

The difference between written and spoken English
and the implications on Japan's English instruction

1. *Introduction*

In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Culture, Science, and Technology (MEXT) released the Course Study for Foreign Languages, which states as its overall objective, to “develop students’ basic communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude towards communication in foreign languages.” In other words, one of the key goals of the Japanese English curriculum is to develop oral communication skills in English. The emphasis on oral communication in Japanese English education is apparent from the fact that all Japanese textbooks approved by MEXT are dialogue based (Matsuda, 2002).

However, a problem with Japan’s English education is that it does not adequately distinguish between spoken and written language. One example is the story of Yuko, a Japanese student who attended through high school in Japan, and then attended college in the United States, who spoke English with hesitation and numerous pauses during interviews, but often “in near-perfect English...she was formulating correct phrasing” (Spack, 1997). In this paper, I examine a 2nd year English class at a public junior high school from a returnee student’s perspective, and demonstrate that the so-called “oral communication” taught in class fails to adequately encompass the wider

range of spoken English as compared to written English.

Before discussing English education in Japan as a form of bilingual education, bilingualism needs to be defined. Bilingualism is multi-dimensional, and is defined by criteria such as competence, balance, and function of the two languages, (Edwards, 2004; Li, 2000). An intuitive measure of bilingualism is to determine a bilingual's proficiency in both languages, yet proficiency is difficult to estimate and even define, because there are even variations in competence among native speakers (Butler and Hakuta, 2004). Bilingualism is further complicated because a bilingual is not simply two monolinguals in one person, but rather one individual with multiple languages, who uses their languages for different functions (Grosjean, 1985). For example, Romaine (1995) explores code-switching as an effective means of communication between bilinguals, and Pavlenko (2006) delineates how bilinguals have different personalities in each of their multiple languages. Furthermore, bilinguals often live together in a linguistic community, which makes it necessary to explore the interaction of groups of bilinguals within a society (Baker, 2006).

Second, what are the issues underlying bilingual education? Some major areas are the role of first-language (L1) proficiency, the age of exposure to L2, and the different outcomes of submersion and immersion education. A significant, yet often

neglected theory is Cummins' (1979) developmental interdependence hypothesis, which states that the level of competence attainable in L2 is a function of the competence in a student's L1 at the start of L2 education (Cummins, 1979; Dicker, 2003). Another critical issue is when to begin bilingual education. While younger learners often end up with better pronunciation, older learners have significant cognitive advantages and often learn at a faster pace (Dicker, 2003). In addition, there is often a wide gap between bilingual education for majority and minority language students. As Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) points out, many minority language communities are forced to become bilingual for education and employment opportunities. Especially for working class minority language children, a sense of "subaltern subjectivity" results when students resist the imposition of a majority language, and yet do not have adequate resources to master the language, as is the case in Hong Kong, where an English-speaking bilingual elite dominate over the Chinese-speaking working class (Lin, 2005). In contrast, Genesee (2004) found that second language acquisition can usually be achieved with no negative effects on first language for majority language students.

Finally, how are such theories implemented in bilingual education? Singapore is often cited as a successful case of bilingual education, because it has achieved a high degree of multilingualism through requiring "Mother Tongue" (Mandarin, Tamil, or

Malay) and English education (Dixon, 2009). One of the factors of success for Singapore's language policy is the high prestige and economic value of English—in many English speaking nations, such as Australia, the reverse effect means that English speaking students often lack motivation to learn foreign languages (Smolicz & Secombe, 2003). Looking at Japan, Kanno (2008) finds that submersion to Japanese is the main goal for ethnic minority children, and that their potential as a source of linguistic capital is ignored by the government and businesses. Returnees often have a similar experience; teachers often point at returnee weaknesses instead of strengths (Kanno, 2000). In contrast, some middle class children at Nichiei Immersion School, a private K-12 school, take the partial English immersion program there in order to potentially join Japan's bilingual social elite (Kanno, 2008).

2. Methodology

I interviewed a 2nd year junior high school student, Tatsuya (a pseudonym), about Ms. Tanaka's (a pseudonym) 2nd year English class at a public junior high school in the Tokyo metropolitan area. I collected additional details from Tatsuya in several informal follow-up interviews, in addition to his textbook, homework, workbooks, handouts, and exams. Tatsuya is a returnee student who was born in the United States

and attended public elementary school through the 5th grade. He then moved to Japan, and has attended Japanese public school since the 6th grade. Tatsuya's background as a returnee student from a monolingual English speaking country provides a different perspective from a non-returnee student, because his English proficiency is above the English course, making it possible to compare what he learned abroad, and what he is being taught in Japan. I have also used my background as a returnee student who attended from pre-school through high school in the United States to look beyond Tatsuya's perspective.

Analysis of the typical class day took the form of an indirect event reading, similar to one conducted by Spolsky and Shohamy (1999), with the main focus on comparing "oral communication" as taught in class with the actual oral communication skills that Tatsuya learned from his American education and environment. While I have attempted to objectively cover the class in my interview, the details of the class are limited to the questions I asked, and the responses offered. In order to construct a better picture of the class, I have also included Tatsuya's textbook and other class materials in my analysis, by having him explain how his textbook was used in class, and what a typical homework assignment was like. In addition, I have analyzed one of Tatsuya's midterm exams, because exams cover the key concepts of the course.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Homework

In Japanese education, *yoshu*, or going over the content that will be covered next class is a common practice. In this sense, the “homework” given in Ms. Tanaka’s English class is an introduction to the next class’s lesson, and it makes more chronological sense to explain the homework before the typical class day.

The typical homework assignment is for students to copy a page of their English textbook’s dialogue in a notebook on the left page, with key vocabulary in a column next to the dialogue, and to translate the dialogue into Japanese on the right page. A typical passage per page in the textbook has around 50 to 100 words, with about 5 to 10 new vocabulary words. Students also recite the page 30 times, and fill in a Bingo sheet for next class, by picking 5 words each from 5 rows, with each row containing a selection of similar words, such as the days of the week (sample Bingo sheet in Appendix A). During the next class, the students will play Bingo at the beginning, and Ms. Tanaka’s main lesson will be about the page in the textbook assigned for homework.

3.2 A typical class day

English class is held three times a week, each for a 50 minute period. The

typical class day begins with the English teacher, Ms. Tanaka exchanging a routine

dialogue with the students:

Teacher: Hello.

Class: Hello.

Teacher: How are you?

Class: I'm fine, thank you. And you?

Teacher: I'm fine, thank you.

After these greetings, Ms. Tanaka conducts Bingo by reading out words, and the game ends when 10 students have two Bingos. The Bingo game typically lasts a little less than 10 minutes.

Ms. Tanaka then covers a passage in the textbook, at the pace of one page per class. This is the main lesson of each class. She first plays the text on CD, with a native English speaker reading the passage in an American accent. Then she goes over the pronunciation and meanings of the new vocabulary words with flash cards, and calls on individual students to check their pronunciation and understanding of the words. For example, she will ask, "What is the meaning of college?" or "How do you pronounce *daigaku* (college) in English?" After this review of the homework, she reads the passage through once, and then again broken up into each character's lines (the passages are typically dialogues between two people), and the class repeats after her. She then reads one character's lines, as the class reads the other character, and vice versa. Finally, she explains the meaning of the dialogue in Japanese, along with any new forms of

grammar and phrases used in the dialogue. If there is time, students stand and are then given time to recite the passage three times at their own pace, after which they may sit down.

The class ends when the bell rings, and there is another exchange of greetings between Ms. Tanaka and the students.

Class: Goodbye, Ms. Tanaka.

Teacher: Goodbye, see you, that's all for today.

3.3 The role of Assistant Language Teachers (ALT)

ALTs teach the lesson on Mondays, and conduct a similar lesson to the one described above, with minor modifications depending on how well they speak Japanese. Their main purpose is to help students develop good pronunciation. Ms. Tanaka is also present, and when an ALT does not speak Japanese, Ms. Tanaka acts as a translator. From April to December, Ms. Tanaka's class had an ALT from the United States, the Philippines, and Russia.

3.4 Exams

While unusual in Japan, Tatsuya's middle school has two semesters in a school year, from April to October, and October to March. Each semester has one midterm and a final exam. Under the assumption that the exam format doesn't undergo major changes throughout the year, the second semester midterm roughly breaks down as

follows,, with a total of 100 points possible:

Listening: 18 points (Question 1 and 2)

Speaking: 12 points (Question 4, 6, and 7)

Translation: 30 points (Question 3, 5, 9, and 11)

Reading Comprehension: 12 points (Question 13 and 14)

Writing and Grammar: 28 points (Question 8, 10, and 12)

The listening section involves answering questions about a passage played on a CD. The “Speaking” questions ask about pronunciation, or ask students to pick an appropriate response to a short dialogue. All answers are paper based.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

At first glance, the class appears to emphasize oral communication. Students spend far more time speaking and listening to English than the stereotypical image of a Japanese English class of the instructor writing a sentence on the whiteboard, and analyzing it in terms of grammar. Their lessons are based on a dialogue oriented textbook, as opposed to one with many short reading passages. However, on closer inspection, much of the speaking is in grammatically correct English, similar to the English spoken by Yuko (Spack, 1997), perhaps more adequately described as “reading out loud” than speaking.

Tatsuya’s experience in the class highlights the difference between spoken and written English. The “mistakes” that Tatsuya often makes on exams are often due to his

use of his English abilities acquired overseas to solve problems, rather than apply what the class covered for the exam. For example, Tatsuya will write “*When* will you visit Taro?” instead of “*What time* will you visit Taro?” or “Right *over here*, please” instead of “Right *this way*, please.” He answers as he would speak, instead of what the textbook dialogue modeled. A common answer of Ms. Tanaka to Tatsuya’s asking why he was marked down is “that’s not how I taught the class.”

But are such “mistakes” really mistakes? If the objective of the class is to teach speaking in the sense of contemporary spoken American English, then Tatsuya’s answers are model answers, and should not be marked down. An extreme example of testing what was learned in class rather than spoken English is question 7 on the 2nd semester midterm exam. The question reads:

7. Pick the best answer to the following dialogues. You may use the same answer more than once. (The correct answer is in parentheses.)

- (1) May I use this computer? (C)
- (2) Must I finish it by tomorrow? (E)
- (3) Shall I close the window? (B)
- (4) Will you take a picture of us? (C)

Choices:

- A. Yes, I must. B. Yes, please. C. Sure.
- D. Yes, I am. E. No, you don’t have to. F. Yes, I do.

The only possible answer to (1) and (4) is C. However, in the case of (2) and (3), both B and E seem equally appropriate. Looking again at the question with the “correct” answers in mind, the biggest difference between (2) and (3) is the use of “Must I...” and

“Shall I...” forms. Looking at a grammar section in the textbook, it states that answers to “Shall I...” should take forms *such as* “Yes, please. / No, thank you.” and responses to “May I...” should take forms *such as* “Sure. / Sorry, you can’t.” With these rules in mind, the “correct” answers strictly adhere to these rules, although “such as” arguably provides leeway for other answers.

As this exam question indicates, however, there is no leeway, and the class is taught in a one question, one response approach. Such an approach fails to notice that while both writing and speaking are governed by grammar, writing is grammatically right or wrong, whereas speaking may be grammatically wrong, but still be “correct” in the sense that it has become so commonplace that our ears do not catch the mistake. In other words, written English is a subset of spoken English (Figure 1), and imposing correct grammar onto spoken English fails to encompass the larger range covered by acceptable spoken English. For example, in spoken English, common equivalents of “Yes” include “OK,” “Yeah,” and “You bet,” but such expressions are not used in formal writing. On the other hand, most writing can be spoken, although this often results in unnecessarily stiff speaking.

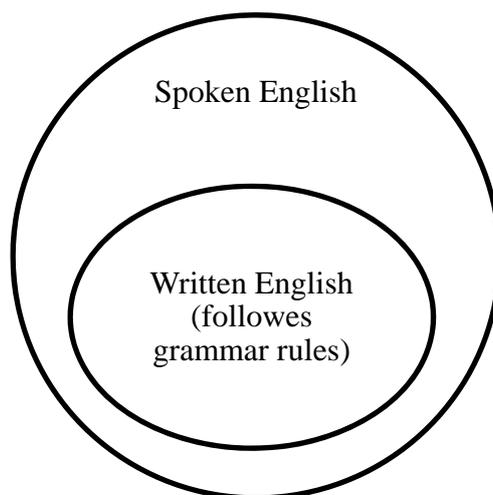


Figure 1: The general relationship of spoken and written English

I mentioned above that “our ears” often do not catch grammatical mistakes in speaking, if the expression is frequently used. Native speakers and many returnees are immersed in English, and through sources such as the media, peers, and instructors, learn to distinguish between “correct” and “incorrect” speaking by ear. This is however, not a simple process, even for children picking up an L1, and would be impractical in an English class that has only three 50 minute periods per week, although instruction time is not as important as quality of input (Dicker, 2003). To speed up language learning, a grammar based approach allows cognitively developed students to artificially acquire this “ear” for English, in a far shorter time span, and this has been the traditional Japanese approach to English, as mentioned by Yuko (Spack, 1997).

In other words, the grammar-based approach to speaking is not in itself a problem. The problem with Ms. Tanaka’s class is that as in Tatsuya’s case, English

speakers outside of the rigid one question, one response framework are forced to conform when such students could instead be utilized to demonstrate the flexibility of spoken English. While it may not be practical to use returnee students to model spoken English as they face a chance of being ostracized for standing out, ALT's could model different styles of speaking. ALT's currently act as a "live" version of the CD included in the textbook, but ALT's could model the dialogue, and then elaborate, "But another way to say this is like this..." In this way, students would have the opportunity to understand that their textbook is not the only correct way to speak, and learn that spoken English is more flexible than written English, just like Japanese, since most students already understand the difference between spoken and written Japanese.

Indeed, for junior high school students, one problem may in fact be this lack of flexibility in English. At Nichiei Immersion School, Kanno (2008) noticed a reluctance of older students, particularly teenagers, to speak in English, because adolescents need "slang and informal language" to "[signal] their identities...and 'talk the right talk'" (as cited in Tarone and Swain, 1995, p.169). In other words, if students were given the opportunity to also learn some contemporary teenage language in class, they may be more willing to use and learn English. After all, English is viewed as a fashionable language in Japan, as can be seen from English and the alphabet playing a prominent

role in brand names and advertising. While teachers may not know slang, ALT's and returnees could fill in this gap.

In conclusion, looking at Tatsuya's treatment in the class, his strength in spoken English is overlooked and ignored—a common experience of returnees (Kanno, 2000). Yet Tatsuya is the goal of the 2003 MEXT policy: to pursue English education with more emphasis on oral communication. The policy is supposedly a move away from Yuko and the traditional grammar based approach (Spack, 1997). However, because the current emphasis on oral communication still does not attempt to encompass the wider range of spoken English over written English, Tatsuya's experience is not of use to the actual implementation of the 2003 MEXT policy—a policy that does not realize that perhaps Japanese people have a hard time speaking because their English is completely inflexible, and not due to lack of opportunity to speak.

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