt that tries to incorporate source culture information and material into English teaching in Japan. The newest *Course of Study* published in 2003 states that in English classes, students are expected to learn and produce information that is about Japanese culture, language, society, etc. Hyde <sup>(23)</sup> argues that dealing with source culture materials and information could be a good alternative to using target culture materials and information.

In this sense, English textbooks used in Japan contain well-balanced materials in terms of cultural variety. For instance, in the *Crown English Series II* published by Sanseido, one of the most widely used textbooks, includes ten passages: five are about universal topics, two are about Japan; two are about interculturalism; and only one passage is from an Inner Circle country. The two passages on interculturalism are about Singlish and perceptible differences between Eastern and Western people. Also, according to Sanseido's comments on the textbook, it is intended to raise students' sociolinguistic and social awareness by introducing culture from non-native English speaking community and non-native speakers of English from Egypt or Korea <sup>(24)</sup>.

It can be said, therefore, that although any specific national guideline for culture teaching, materials, and their implementation is absent, MEXT clearly attempts to encourage interculturality and to reflect it in English classrooms. Also, materials used in schools are culturally

sensitive enough to conduct English classes interculturally. The last aspect that should be mentioned is English teachers, who actually apply and implement what has been discussed so far.

Nearly everything about English teaching – whether or not students will become interested in English; whether or not they will succeed in English learning; or whether or not they will be culturally and socially competent users of International English – is dependent upon teachers. The discussions so far have pointed out that the fundamental soil for teaching culture sensitively has already been cultivated, and it is waiting for teachers to plant the seeds, grow them, and harvest crops. In order to succeed in this long-range project, there is a need for teachers themselves to become culturally sensitive, knowing what they need to do and what they should not do.

The first point that should be mentioned is teacher's qualification programs in Japan. All school teachers are required to have the national qualification, which can be acquired by taking undergraduate credits. During the teacher hiring process for public schools, for example, the undergraduate courses that applicants have taken are hardly taken into consideration for deciding which applicants to hire. As a result, one can be hired without having taken any course that deals with culture, such as cultural anthropology or sociolinguistics. Fundamental knowledge about culture can be learned through those academic disciplines, and are highly recommended to prospective teachers.

As for incumbent teachers, they need to recognize the universal aspects of human cultures. We, humans, share many universal values which are actually taken for granted and are sometimes ignored. Also, Leveridge<sup>(25)</sup> argues that teachers should not compare cultural differences but *contrast* them so that students do not make value judgement. Of course, in order for students to contrast them, teachers need to provide them ample and not-simplified information about various cultures.

The perceived superiority of natively spoken English is certainly not confined to textbooks. English teachers and ALTs from Western/Inner Circle countries are plentiful in

Japanese high schools and in specialized private language schools across Japan. These teachers invariably bring with them 'cultural baggage' into the classroom, effectively cancelling out any neutrality which the English language may have as a standalone entity, or the arguable neutrality of textbooks aimed at 'international target culture materials'.

According to McKay, when given a choice between a bilingual teacher of English (for whom English is their second language {L2}) and a 'native speaker', it is the latter who is "invariably... given preference" by employers<sup>(26)</sup>. Sadly, even a qualified English teacher will often lose out to a completely untrained individual, simply because for the untrained individual English is their first language {L1}, their native language. In the spread of English in the context of Japan, cultural materials and 'cultural baggage' of ALTs in the classroom do not completely satisfy the 'neutral' definition – ELT in Japan is not culturally neutral; and the selection of EFL teachers by schools is not 'natural', due to their preferential hiring of largely untrained native speakers, over bilingual teachers of English. The fact is that language schools can "charge more if they advertise they have native English speakers as teachers"<sup>(27)</sup>, indicating the influence of the business of EIL on language teaching in Japan, and illustrating a lack of the 'natural' and 'neutral'. This leads us onto the business of ELT in Japan.

#### 4. The Business of ELT in Japan

ELT is big business around the world, with EFL/ESL being the "sixth highest source of invisible exports for the UK in 1985" according to Pennycook<sup>(28)</sup>, with many companies in the industry either teaching English, or providing the materials (textbooks, guides, etc.) and examinations (TOEFL, TOEIC, etc.) to accompany the teaching. The ELT market has many levels of support, such as the standardized examinations, which have "spawned a whole series of schools and publications dedicated to training people specifically" for scoring highly in TOEFL and TOEIC<sup>(29)</sup>.

English language schools can be found almost everywhere in Japan, catering to high school students in

*juku* (cram school) style contexts in order to pass English exams, to those wishing to score highly on TOEFL/TOEIC examinations, as well as learners of English who have their own purposes and goals for study. Many hire Japanese people, who have the experience of learning English and of scoring highly in the standardized examinations as teachers. Many other English language schools, usually those which are widely recognized such as Nova, Geos and Berlitz schools, hire native speakers from America, Australia and Britain as teachers. It does not matter where from, so long as they are ‘native speakers’ of English, since “many Japanese English learners do not actually make a qualitative distinction between American English and British English”, according to Miyagi, Sato and Crump<sup>(30)</sup>. These schools can necessarily charge more, and have a higher reputation, thanks to the presence of native speakers, because as previously mentioned language schools can charge more if they advertise they have native English speakers as teachers.

These native speakers will often be almost completely untrained in teaching. The same can be said of ALTs, such as those on the government sponsored JET program, who are “mostly untrained as teachers”<sup>(31)</sup>. Certainly, being trained is not a requirement for being hired, so it is lucky happenstance for students who do get a trained ALT in their classroom.

The main benefit for students is the contact with a foreigner, which broadens their experience with people of other cultures. Perhaps this has been recognized by the JET organizers, who have in recent years been hiring ALTs from Outer Circle countries, such as India, which can only help to broaden understanding of international cultures, as well as recognition of other varieties of EIL rather than just the standardized – and idealized – varieties from Britain and America<sup>(32)</sup>.

In a dynamic where Japanese people are paying to learn English, it cannot be said of EIL that its spread is ‘natural’, since it is ‘forced’ via the ‘service provider – customer’ relationship; nor can it be said to be ‘neutral’, since ALTs in the JET program and in the language schools inevitably bring culture into the classroom. As for ‘beneficial’, while

there are benefits of the business of ELT, such as those discussed above where ALTs with other non-‘standard’ varieties of English are hired, and also economic benefits, the nature of the ‘service provider – customer’ relationship predisposes the spread of English to benefit one group more than the other (namely the English language schools over the students), and so does not fit Pennycook’s criteria of being on “a cooperative and equitable footing”<sup>(33)</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

In an attempt to analyse the extent to which the spread and use of EIL in the Japanese context is natural, neutral and beneficial, we have examined the areas where Japan enters the EIL discourse.

Considering the spread of EIL to Japan as ‘natural’, to some extent English has spread naturally to Japan. It was not forced upon Japan by colonial powers, but rather adopted freely by Japan in order to strengthen the country’s global position, hence its initial spread to Japan can be seen like Pennycook does “as a result of inevitable global forces”<sup>(34)</sup>, and therefore ‘natural’. On the other hand, the current spread of EIL in Japan is certainly not natural, mired as it is by the business of ELT and the inequalities inherent within the hiring practices – giving preference to untrained ‘native speakers’ over experienced bilingual teachers – and pressure upon high school students to learn English in order to pass exams, ‘forcing’ the language upon them.

With regard to the neutrality of EIL in the Japanese context, English is not “detached from its original cultural contexts”, as native speaker ALTs and target culture materials/textbooks bring Inner Circle culture into the classroom. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to completely divorce culture from language, so perhaps in any teaching context, Japan or any other country, English is not culturally ‘neutral’.

Neither is it “now a neutral and transparent medium of communication”, due to the appropriation of standardized English examination scores by companies as a means of selecting job applicants<sup>(35), (36)</sup>. This final development

within the last five to ten years is alarming, not because it indicates the continued spread of English in Japanese society, but because of the conscious use of English in order to create divisions in society between those who have English proficiency and those who do not – harking back to the initial spread and use of English by the British Empire within its colonies.

Finally, the ‘beneficial’ nature of the spread of EIL in the Japanese context can be summed up by the English language’s role in international relations, politics and commerce. Repeated earlier but worth repeating again, English education prepares “students to interact with the international community, which has obvious economic and political benefits”<sup>(37)</sup> – the ability to communicate in English is a necessity in the modern globalised world.

For those Japanese who go on to careers that use English, it is beneficial to have studied the language, but for most Japanese who never need to use English at a high level, English is not so ‘beneficial’. In Japan, such as it is in many other contexts, the ‘beneficial’ nature of the spread of EIL is dependent on the individual’s proficiency in the language: those with a high proficiency in English can reap the benefits, while those with a low proficiency or no English ability at all are left without access to the same career paths and opportunities. This situation may not be so pronounced in Japan, with the majority of jobs and interactions in society requiring very little or no English, but with the worrying trend for companies to use English proficiency as a litmus test for hard work, commitment and other desirable employee traits, irrespective of the need for English in the workplace. In the future more and more may feel the ‘beneficial’ spread of EIL – while yet more would disagree with the theory of the spread of EIL as ‘beneficial’ in the Japanese context.

### References

- (1) Olagboyega, K.W. (2007): Varieties of Modern English Language. In *The Scientific and Technical Journal*, Faculty of Engineering and Resource Science, Akita University, Japan. Vol. 28, 33-47.
- (2) McKay, S. L. (2002): *Teaching English as an international language: Rethinking goals and approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (p.5).
- (3) Pennycook, A. (1994): *Cultural politics of English as an international language*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education. (p.8)
- (4) Ibid., p.9
- (5) Kachru, B.B. (1990): World Englishes and applied Linguistics, In, *World Englishes* 9:1, pp.3-20.
- (6) Ibid. p. 9.
- (7) Riley, P.A. (2008): *Reform in English Language Teaching in Japan*. Yokohama: Kanto Gakuin University (p. 108)
- (8) Law, G. (1995): Ideologies of Education language education in Japan. *JALT Journal*, 17 (2), pp. 213-224
- (9) Ibid. p105.
- (10) Wada, M. (2002): Teacher education for curricular innovation in Japan. In S. J. Savignon. (ed.). *Interpreting communicative language teaching* (pp. 31-40). Yale: Yale University Press
- (11) Matsuura, H., Chiba, R., and Hildebrandt, P. (2001): Beliefs about learning and teaching communicative English in Japan. *JALT Journal*, 23 (1) 69-89.
- (12) MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). (2002): *Developing a strategic plan to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities”*. Retrieved July 20, 2011, from World Wide Web, <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/2002/07/020901.htm>
- (13) Ibid. p.108.
- (14) Ibid. p. 107.
- (15) Ibid. p.113.
- (16) Miyagi, K., Sato, M., & Crump, A. (2009): “To challenge the unchallenged: Potential of non-‘standard’ Englishes for Japanese EFL learners.” *JALT Journal*, 31, 2, pp. 261-273
- (17) Ibid., p.88-93
- (18) Ibid., p. 269
- (19) Ibid., p.92
- (20) Ibid., p.269
- (21) Muroi, M. (1998): “A comparative study of social awareness in Oral Communication textbooks.” *SURCLE*, 1, pp. 67-71.
- (22) Crystal, D. (2004): *The English language: a guided tour of the language*. London: Penguin Global.
- (23) Hyde, M. (1994): “The teaching of English in Morocco: the place of culture.” *ELT Journal*, 48, 4, pp. 295-305.
- (24) Shimozaki, H. (ed.). (2003): *Crown English series II*. Tokyo: Sanseido.
- (25) Leveridge, A. N. (2009): The relationship between language & culture and the implications for language teaching. Retrieved July 20, 2011, from <http://education.tefl.net/articles.teacher-technique/language-culture>

- (26) Ibid., p. 42
- (27) Ibid., p. 42
- (28) Ibid., p. 155-156
- (29) Ibid., p. 156
- (30) Ibid., p. 264
- (31) Ibid., p. 266
- (32) Ibid., p. 268
- (33) Ibid., p. 9
- (34) Ibid., p. 9
- (35) Pennycook, A. (1994): *Cultural politics of English as an international language*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education. (p.9)
- (36) Miyagi, K., Sato, M., & Crump, A. (2009): "To challenge the unchallenged: Potential of non-‘standard’ Englishes for Japanese EFL learners." *JALT Journal*, 31, 2, p. 264
- (37) Ibid. p. 264.