

English Education in Japan and Japanese-American Relations

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1. Introduction

There have been repeated discussions in Japan since the Meiji Restoration, Japan's political revolution in 1868, about whether or not the Japanese people should study English. There was a Minister of Education in the 1870s who stated that if Japan did not adopt English as its language, the progress of Japanese civilization would be evidently impossible. There was another Minister of Education in the 1890s who advocated that the Japanese people should respect their own language, therefore he diminished the number of English class hours at middle schools. There were quite a few scholars at that time who emphasized the importance of teaching English, saying that the Japanese people should study English and obtain knowledge and feelings of fresh and sound western cultures through English.

In 1924, the anti-Japanese immigration law was passed in the U.S. Supreme Court. Naturally there appeared some critics, politicians and military people who argued that Japan should stop teaching English and respect its own language because Japan was an independent and honorable nation. In 1931, the Ministry of Education again diminished the number of English class hours at middle schools. In 1941 when Japan and the U.S. went to war, all English loanwords were changed into Japanese words, though people had to endure a great inconvenience. Immediately after Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces in 1945, however, the Japanese people began to study English very hard again. Japan seems to have been doomed to repeat such waves of pros and cons about English education, and these arguments have been remarkably synchronized with good and bad relations with America. In this paper, the writer traces the history of English education

in Japan and tries to find how the English education has been influenced by the Japanese-American relations.

2. The First Favorable Wave for English Education

In 1853, an American fleet of four warships came to Japan under the command of Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, who urged the Tokugawa Shogunate to open the country to the outer world. Perry delivered a letter from the U.S. president. It was a shocking incident to Japanese people, because they had lived long under a policy of national isolation. Perry returned to Japan the following February to conclude the Japan-U.S. Treaty of Peace and Amity. The treaty stipulated that Japan would provide most-favored-nation treatment and allow the opening of two ports as U.S. supply stations. In 1856, Townsend Harris opened the first U.S. consulate general. Harris concluded two years later the Japan-U.S. Treaty of Amity and Commerce. When ports in Kanagawa, Nagasaki and Hakodate were opened to foreign countries in 1859, American missionaries came to Japan to propagate Christianity. Instead of propagating Christianity, they taught English to the Japanese young people because Christianity was prohibited in Japan at that time. In the 1820s, British whaling ships made frequent appearances in Japan's home waters. In 1870, religious freedom was acknowledged and American missionaries came to Japan in great numbers.

The Tokugawa Shogunate thought that they could not help accepting foreign people. They realized the accelerated necessity of English study. The government, therefore, built an institution, Banshoshirabesho, to teach or translate English. In 1866, the government sent twelve boys to Britain to let them study English and see more of the world. In 1868, a political revolution known as the Meiji Restoration broke out and the Tokugawa Shogunate collapsed after more than two hundred years' reign. The new government decided to open Japan to the world and to catch up with Western nations. It also aimed to make Japan rich and to build a strong army under the slogan of "Fukokukyohei." There was an atmosphere at the time of the revolution that Japan should exclude foreign countries. This atmosphere, however, changed drastically once Japan opened its door to the outer world. The new government's policy of catching up with Western nations was to

employ foreign people and send young Japanese to Western nations. In 1872, 119 British, 50 French and 16 Americans were working for the new government. In the 1870s, the new government sent a large number of young Japanese, including the first group of five girls, to Western nations. The government sent 167 in 1871, 212 in 1872 and 86 in 1873. During these three years, 193 were sent to the U.S., 144 to Britain, 73 to Germany and 57 to France¹.

In 1871, the Ministry of Education invited David Murray, an American, who was asked to be an adviser and to revise the educational system. In accordance with an adoption of the new educational system in that year, English was included in middle school curricula just as it was before. In 1872, Arinori Mori, the first Minister of Education, wrote in his letter to a Yale University professor, William D. Whitney, that Japan should adopt English as its language². He stated that the Japanese language was inadequate to the growing necessities of the nation, and that if Japan would keep pace with the age, it must adopt English. He even recommended that Japanese students studying in the U.S. should marry Americans and return with their American spouses. Some scholars, like Tatsui Baba and Amane Nishi, opposed this idea, saying that the Japanese language was developed enough to educate its people. They argued that if English was adopted, only those who had enough time and money to learn English were benefited, and English might divide Japanese people into two social classes as seen in India.

In 1882, the new educational system was put into effect, partly adopting both the British and the American systems. English became a major compulsory foreign language at four-year middle schools, and English and minor foreign languages, German or French, became compulsory subjects at two-year higher middle schools. English was taught for six class hours a week at middle schools and seven class hours at higher middle schools. Even at primary schools, English could be included in curriculum as a selective subject. At middle and higher middle schools, almost all subjects were taught in English with English textbooks by native speakers of English.

One national big issue at that time was to revise the Japan-U.S. Treaty of Amity and Commerce, which Japanese people thought was unfavorable to Japan. The Japanese government had been required to give foreigners easy access to Japanese markets. This

meant that communication between Japanese people and foreign people would increase rapidly. This idea spurred Japanese people to study English. They thought that if Japan wanted to become a member of the developed nations, English was an indispensable means to make Japan a modern nation.

In 1887, the Japanese government failed to revise the treaty. It was natural that some sense of nationalism emerged among Japanese people, and it meant that criticism toward English and English education would become strong. It indicated the coming of a dark age of the English education in Japan.

3. The First Unfavorable Wave for English Education

The Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1894 and ended in 1895 in favor of Japan. After the war, however, Russia, Germany and France intervened in the treaty between Japan and China. It was called the Triple Intervention. Japan expected Britain and the U.S. to support Japan, but they took the position of staying away from the issue and held non-intervention policy. Naturally, strong nationalism emerged among Japanese people and anti-America sentiment reached the boiling point. Under such circumstances, Japan concluded an alliance with Britain in 1902, because Britain felt a threat from Russia and the British government judged that it would be better for them to have an alliance with Japan in order to maintain their colonies in Asia. In 1904, the Russo-Japanese War broke out. Japan defeated Russia in 1905. The rising status of Japan began to be acknowledged internationally. The atmosphere that Japan was now a member of the developed nations was prevailing all over the nation. People thought that there was nothing to learn from Europe and America. Japanese people became confident in their achievements and thought that they could do anything without help from foreign nations, especially from Britain and the U.S.

In 1893, Kowashi Inoue, the Minister of Education, diminished the class hours of English at middle schools. He argued that every developed nation should respect their own language and that Japan should also respect its own language. He also emphasized the importance of teaching Japanese language and recommended that all subjects should be taught as much as possible in Japanese³. Another reason why the government

diminished the class hours of English was that there were opinions among educators that young Japanese spent too much time studying English which damaged their health because they did not have enough time to play. Many foreign teachers were replaced with Japanese teachers. Many Japanese people at that time thought that the system of English education was a failure. They noticed that after so many years of study, students were still unable to speak and write English. One critic, Sojikan Sugimura, lamented that most middle school students, on average, still could not speak or even understand English⁴. Though the circumstances surrounding English education was considerably unfavorable, English was still taught at schools. It was a force of habit put on the newly revised education system of the Meiji government. English in those days became an important subject to pass entrance examinations to higher schools. This meant an emergence of "examination English", which was doomed to control English education thereafter in Japan.

In 1916, Ikuzo Ooka, the Minister of Education, argued that English should be abolished from the middle school curriculum. He stated that middle school education should be general and should not make a foreign language a compulsory subject. He also emphasized the importance of independence of education from the influence of foreign countries⁵. Under such unfavorable circumstances toward English education, some professors of English tried hard to make the Japanese people understand the importance of English education. In 1911, a college professor, Yuzaburo Okakura, stated in his magazine that English education should aim not only to give practical ability to students but should also influence students' ideas, morals and spirit⁶. Another professor, Tomoyoshi Murai, stated that English could awake the Japanese people's mind and could make them develop their knowledge and character⁷.

In the late 1890s, study of the English language itself became popular among teachers of English, and the most prestigious monthly journal on English education, *English Youth*, made its first appearance. Later, in 1911, another prestigious monthly, *English Education*, was published. In the 1910s, the political, economic and cultural status of Japan in the world became higher and the Japanese people wanted to have their own education, that is, the Japanese language should be used at schools. As for English,

people thought that it not only could serve to introduce the Japanese people to the thought of Western people but also it could have pedagogic value as a disciplinary faculty. Some educators argued that English study could foster the international mind which would enable Japanese people to see things from a more objective point of view. As for the English ability of Japanese students, it was reported that middle school graduates could not understand after listening to simple sentences and they could not express their ideas in spoken English⁸.

Since the late 1920s, opinions of expulsion of English became dominant among politicians and college professors. The background reason for this tendency was that Japan broke out of the League of Nations in 1933. In 1924, an anti-Japanese immigration law was passed in both the American Lower and Upper houses, and the U.S. imposed a very high customs duty to cotton fabrics imported from Japan. This was because the U.S. felt uneasy about Japan's expansion to Manchuria. Thus in 1940, Japan broke the Commerce and Navigation Treaty with the U.S.

In 1924, a prominent Japanese opinion leader, Genji Shibukawa, argued that Japan was a nation of an old history and that its people should have a pride in their nation. He also argued that Japan seemed to be a colony of English speaking nations. He stated in a monthly journal that English should not be included at the middle school curriculum and that English should be taught at high schools to only those who wanted to enter colleges⁹. In the same year, a high-ranking naval officer, Kyosuke Fukunaga, stated that Japan should stop teaching English and should send the language of Americans away¹⁰. In 1925, another prominent opinion leader, Sojikan Sugimura, stated in a monthly journal, *Bungei shunju*, that Japan should come back to her own language¹¹. In 1977, a college professor of Japanese literature, Tsukuru Fujimura, argued in a monthly journal, *Gendai*, that Japan should immediately abolish all English from middle schools. He also stated that Japan should be proud of herself and have self-esteem under the new era of Showa. He suggested that the government should establish a department of translation¹². Kouroku Sato, a popular poet, criticized English education as useless and said that the government should send students to farming fields to let them plant potatoes instead of taking students' time so much for English study¹³.

As mentioned above, anti-English sentiment seemed to reach the boiling point in those days. In 1940, English signs at railway stations disappeared. In the same year, English was excluded from entrance examinations to the military academies, such as the Military Cadet Academy, the Military Accounting Academy and the Military Preparatory School. In 1941 when the Pacific war broke out, English was officially changed from a “hostile language” to an “enemy language.” Most of the English loanwords were changed into Japanese words, though people had to undergo a great inconvenience. In 1942, all American and British teachers were dismissed. English became an elective subject at women’s middle schools and women’s vocational schools in the same year, because the Ministry of Education wanted to increase practical subjects like “Child Care” and to decrease class hours of English for women’s school. In 1943, English was a compulsory subject at the first and second years of middle schools, but became selective at and over the third year.

Under such circumstances, some professors of English, such as Yuzaburo Okakura, refuted these anti-English education opinions by saying that English education could serve to develop people’s culture. Others also emphasized the importance of English education in terms of cultivating one’s own character. During 1927, many people of all trades contributed their opinions for a survey in a prestigious monthly journal, *Gendai*. About twenty percent of them favored abolishing English from middle schools; seventy percent favored diminishing class hours; and the rest wanted to continue what they were doing¹⁴. One prominent college professor, Sanki Ichikawa, argued in 1942 that English would become important for Japan to construct a new world system and said that English was used in Thailand, Burma, India and the Philippines where the Japanese people were working together with local people to construct a great East Asian world¹⁵. In other words, he implied that English could serve Japan’s expansion in Asia.

4. The Second Favorable Wave for English Education

In 1946, only six months after the end of war, an English conversation program called “Come, Come English” was broadcasted by The Japan Radio Broadcasting Association, and it immediately became a very popular program among young Japanese. People

started to study English very hard. English conversation books were sold out all over Japan. Many American missionaries taught English in their churches, middle and high schools, intending to convert the Japanese people into Christianity. In 1950, an influential politician, Yukio Ozaki, wrote in a newspaper that Japan should change the language from Japanese to English to understand democracy¹⁶. In 1947, a new school system was put into effect, and six-years of primary and three-years of middle school education became compulsory to the Japanese people. English became a selective subject at middle schools, but it was actually taught at every school because English was included in entrance examinations for high schools. For the first time in the history of English education in Japan, every Japanese was at this point put into the situation that he would study English at least for three years. At high schools, English was one of compulsory subjects and students studied it most eagerly because every college and university imposed English for entrance examinations.

In 1964, restrictions on going abroad were abolished and Japanese people began to go abroad for sightseeing and honeymoons. English conversation schools started to pop up in big cities and books such as “English for Traveling Abroad” filled shelves of book stores in big cities. This was the start of the second “English Boom.” In the same year, Japan hosted the 18th Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo, the first in Asia. The Japanese people became self-confident. Japan’s economy became stronger and stronger, and it finally accelerated to a point in 1980 that Japanese auto production figures surpassed those of the United States, making Japan the world’s top car-producing nation. Japanese business men were sent to foreign countries to be engaged in international business. In 1989, a Japanese real estate company bought Rockefeller Center, a symbol of New York City. U.S. newspapers compared the purchase to Pearl Harbor. In the same year, Japan became the world’s most generous foreign-aid donor, giving away nearly \$ 9 billion. In 1990, a Japanese developer paid \$ 841 million for Pebble Beach Golf Course. One U.S. congresswoman even said that the United States “is rapidly becoming a colony of Japan.” In order to do business in the international world and go abroad for sightseeing or honeymoon, Japanese people studied English very hard even outside of schools. Foreign language teachers from many English-speaking countries were welcomed with high salary

at English conversation schools in big cities.

5. The Second Unfavorable Wave for English Education

In the 1980s, many private Japanese companies began to establish business relations in foreign countries in accordance with Japan's economic expansion. They found that their employees' English ability was not good enough to do business with foreign people. They criticized English education in Japan and requested that English teachers should give students practical ability of English. They said that Japanese students had a lot of knowledge about English grammar but they could not really communicate in English. Some companies started to provide their employees with English conversation lessons taught by native speakers in the companies. Some scholars criticized the system of employing teachers of English. They said that most teachers of English majored in English literature at colleges and they were not necessarily professionals in the field of teaching English. In addition to a negative opinions to English education, a prominent opinion leader, Shuichi Kato, said in a monthly journal, *Sekai*, that only one out of one hundred people needed English to do their work and that English should not be given to all the people in Japan¹⁷.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, American trade deficit with Japan skyrocketed, and Americans criticized Japan by saying that Japan was disturbing the world free trade market system by only concentrating on exporting Japanese products. In the most shocking scene at this time, which was broadcasted to the world by American media, American auto workers crushed a Japanese car in front of their company. In 1978, the American media depicted, with an intention of drawing world attention to the brutality of the Japanese people, an incident that happened in a fish-farming village where fishermen killed dolphins on their beach. To Japanese fishermen, dolphins were a great nuisance who invaded fish-farming nets. A leading newspaper stated that Japan should talk back to Americans about the dolphin issue. In 1974, an influential politician, Wataru Hiraizumi, expressed his opinion about English education in Japan and said that five percent of the Japanese people was enough to study English and become fluent in English¹⁸. The publication of the book entitled "Japan As Number One", written by an

American professor Ezra F. Vogel, pleased many Japanese people. American business men started to visit Japan to study the successful Japanese business management style. There were some people who went as far as to say that there was nothing any more which Japan should learn from America. Around this time, the class hours of English at middle schools were diminished from four class hours to three class hours per week. The Japanese people were very proud of their economic success and they thought they could do everything by themselves. They also believed that the economic prosperity would continue forever. Some people voiced that Americans should study Japanese if they wanted to do business in Japan.

6. The Third Favorable Wave for English Education

In the early 1990s, Japan's bubble economy burst. Quite a few Japanese companies, especially real estate companies, had to sell what they had purchased in America during the previous bubble economy. For example, Japanese supermarket chain Daiei parted with the world largest shopping mall Alameda Shopping Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. In the field of information technology, it was noticed that Japan was far behind the United States. Japanese people realized that they should study English very seriously to become literate about Internet and compete with the U.S. in the field of information technology. They thought that English was indispensable to survive in an international world. The government announced that every household would be equipped with a PC in the coming Internet Age. Even at primary schools all over the country, PC classes were included in their curricula. In 1996, the Ministry of Education decided to introduce English education into the primary school curriculum in the 2002 school year. It meant that Japan needed about 50 years after the end of the World War II to start to teach English at primary schools even though other foreign countries had already taught English at primary schools. Opinions swing widely at that time between those who advocate that English must be taught while children are capable of learning a language naturally and those who assert that English should be taught to only chosen ones.

In 2000, an advisory panel to then Prime Minister suggested in its report that all Japanese needed to be equipped with practical English skills before reaching adulthood

and proposed a national-level discussion to determine whether English should be designated a second official language for the 21st century. English became compulsory at middle schools in 1998. English has also been the most important subject at middle and high schools because the score of English examination contrives to be a decisive factor to pass the entrance examination. Middle and high school students spend more time studying English than other subjects. There are lot of English conversation schools located in front of railway stations and they advertise "Study-Abroad in Front of Stations." Some businessmen who lived in Asia for a long time said that English is now the common language in Asia and that Japan would be left behind if Japanese people were unable to communicate in English. In an editorial of one leading newspaper, it was said that Japan had to study English to make it a powerful country, though the Japanese do not feel comfortable to use English as its second language¹⁹. The English education business has been very prosperous in Japan and one can find English conversation schools or classes all over Japan. More and more Japanese sit for TOEFL and TOEIC, and EIKEN or Test of Practical English supported by the Ministry of Education.

7. Conclusion

The English education in Japan, as seen above, has been repeatedly influenced by the Japanese-American relations. This seems very natural because English is the language Americans speak. Some scholars say that Japanese people have a mixed feelings of superiority and inferiority complex to America. When Japanese people have an inferiority complex in some way or other, they tend to study English harder. On the other hand, when they have a superiority complex and they are very proud of themselves, they tend to dispense with English to be independent in an international world. Even though we see the repeated waves of pros and cons of the English education in Japan, it has never been completely abolished. This is because the Japanese people have been wise enough to understand what will happen to Japan if they stop English education. They know that Japan has to continue to maintain good relationships with other nations, especially with America. To do this, they understand, English is indispensable for the Japanese people. They understand that Japan will not be able to survive in this international world if it

is “contained” by foreign countries as one American journalist suggested in his report entitled “Containing Japan²⁰.” With these things in their minds, they will continue English education even though there are some people from time to time who say “no” to English education.

Notes

- 1 Tetsuo Kawazumi, *Shiryō nihon eigakushi 2* (Materials on Japan's History of English Study Volume 11), Taishukan, 1978, p.15
- 2 Kenichi Takanashi, et al, *Nihon no eigokyoikushi* (The History of English Education in Japan) Taishukan shoten, 1975, p.196
- 3 Masao Takahashi, *Eigokyoikugaku gairon* (An Introduction to English Education), Kinseido, 2000, p.13
- 4 Tetsuo Kawazumi, p.164
- 5 *ibid*, p.148
- 6 Mikio Matsumura, *Meijiiki eigokyoiku kenkyū* (English Studies in the Meiji Era), Jiyusha, 1998, p.233
- 7 Tetsuo Kawazumi, p. 150
- 8 Kenichi Takanashi, et al, *Eigokyoikushi shiryō* (Materials on the History of English Education), Tokyohoreishuppan, 1980, p.736
- 9 Tetsuo Kawazumi, p.164
- 10 Kenichi Takanashi, et al, p.733
- 11 *ibid*, p.736
- 12 *ibid*, p.746
- 13 Tetsuo Kawazumi, p.236
- 14 Tetsuo Kawazumi, p.243
- 15 *ibid*, p.629
- 16 *ibid*, p.783
- 17 *ibid*, p.786
- 18 Shoichi Watanabe, et al, *Eigokyoiku daironso* (A Heated Discussion on English Education), Taishukanshoten, 1998, p.13

- 19 Asahishinbun shasetsu, (The Editorial of The Asahi Newspaper), October 10, 1998
20 James Fallows, "Containing Japan," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1989, p.48

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