

# The Learning of Spoken English in Japanese Schools and Universities

By

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The attitudes of most peoples to the study of foreign languages, and the reasons why they favour certain methods to try and master them, are highly complex matters of history and national temperament. This is very true of the Japanese, so in this article I can only hope to scratch the surface of a vast subject. The title of the article gives a clue to my limited objectives. 'Schools and Universities', because I am limiting this study to what happens in the formal education system and will only make passing reference to language schools and other ways of learning English; 'spoken English', because I shall concentrate on the skills of English as a living and predominantly oral language rather than with the formal grammatical analysis and literary study which make up the major part of 'English' in Japanese formal education — as they do in many other countries. Literature and grammar are important aesthetic and intellectual disciplines, but here I am mainly concerned with English as practical oral communication. Finally, I have entitled this article the 'learning' rather than the 'teaching' of spoken English because I believe that the active participation of the learner of the spoken language needs to be emphasised. It is not sufficient for the pupils to absorb passively what the teacher tells them; they must take part in active communication in the new language with their teacher and with one another; modern educational psychology suggests that only in this way can they get the practice and experience necessary for true mastery of the language. Modern teaching methods in America and Europe are beginning to make possible

this kind of learning, and the adaptation of these methods to the needs and psychology of a Japanese teacher of English with Japanese pupils is a matter of pressing urgency today. So I shall try to do the following :

i) give a brief historical background to the learning of oral English in the Japanese education system ;

ii) examine the organisation of English study in present-day Japanese High Schools and Universities — curriculum, the training of English teachers, the nature of textbooks and examinations, objectives and methods—so as to assess how far students have the opportunity to learn spoken English. No precise evaluation of oral proficiency is possible, as Japanese students take no specific tests of these skills. However, some comparison can be made between Japan and other countries with statistics on class size, age at commencement of language study, hours of study per week and other factors with a bearing on the acquisition of oral skills ;

iii) summarise the problems which appear to confront the teacher and learner of spoken English in Japanese schools and outline the ways in which the study of spoken English is being and could be further encouraged.

### *Historical Background*

Although during the Tokugawa era the study of foreign things was strictly controlled by the Shogunate, a certain amount of Dutch was learned by people involved in the Dejima trading activities, and Dutch was the first Western language to be taught officially in Japan, at the Bakufu school of Western studies (the so-called *Bansho shirabe-sho*), opened in 1856. The school added English in 1861. From the beginning, as Dore observes in his 'Education in Tokugawa Japan', there was an ambivalent attitude to these foreign studies ; on the one hand it was felt desirable to learn thoroughly as a way of developing Japan to compete with other countries, but at the same time students were

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1) Dore *op. cit.* p. 169

warned to be on their guard against excessive familiarity with foreign ways, as this might lead them to lose their native Japanese spirit.<sup>2)</sup> These two sides of the argument can be persistently discerned in the attitudes of most countries to foreign languages—to know a foreign language well is desirable, because it leads to useful knowledge, but it is also feared, since it forces the learner to face modes of thinking from the ‘out-group’ of an alien culture.<sup>3)</sup> The method of study for foreign languages at the Bakufu school is described by Dore as following the system used for the Chinese classics—the so-called *sodoku*,<sup>4)</sup> in which the students had to read a passage in the foreign language by repetition after the teacher, the passage being then explained in Japanese. By repeated readings and reference to the explanation it was hoped that the students would come to understand the English constructions. Such a method was not likely to encourage practical ability in colloquial English, even if it gave the pupil some idea of the meaning and structure of the written language.

Following the Meiji Restoration, a new school system was established, modelled on those in Western countries, and by the time Lafcadio Hearn was teaching in Kumamoto in 1894, pupils at Higher Middle Schools, aged 18 to 25, were required to have a practical knowledge of English, and also of German or French. Later German and French were made optional.<sup>5)</sup> Many of the earliest teachers of English in Japanese schools were foreign, including missionaries, of varying abilities and methods of course, and no doubt it was not unusual for students to be badly taught with inferior books, as Hearn described in his letters.<sup>6)</sup> Hearn said that he was for a time obliged to teach by mouth and chalk only, no suitable books being available. He often testified to the eagerness and diligence of his pupils, though he complained

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2) Dore *op. cit.* p. 170

3) see L.A. Jakobovits, ‘Foreign Language Learning’, 1970, p. 62.

4) Dore *op. cit.* p. 170.

5) Hearn, ‘Out of the East’, p. 28

6) E. Stevenson, ‘Lafcadio Hearn’, 1961, p. 245.

that his students at Tokyo University were not well-graded and lacked preparation.<sup>7)</sup> B. H. Chamberlain points out that during this period, when the Japanese language had not yet evolved a terminology for industrial, commercial and political topics, these subjects were at first taught in the Universities through the medium of English.<sup>8)</sup> This situation did not last, however, and as the Japanese language found ways of describing new concepts so English lost ground as a medium of instruction. Furthermore, as Japanese teachers of English increased in numbers throughout the educational system, the use of translation inherent in the older *sodoku* methods persisted, and received further support from the adoption of Western-style textbooks. These used the grammar-translation method then current for the study of foreign languages in Western countries. Translation was thus the key to all language study; a continuation of the native *sodoku* tradition blended with adopted Western methods to produce a firm habit. This is described by Mr Amagi, then Vice-Minister of Education, in his address to the Council on Language Teaching Development (COLTD) in 1969, "... a habit of ours to understand foreign languages through the Japanese translation of them. This habit has been formed in the past 100 years."

A major effort to get English, and especially spoken English, studied in its own terms and not through the intermediary of Japanese was made by Harold Palmer during his stay in Japan from 1922 to 1936. A significant landmark was his foundation of the 'Institute for Research in English Teaching'; as Akira Ota explains, his efforts were not as successful as had been hoped, partly because Japanese people were not at the time ready for such advanced ideas on language, and partly because the War soon after affected English study adversely.<sup>9)</sup> Fortunately, the ideas and groundwork of the Institute paved the way for post-war developments like the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET).

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7) Stevenson, op. cit. p. 134

8) B.H. Chamberlain, 'Things Japanese', p. 134.

9) A. Ota, 'The Teaching of English in Japan', 1962, p. 1.

The post-war period saw a re-organisation of the school system on the 6-3-3 system, with some students going on to a 4-year course at a University or a 2 or 3-year course at a Junior College. English was introduced at Junior High School level and continued in Senior, Industrial and Technical High Schools. By 1971, the situation was as follows :

Junior High Schools : a foreign language (usually English) elective.  
315 class hours in three years.

Senior High Schools : a foreign language compulsory. In the case of  
(also Industrial English, two courses were available :

and Commercial H.S.) English 'A' : (for beginners) 315 class hours  
in 3 years.

English 'B' ; (advanced) 575 class hours in  
3 years.

(English 'A' was designed for students who had not taken the subject at Junior High School ; English 'B' for those who had.)

Higher Education : students at University had to acquire a minimum of 8 credits in a foreign language, a credit representing a 15-week course with 1 lecture and 2 preparation hours each week. Medical and Dental students had to earn 16 credits during their 6-year course. Similar rules applied to students at Technical Colleges ; there was no requirement in foreign languages at Junior Colleges.<sup>10)</sup>

English was the foreign language chosen by most students at all levels of the educational system, though some medical and dental students preferred to take German, as had been the case before the War.

Other perspectives opened up after the War. Japanese people from all walks of life displayed as never before an interest in foreign culture and a desire to go abroad. The idea of study abroad was of special appeal ; a UNESCO survey at the end of 1951 revealed the

10) Min. of Education : 'Education in Japan', 1971, pp. 59-62.

extent of this interest among young people; F. Vos questioned 100 young people, many of them students, in Tokyo, and only two said that they would not like to go abroad to study or to work.<sup>11)</sup> A nationwide sample revealed that the country most young people wished to visit was America (48%) while Britain came third (6%).<sup>12)</sup> However, the re-organisation of the education system had not significantly changed the style of teaching or the exams required, especially for university entrance, and although new textbooks were issued, in many cases involving the co-operation of foreign authors with Japanese teachers, the texts were still used mainly as manuals of translation and grammatical explanation; the classroom did not see much active use of oral English. Those wishing to go to America or Britain had to study spoken English elsewhere. It was this absence of spoken English from the curriculum of the regular education system that encouraged the growth of so many language schools in modern Japan. These schools, of all sizes and qualities, some Japanese and others foreign-owned, now run into the thousands and are beyond the scope of this article. However, some reference must be made to one school which has undertaken extensive programmes to help High School teachers improve the standard of their spoken English. This is ELEC, the English Language Education Council, Inc., a joint Japanese-American foundation which has been responsible for bringing a number of prominent language teaching specialists to Japan, including C.C. Fries and A.S. Hornby. ELEC has also supervised the production of English textbooks for schools.<sup>13)</sup> Other significant developments encouraging the study of spoken English have been the formation of the Modern Language Institute at Tokyo University in 1958<sup>14)</sup> and the Council on Language Teaching Development (1968).<sup>15)</sup> Among foreign organisations helping with the

11) J. Stoetzel, 'Without the Chrysanthemum and the Sword' UNESCO 1955, p. 121

12) J. Stoetzel, *op. cit.* p. 123

13) A. Ota, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

14) A. Ota, *op. cit.* p. 6

15) see the COLTD 'First Symposium on English for International Communication' for fuller details of this organisation's work.

in-training of High-School teachers, notable is the British Council, which runs special courses at its Kyoto Centre (to be described later in this article) and, gives scholarships for Training Courses in the U. K. for Japanese teachers of English. All these organisations have promoted, in one way or other, interest in spoken English within the framework of formal education.

The past twenty-five years have seen a more favourable climate for the study of oral English in Japan ; the main reasons for this are the postwar political changes, encouraging contact between Japan and other nations, the improvements in communications brought about by the jet-plane, the business boom causing more and more foreign businessmen to visit Japan and Japanese business people to go abroad, and the growth of affluence which in the past five years especially has made an enormous increase in the number of ordinary Japanese people travelling abroad and finding the advantages of spoken English as an international language. The development of audio-visual equipment for teaching has also made it possible in theory for a more efficient technique to be adopted for language lessons. However, in practice the demand for spoken English has been met chiefly by private or international organisations rather than the formal education system. The remainder of this article will look at this system, its organisation, teachers and methods and try to discover why oral English has lagged behind, what is being done about it, and what can be further done about it, bearing in mind that methods which work in other countries may need substantial adaptation if they are to work in the unique situation of Japan. Too often, above all in the educational sphere, methods devised for other kinds of society have been applied to Japan without due consideration.<sup>16)</sup>

*Spoken English in Schools and Universities Today.*

*Curriculum.* English is now an elective subject in both Junior and Senior High Schools, instead of being compulsory at Senior High

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16) see Stoetzel *op. cit.* p. 106.

School level as before. English became an elective subject in Senior High Schools as from 1973. In practice, English is taught at all High Schools, but in schools where the majority of students are not going on to the University, as in Technical and Commercial High Schools, English may be limited to only a few hours a week. The typical study pattern in higher secondary education in 1973 can be seen from the following examples :

Students intending to go to University : 15 credits (575 hours)

Students intending to find employment : 9 or 6 or 3 credits (315<sup>17)</sup>  
or 290 or 105 hours)

It is instructive to compare some figures for the study of English in Japanese schools with figures for the study of foreign languages in other countries :<sup>18)</sup>

	<i>Japan</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>France</i>
Age for beginning foreign language :	12	9	11	11
Hours per week at age 14 :	3	5	4—8	3—6
(Junior High Schools)				
Percentage of teaching hours devoted to foreign language (Senior H. S.) :	16%	20%	9%	18%

These figures suggest that Japanese schoolchildren receive, on the whole, less exposure to foreign languages than children in Europe and America, and also that the study of English begins later in Japan than the study of foreign languages in other countries.

The hours of study of English at Japanese universities has remained what it was (see above, figures for 1970 in *Historical Background*). *Class sizes*. Here again, comparison with other countries is interesting, especially as for the learning of spoken language the number of students in a class can have a considerable bearing on the attainment

17) Min. for Cultural Affairs : 'Outline of Education in Japan', 1970 pp 18-19 (figures refer to 1973 standards).

18) These figures are for *all* areas of English study, not just spoken English.

19) Min. of Education : 'Educational Standards in Japan', 1970, pp. 71, 61. 1970 figures. The 9% figure for U.K. teaching hours is due to early specialisation.

of proficiency.

Standard number of students in	<i>Japan</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>France</i>
one class (Junior H .S.):	45	21—33	30	<sup>20)</sup> 35

The disparity between these figures is increased if we remember that in some countries it is normal for foreign languages to be taught to smaller groups than regular subjects. In France, for instance, groups for the study of English are not supposed to exceed 23.<sup>21)</sup>

### *Teachers and teacher-training.*

Teachers at schools are required by law to have proof of training in most countries. In England, a prospective school-teacher is expected to attend a university for a least a three-year course (this is now normally four for a foreign language, including a year's residence in a country where the language is spoken), followed by a year's training, including several months of supervised classroom practice and an examination; alternatively, on leaving High School, he or she attends a College of Education for three years, during which time the teaching subject is studied along with educational psychology, teaching method and the history of education. There is also supervised teaching practice. The great majority of foreign language teachers in English schools are graduates with a year's professional training.<sup>22)</sup>

In Japan, the requirements for becoming a teacher are simpler than in England, and it is likely that even today there are fewer opportunities for the Japanese teacher of English to get in-training during his working years than for his English counterpart. Prospective teachers in Japan are required to get a number of credits in general education, teaching and professional subjects, normally at university, although some Junior High School teachers and a very few Senior High School teachers may only attend Junior College. Acquisition of the minimum requirements enables a teacher to get a Second Class

20) ditto, p. 96

21) ditto, p. 72

22) see D.H. Harding, 'The New Pattern of Language Teaching', 1970, p. 198.

certificate, while further study, usually by obtaining credits at special courses run in *Kyoiku* centres, results in a First Class certificate being granted.<sup>23)</sup> Practice teaching of two weeks' duration is involved in the acquisition of professional credits. Subsequent appointment is on the basis of recommendations from school principals and a written examination.<sup>24)</sup> It is therefore possible, and indeed usual, for a teacher of English in Japan to take up his position without having gone abroad or had prolonged training in methods of teaching. The Ministry of Education is aware of the difficulties inherent in this situation, and has resolved, amongst other things, to provide more specialised training for teachers and teaching practice of one year's duration prior to appointment.<sup>25)</sup>

What kind of teacher does this system produce? Several years' experience in running courses for Japanese High School teachers of English, in Tokyo and the Kansai, has shown me several hundred teachers who are hard-working and eager to improve their own and their pupils' standards, but who are not usually very fluent in using the language in a classroom situation, even if they can hold their own in actual conversation with a foreigner. In a typical group of ten Senior High School teachers at a recent in-training course in Osaka only one had been abroad and only two estimated that they spent more than five minutes of any lesson in the actual use of spoken English. Two said that they never used English at all in class. Three of the group were very fluent and able to talk with me quite freely from the beginning; six spoke with some hesitation and were sometimes at a loss for the right word or phrase; one found great difficulty in speaking any English at all.

It must be made clear that while the above comments indicate that teachers' proficiency in spoken English is not very high, this reflects

23) Min. of Education: 'Education in Japan' 1971, pp. 80-82.

24) ditto, pp. 83-84.

25) see Min. of Education, 'Basic Guidelines for the Reform of Education', 1972, especially pp. 47-8 and 149-151.

no discredit on their intentions or efforts, which in the cases I have seen appear very praiseworthy. Indeed, Japanese teachers seem to be more selfcritical and keen to improve their abilities than groups of teachers I have met in other countries. Other reasons for their difficulties, and the methods they actually use in class, will be discussed later on, but for now it may be pointed out that some at least of the problem may lie in the present system of teacher-training, which does not appear to expose the prospective teacher sufficiently to the use of oral English or to methods of using the language for teaching.

University teachers, who are appointed on a basis of academic qualification and not by teaching certificate, are often of a much higher standard of fluency in English, whether they teach literature or language. More will be said about their case later on.

#### *Textbooks.*

In Japan, textbooks are commonly written and published by private individuals or groups of individuals, but for their use in schools they have to be authorised by a Committee appointed by the Ministry of Education and composed of 'teachers, and other learned and experienced persons'<sup>26)</sup>. A similar system of accreditation is used by Sweden, Spain and other countries, while other nations allow free publication (U. K., Italy) or arrange publication by the State (USSR, China). The usual situation for English textbooks in Japan is for them to be a joint effort of Japanese and foreign personnel, the text being written either by a foreigner, with Japanese notes and explanations by a Japanese teacher, or else by a Japanese or group of Japanese, and then subjected to review and correction by a foreigner. Textbooks are of several kinds :

i) for Junior High Schools, there are general 'coursebooks' which are intended to teach the basic facts of English, usually these days with a conversational background to some of the material. A typical lesson will present some examples of a sentence-pattern, which are

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26) This and the details following are from Ministry of Education: 'Educational Standards in Japan,' 1970, p. 64.

then shown in the context of a dialogue or piece of narrative and given further practice by exercises, mainly of the substitution-table and question-and-answer types. There are also some translation exercises. Although there are some woodennesses of construction and even some errors of grammar in books of this type, they are for the most part adaptable to methods involving spoken English and the more recent ones are published with tapes for classroom use, recorded by native speakers.

Elementary textbooks are also used in Senior, Industrial and Technical High Schools for English 'A' classes, that is, classes for beginners who have not studied English in Junior High School.

ii) for 'B' courses in Senior High Schools, there are two main types of book :

a) 'grammar and composition' textbooks, which are written mainly in Japanese, and explain English grammar by relating it to Japanese and taking points which cause difficulty when translation is carried out. Exercises are usually in the form of numbered sentences for translation from Japanese into English or *vice versa*. It is very difficult to use these textbooks for spoken English.

b) 'Readers'. These books consist of extracts, normally narrative, descriptive or philosophical, sometimes written specially for the purpose, sometimes extracted, with or without abridgment or adaptation, from the works of famous authors. These extracts are accompanied by notes on 'points to study', involving advanced grammar and idiom. As there is little conversational material in these books, they need a special technique if they are to be used in conjunction with an oral approach in class, and most teachers are not at present aware of the techniques to apply. They are, however, easier to use in English than the 'grammar and composition' books.

In Universities, there is no Ministry control of texts and the individual teacher is largely responsible for the choice of texts for all types of English. Texts for *Eikaiwa* are very diverse both in origins and usefulness. As many of the instructors of spoken English in

Universities are foreign, it is probably safe to say that there are more texts geared to the 'Direct' i. e. all-English method of teaching than in other areas of the formal education system.

*Objectives.*

Before we examine the methods and techniques actually used in schools and universities, it is worth while examining the official Ministry of Education viewpoint on the teaching of English. This emphasises the importance of oral skills, and indeed in the latest reforms, effective in Senior High Schools from 1973, provision is made for the first time for periods of 'English Conversation', although this addition to the curriculum is an optional extra and few schools have so far availed themselves of it. It is intended mainly for vocational High Schools where the students are not concerned with the requirements of the University Entrance Examinations.

Here are some of the guidelines laid down by the Ministry of Education for the study of spoken English:<sup>27)</sup>

'To enable the pupils to hear and speak rudimentary English concerning familiar things and the immediate surroundings.' (Junior High School, First Grade)

'To familiarise the students with the spoken aspects of English and basic usage, and develop basic ability to understand and speak it.' (Senior High School, English B)

'The following language activities should be carried out in terms of hearing and speaking:

- a) To exchange daily routine greetings.
- b) To speak and listen to accounts of familiar things and events or activities.
- c) To ask and reply to questions about familiar things and events  
.....' (Senior High School, English B)

In conjunction with the above directives go similar ones on reading and writing. The directives indicate that listening and speaking are

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27) The following details are taken from the Ministry of Education's 'Revised Course of Study for Lower and Upper Secondary Schools', 1969-71.

regarded as having the same importance as reading and writing.

The objective not mentioned here, however, and yet the one which remains the basic one for virtually all High School teachers except those whose pupils will go direct from school to a job, is to teach the kind of English that will enable the pupils to pass the examinations for entrance to the University, and in particular to the more famous public and private ones. These examinations, which we will examine in greater detail shortly, are as a rule not geared to oral English at all, but to the traditional skills of translation and explanation of literary or at any rate non-colloquial texts. This fact, coupled with the teachers' own lack of confidence in their spoken English, and with other difficulties which we will sum up presently, is the reason why the actual methods of teaching in High Schools are heavily weighted on the side of reading, writing, grammar and translation instead of oral proficiency.

*Methods actually used.*

The following comments on school methods apply to Public High Schools. The situation in Private High Schools is somewhat different and will be taken separately.

*Public Junior High Schools.* It is probably true to say that more Junior than Senior High School teachers try to use oral English where possible in their lessons. The books help here, of course, since many of the exercises are presented in the form of conversations between characters in a story. Most teachers I have spoken to affirm that they try and get their pupils to recognise and say simple greetings, and some take the logical next step of performing class routines, like asking pupils to stand up, come to the board, etc. in English. Suitable phrases for these things are presented in some textbooks. I have seen one teacher give a lesson in which he used a tape recorded by a native speaker as a model for repetition by the pupils of new words, and he later got them to close their books and listen while he played part of the text on the tape, after which he asked a few simple questions and had the pupils summarise the material in Japanese. This

teacher told me that in the next lesson he would have the pupils repeat the text sentence by sentence after the tape, with their books open. So much use of English — in addition to the taped work the teacher also did some oral question-and-answer work with sentences of his own — is probably exceptional; certainly it is unusual for pupils to be encouraged to 'get away from the book' and simply *listen*. A common practice is for teachers to have their pupils read from the book in chorus, a technique which is often criticised by modern teaching experts.<sup>28)</sup> Translation of the English text into Japanese at some stage is usual; the syllabus does not leave enough time for pupils to work their way to full comprehension through English alone. Indeed, getting through the text in time by any means, even with minimal use of spoken English, seems to be a big problem for many teachers.

*Public Senior High Schools.* In the first two years of the course, the teacher may try and use greetings in English. He may also spend some time coaxing the pupils into making English answers to his questions on the Reader. The rest of the lesson is likely to be mainly in Japanese. The text material of the Readers being difficult, the teacher will probably not be able to do much more than give a paraphrase in Japanese and some explanation of the reasons, as they appear to him, for certain constructions being used. In the case of the 'grammar and composition' books, little use of English is possible apart from making translations of sentences in Japanese in the text, and this can hardly be called 'oral English' in any real sense. It is necessary to explain that in Senior High Schools, the pupils study 'grammar' in certain lessons and 'readers' in others, with different teachers. A typical Senior High School teacher will find himself

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28) e.g. M. West, 'Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances', 1960, p. 70, A.W. Frisby, 'Teaching English', 1957, pp. 210, 223; W. F. Mackey, 'Language Teaching Analysis' 1965, p. 425, has reservations about reading aloud; however R. Lado, 'Language Teaching', 1964, pp. 137-8 regards the question of reading in chorus as undecided in the absence of conclusive experiments.

teaching 'grammar' to some grades and 'readers' to others. The material in the 'grammar' and 'reader' textbooks is not co-ordinated.

In the third year of the course, even the small amount of oral English described above is difficult to maintain, and many teachers will not even use English for greetings. The reason for this, according to the teachers, is that they have no time for oral English in view of the University Entrance Examination requirements. In schools where foreign instructors are employed, they may not be able to have classes in the third year for this reason.<sup>29)</sup>

Senior High School teachers are being encouraged to use the facilities offered by tape-recorders and other audio-visual aids. So far only a few appear to be availing themselves of these things, largely on account of the exam factor just described.

*Technical and Commercial High Schools.* These constitute a special grade of Upper Secondary School; the pupils do not intend to go on to a University, so the problem of the University Entrance Examination does not arise. It might be supposed that this would make it easier to teach spoken English, but the teachers I have spoken to appear to use the same methods as the ordinary Senior High School teachers, relying on translation and explanation in Japanese. One difficulty is that students lack motivation; they feel that as there is little chance of their getting top posts in commerce or industry they are unlikely to need English for work. The teachers also seem in some cases to be less proficient in spoken English than other High School teachers, and are therefore unwilling to venture into spoken English in class.

*Private High Schools.* It must be pointed out that the situation of spoken English in private High Schools, especially those which feed students to their own Universities, is often better than in public institutions. The University Entrance Examination is commonly of less significance, and indeed it may be possible for the High School

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29) see the article on 'American Couple Enjoy Teaching in Kobe' in the 'Mainichi Daily News' for October 2, 1973.

graduate to go on to the related University on the basis of recommendation without the need of an exam. This fact, and the better financial state of many private schools, who can therefore instal language laboratories and hire foreign teachers for *Eikaiwa* lessons, makes for a brighter picture for spoken English at these establishments.

*Universities* In Universities, the varieties of method in the 'spoken English' classes are almost as numerous as the teachers. A distinction is made between 'English language' lessons (*Eigo*) and 'English conversation' (*Eikaiwa*). These courses may be given by Japanese or foreign instructors, foreigners being more common in private universities. *Eigo* includes grammar, linguistics, writing and perhaps such items as newspaper English. *Eikaiwa* may involve drilling from a textbook (often foreign), discussion in English of a novel or other text, often simplified, and free discussion. Many Universities nowadays have a language laboratory where students will go once a week. Here they will practise material which may or may not be integrated with their *Eikaiwa* lessons.

*Extra-curricular Learning of Spoken English.* Any activity which gives practice in spoken English, even if correction of mistakes is not always possible, helps to reduce shyness and improve fluency. Shyness being a basic problem for Japanese learners, especially in face-to-face impromptu conversation, the 'free conversation' activities of the numerous School and University 'English-speaking Societies' are probably even more valuable than the formal debates and speech contests which they organise.

*A Summary of the Problems of Learning Spoken English in Japanese Education.*

*The Standard of Spoken English among Teachers.*

It is not the fault of High School teachers that very often they have an imperfect command of spoken English. Distance and expense keep them from travelling abroad to the extent possible for foreign language teachers in Europe and America, and the present teacher-training facilities need to be further developed, as has already been explained.

In addition, they are affected from their own school days by the University Entrance Examinations, which we must now consider.

*The University Entrance Exam System.* This system has been criticised by many educators, Japanese and foreign, and notably by the all-Japanese Conference of Experts on the Teaching of English held in Tokyo in 1962.<sup>30)</sup> The Conference members felt that although entrance exams were necessary, the existing ones were too hard, relied excessively on translation, and did not relate to the Ministry of Education 'Course of Study'. As a result, '... the major activities in the classroom are reading and writing. Hearing and speaking sides are completely neglected.'<sup>31)</sup> Although some private universities have experimented with new exam techniques, the basic picture is the same. Spoken English is not tested, and the written English tests are of literary, or at any rate non-colloquial, English. For instance, analysis of an actual exam paper from 1972 shows that of the five questions, three are based on narrative and descriptive passages, and the student has to show understanding of them by multiple choice exercises (two of which are entirely in Japanese), together with a translation from English into Japanese; the fourth is a blank-filling test of six one-word items in a dialogue about a piece of scientific apparatus, essentially non-colloquial; and the final question is translation of a complex Japanese sentence into English. Reference to criteria for test validity, such as those given by Lado,<sup>32)</sup> show that while the test just described is a valid test of comprehension, there are not enough other items to constitute validity for translation or active control of structure. In effect, it only represents a test of passive reading skills which is easy to administer and mark. Similar findings emerge from an assessment of five more Entrance Tests from major universities; they are valid for comprehension and to some degree for translation but do not evaluate ability in oral English.

30) For fuller details of what follows see the 'Report of the Conference of Experts on the Teaching of English,' published in 1963.

31) *op. cit.*, p. 51

32) see R. Lado, 'Language Testing', 1961, pp. 30 and 320-329.

It is easy to see from this why so little incentive exists in High Schools for the study of spoken English ; and the fact that Entrance Exams contain some extremely difficult vocabulary and constructions explains why not only teachers but also students are anxious not to 'waste time' on learning how to speak.

At the same time, one has to appreciate the difficulty of making valid tests of oral skills. Oral tests are hard to score and also to construct. They presuppose highly-qualified examiners and teachers who are capable of preparing their students for oral tests. In the long run, for any serious improvement in the learning of spoken English, it will be necessary to combine new exams with new textbooks (at any rate for Senior High Schools) and massive in-training of teachers. Later we will look at some steps which are being taken in this direction. Some comfort may be drawn from the fact that until recently tests of foreign languages in England were also mainly of the translation type and concentrated on written skills ; the result was that pupils often learned a 'schoolboy French' or 'schoolboy German' reflecting written rather than spoken norms<sup>33)</sup> ; however, in recent years new types of oral-orientated exams have emerged in conjunction with a greater emphasis on the oral ability of the teacher. The process is a slow one and is still going on, but what had appeared an impossible task in England is now becoming feasible. Although the Japanese situation is very different, some features of these experimental changes in England may prove applicable to Japan.

However, examinations are only part of the picture. There are other problems, which sometimes place a great strain on teachers and learners alike. Here are the main ones :

*Class Size.* It has been known for a long time that large groups make it hard to learn oral skills in a foreign language. Much chorus-work is needed, and group-response is different from individual conversation ; even where adequate practice can be given through efficient

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33) D. H. Harding, *op. cit.* p. 42.

drilling, individual practice and personal attention from the teacher are not possible.<sup>34)</sup> In Japan, many High School classes consist of 45 pupils, so it is not surprising if even proficient teachers have to resort to lecturing on grammar and teaching in Japanese. Anything else is too exhausting and progress dishearteningly slow. Class size is another point where private schools are sometimes better off than public ones.

*Lack of Time* It has already been mentioned that many students fear that if they study spoken forms they will 'waste time' needed in learning vocabulary and practising translation for the examinations. Even at Junior High School level the syllabus demands a fast pace through the book, and it is quicker to learn the superficial 'meaning' by translating and passing on than to spend time puzzling it out in English, although the latter process gives more insight into the language. The real remedy for this situation is a less over-loaded syllabus. Perhaps it would be better for pupils to learn a little thoroughly than try to master too much in the time and fall back continually on Japanese in consequence. But even the present lack of time need not preclude such things as greetings and classroom instructions being given in English. The reason why many teachers do not even go as far as this is shyness (see below) rather than lack of time.

*Lack of Suitable Textbooks.* I have already said something about the problem of Senior High School textbooks, which are hard to use for spoken English lessons. In fact, beyond the elementary level there are really no major texts or courses available either for school children or adults in language schools that deal specifically with the needs of Japanese learners. Such courses as 'English 900', though popular in Japan, are 'broad-spectrum' courses designed for students all over the world and without specialised material for areas like pronunciation or the articles and pronouns which cause such difficulty to Japanese people. Special textbooks at every level need to be written to help Japanese people with spoken English.

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34) M. West, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

*Psycho-social Problems of Japanese Teachers and Learners*. B. L. Whorf,<sup>35)</sup> R. Lado,<sup>36)</sup> and Edward T. Hall,<sup>37)</sup> among others, have shown how our language moulds our thought processes, how an acceptance of the validity of cultures other than our own affects our ability to study foreign languages, and how communication in words is intimately bound up with gestures and social attitudes. It follows that when people from one culture try to learn the language of a totally different culture powerful psychological forces are brought into play. To some degree, learning to speak a foreign language involves the adoption of a 'new personality' when one is speaking in the language. For people with a strongly developed sense of their own culture and powerful traditions this is hard to do; it produces 'cultural shock'. This seems to be true of many Japanese learners, who are shy about using spoken English not only because they fear loss of 'face' if they make a mistake, but also because they have to behave in an 'unaccustomed' way when their whole upbringing trains them to behave in ways which are 'accustomed' and therefore acceptable. Not only gestures like shaking hands, but speaking in a foreign language may therefore prove psychologically difficult. Here a foreign teacher of English has the advantage of a Japanese teacher, for he is more readily able to break down the resistance of the pupils by his obvious lack of embarrassment. But a Japanese teacher, uncertain of his own oral competence, shy about using the language anyway, also worried about appearing ridiculous in front of his pupils, and with a class of 45 youngsters even less competent and more shy than himself, is in an extraordinarily difficult situation. As if this were not enough, he and his class are hampered where oral English is concerned by the traditional Japanese concept of the *sensei*.<sup>38)</sup> Hierarchies are historically an

35) B. L. Whorf, 'Language, Thought and Reality', ed. Carroll, 1956.

36) R. Lado, 'Linguistics across Cultures', 1957.

37) E. T. Hall, 'The Silent Language', 1959.

38) see Dore, *op. cit.* *Passim* for comment on the role of the *sensei* 'especially p. 163.

important element in Japanese society, and etiquette requires the pupil to have a degree of respect for his teacher which virtually precludes the kind of student participation in the lesson that is required in lessons for spoken English. The teaching methods arrived at in the West need modification for the Japanese scene, and Japanese teachers and learners may need to accept different ideas of their roles if oral skills are to be practised without embarrassment. This is perhaps harder to do in the formal education system than in a language-school — I have seen a Japanese teacher of English at a conversation school in Tokyo who achieved a degree of relaxation with his class, nearly all young people, which it would have been hard to attain in a High School or University. I believe this side of the problem has received too little attention in the past. In any case, the whole socio-cultural background needs sympathetic study by Japanese and foreign experts if the learner of spoken English is to learn in a favourable classroom atmosphere.

*The Encouragement of Spoken English in the Japanese Education System.*

Under this general heading we can consider long-term objectives, both those now planned and those worth consideration, and examine activities now in progress for helping teachers of English, especially in High Schools, to make the best use of resources actually at their disposal.

*Long-term Objectives.* It has already been mentioned that the Ministry of Education plans to provide more specialised training for teachers and a one-year period of teaching practice for prospective teachers. Another plan under consideration is for special training of existing teachers in graduate schools so as to deepen their understanding of their profession. These schools would include '... instruction on the theory of curriculum, practical instructional techniques, teaching methods for the various subject areas, and school management'. It is

39) Min. of Education, 'Basic Guidelines for the Reform of Education', 1972, p. 47.

to be hoped that teachers of English will have, under the heading of Teaching Method, some training in the most modern Oral Methods for English, following the findings of modern linguistic science.<sup>40)</sup> This training would have to go hand in hand with intensive development of the teachers' own spoken abilities so that they have the self-confidence to use more English in class as required by the Oral Method. As stated a few pages ago, the type of Oral Method adopted would have to be one designed for the Japanese psychology and situation, not a straight 'transplant' from Europe or America. It is also to be hoped that training and re-training programmes for teachers of English will make it possible for at least some of these people to have study periods abroad where they can develop their spoken English and see what is being done in other countries to modernise language teaching. A very few teachers and teacher-consultants are now able to do this with the help of scholarships from the British Council and other bodies.

The modernising of the University Entrance Examinations remains an important objective. I have pointed out that oral skills are at present untested and also that oral tests are hard to construct and score. As an interim measure, it might at least be possible progressively to alter the character of the written exam papers to include more dialogue material, more current spoken English vocabulary, and more questions involving active production by the examinee of answers showing competence in correct basic structure. The 1962 Conference of Experts on the Teaching of English discussed an experimental Aural Test from a women's college,<sup>41)</sup> and such ideas might be fruitful as a way of improving the Entrance Examinations.

Textbooks and class size are other matters needing long-term attention. The Ministry of Education is eager to promote modern textbooks, and here a difficulty arises from the unwillingness of publishers to experiment with material which might not, at first, sell as well as

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40) see D. Girard, 'Linguistics & Modern Language Teaching' 1972

41) see *op. cit.* p. 52.

the wellworn and familiar material of today — which includes, in English, books of grammar and translation. Some joint publishing ventures between Japanese and foreign concerns offer hope of improvement here. To some degree the textbooks will be modified by any shifts in emphasis in the Entrance Exams. On the class size problem, little is possible until enough teachers are available to permit numbers to be reduced, but teacher-training programmes should include as a matter of course instruction in techniques for breaking classes into groups for certain types of study. F. L. Billows,<sup>42)</sup> among others has suggested techniques for getting part of a class working orally while the other pupils are doing reading or writing.

Little has been said so far about the role of language-laboratories although these are playing a growing part in the educational scene. This is because the material available for use in the lab is still rather limited in Japan. Properly used, these laboratories can be valuable in giving pupils practice in oral English, but they need teachers who have been trained to use them according to specific techniques, and also properly graded material which a number of educators, notably Lado,<sup>43)</sup> see as ancillary to classroom work rather than central. Long-term objectives for spoken English will no doubt include laboratories, teachers trained to use them, and a range of materials for pupils of all levels.

The attainment of these objectives will take, on an optimistic view, many years. But even limited progress along these lines could make a significant difference to the classroom climate for the learning of spoken English. If, above all, the teacher-training methods employed not only show the teacher how to teach, but also show him how to help the learner to learn, through the creation of a sympathetic and active classroom atmosphere, then real interest and pleasure in the learning of spoken English will result and much of the traditional shyness of the pupil will disappear.

42) F. L. Billows, 'The Techniques of Language Teaching,' 1961 pp. 116-118.

43) see 'Language Teaching', p. 174.

*Present-Day Activities.* Pupils themselves are becoming daily more aware of the value of spoken English in the modern world, and each year sees more and more schoolchildren and university students going abroad to study spoken English in Britain and America. Groups of teachers, and individual ones, share in this interest and in these study trips. Teachers' organisations, such as STET, the Society of Tokyo English Teachers, meet periodically to discuss teaching matters, watch films about English teaching and hear talks in English by speakers on many subjects.

Short-term in-training courses are already being run for English teachers, especially in municipal and prefectural *Kyoiku* centres, both intensive courses during school holidays and once-a-week courses during term-time. The Science Education Institute of Osaka Prefecture runs a comprehensive programme for Junior and Senior High School teachers of English. In 1973, the Summer Intensive Course for Junior High School teachers ran for five days and involved 3 foreign lecturers (1 American and 2 British) and over 30 teachers. Every day there was language laboratory practice of English conversation, using a course of dialogues and drills, including pronunciation, and this was integrated with Spoken English class sessions, for which the course members were divided into three groups. These groups also studied Reading and Writing daily. During the week there were three lectures to the entire group, two on language learning topics and one on travel. There was thus a strong oral element in the course programme, although the other aspects of English were also given practice. While the primary aim of the course was improvement in English ability, teaching methods were discussed in two of the lectures. The regular once-a-week courses of the Centre, for Junior and Senior High School teachers on different days, have similar aims together with instruction in the use of audiovisual aids. Each three-and-a-half hour session includes language laboratory practice, reading practice, listening to a short speech by a native-speaker (British or American) who then supervises a discussion in small groups, and the afternoon ends with

a lecture on audio-visual aids. Material for use with overhead projectors has been prepared in the Institute, and from time to time course members are able to go out to schools in the area to watch demonstration lessons with the latest electronic equipment. Courses so comprehensive are rare in Japan, and participants say they derive much benefit from them.

Another type of in-training course in the Kansai is provided by the British Council Centre in Kyoto. Intensive Courses for English teachers are run for five days in the spring, and sometimes during the summer vacation as well. There are three elements to the courses—practice of English, especially spoken English, by the participants; discussion of methods for teaching English, especially spoken English, in the classroom with existing books and exam requirements being taken into account; and the third element is cultural, with lectures and films about aspects of present-day Britain. About 40 teachers attend. The Council also has once-a-week evening courses in Kyoto during term, when a small group of teachers meets for practice in spoken English and discussion of teaching methods. In all these courses, the Method element is designed to encourage teachers to use English regularly in their classes in two ways—by always making greetings and classroom instructions in English, as far as possible, and by having five minutes or so of oral English in every lesson, and ways are discussed of building up simple drills and question-and-answer exercises from their textbooks to facilitate this. The aims are deliberately limited so that the teacher can gain confidence through a series of small steps.

I have described these local activities for English teachers at some length because experience has shown that teachers benefit from them to the extent of increasing in confident use of spoken English (proved by the fact that many are tongue-tied at first, but far more fluent at the end of a course), and some of them also claim to make use afterwards of teaching techniques discussed during their course. I hope it is not too optimistic to see in courses like these a pattern which could be developed and extended in coming years and from which experience

could be drawn for the long-term teacher-training projects of the Ministry of Education.

*Conclusion.*

This paper has been able to cover only sketchily the situation of teachers and learners in Japanese schools and universities. In spite of my intention to emphasise the learner, he — or she — has proved elusive; hopefully some of my evidence serves to illuminate the situation of the High School child, sitting in a room with 44 others wondering what English is all about and whether such studies will be relevant to his or her life; or the University student, who perhaps wonders why his ability in spoken English is so poor, or why he has learnt more conversation at a language school than with his usual *sensei*. The picture is in fact a brighter one than ever before; the Japanese traditionally depreciate their skill in foreign language and probably a higher percentage can communicate in simple English than at any previous time. This is not always due to the formal education system, however, and I have tried to show how the system's approach to oral skills could be and is being improved. This is rather presumptuous of me as a foreigner, and the more so as my own country has by no means put its own language teaching house in order. My excuse is interest and involvement in the subject and a conviction that many Japanese people want to learn to speak English so as to understand people from other countries. Where I have made criticisms or suggested improvements, I have tried as far as possible to draw on Japanese sources to support my statements. At all events I hope that the future will enable Japanese schools and universities to provide learners with all the English skills — oral and written — which they want while lessening the burden on the teacher — especially the High School teacher of English, who is really the hero of the story.

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