

The Teaching of English in Japan and Mr Hiraizumi's Proposals: a Foreign Instructor's Viewpoint

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In an earlier paper (Konan Women's College Researches, No.10, 1973) I examined the situation of spoken English in the formal education system of Japan, and suggested that ways of adjusting modern language teaching methods to Japan ought to be explored. I also said that research was overdue on the psycho-linguistic problems peculiar to this country. In recent months there have been a number of developments in this field which I have followed with the keenest interest, and it seemed worth while to compare and comment on some of them. So in this paper the opinions of some Japanese authorities will be discussed from my own point of view, that of a foreign instructor. Three things need to be said at the outset: first of all, I am mainly interested in the study of English as a practical means of communication, using the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, like many foreign teachers in Japan I like to concentrate on the oral skills. Secondly, although I entirely accept the idea that each country has to develop its own attitude to foreign language studies, inevitably my own outlook is coloured by current British views on language teaching and by my teaching experiences in Britain and elsewhere. Certain traditional Japanese opinions about the study of English seem strange to me, and perhaps to other foreigners, and I cannot claim that my interpretation of the views of Japanese experts is always correct. Finally, some of the papers I shall discuss here have only been accessible to me through the translation and explanation of my colleagues; in this respect I would like to express my sincere thanks to Reiko Naotsuka and Stewart Purcell for their generous help, and to stress

that if I have misunderstood anything through the difference in language, then this is entirely my own responsibility.

In short, this is a foreigner's viewpoint and will no doubt contain some typical foreign prejudices—possibly some idiosyncratic ones as well. I can only hope that this very fact will add spice for Japanese readers.

Procedure.

In recent months, three Japanese authorities have made significant and widely differing contributions to the analysis of the English teaching problem. This problem I summarize as follows: dissatisfaction on the part of teachers, pupils and parents with results attained, together with uncertainty over aims and possible reforms. Professor Harasawa¹⁾ represents what can be called the “diagnostic” viewpoint, Mr Hiraizumi²⁾ the “revolutionary” viewpoint, and Professor Watanabe³⁾ the “traditional” viewpoint. I shall summarize each of these contributions, give my reactions to them and at the end of the paper supply, somewhat presumptuously, my own outline suggestions for the reform of English teaching in Japan, using the same headings as Mr Hiraizumi in his now well-known *Proposals*.

I

Chronologically, the first of these articles is that of Professor Masayoshi Harasawa of Keio University. He takes a more “psycholinguistic” approach than the other two authorities, and his conclusions are both more pessimistic, and, I believe, more immediately comprehensible to a foreigner, who may feel that he views the situation both as a Japan-

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- 1) M. Harasawa: “A Critical Survey of English Language Teaching in Japan” *English Language Teaching Journal* (Oxford U. P.) Vol. XXIX No.1, Oct. 1974.
 - 2) W. Hiraizumi: 外国語教育の現状と改革の方向 i. e. “Foreign Language Education at Present and Some Proposals for Innovation” *ELEC Bulletin*, 48, 1975.
 - 3) S. Watanabe: 亡国の「英語教育改革試案」 i. e. “National Ruin through the Proposals for the Revision of English Teaching” *Shokun* (Bungei Shunju), April 1975.

ese and an internationalist. One senses throughout the article an intense regret at what he regards as the excessive isolationism of his fellow-countrymen. It is perhaps significant that this article is the only one of those under discussion to have been written in English.

Professor Harasawa begins by giving an outline history of English teaching in Japan, and then examines what he calls "surface-structure" and "deep-structure" reasons for the failure of most Japanese people to communicate in English even after many years of concentrated study. These terms are, of course, loosely borrowed from Chomskyan linguistics. Among the "surface - structure" reasons he includes well-known ones like the unsuitability and all-pervasive influence of the university entrance examinations and the lack of good teacher-training facilities. He furthermore criticizes academic circles for their lack of interest in the practical aspects of study and obsession with grammatical details, pointing out that this attitude sets the tone for the entire system of education in English. The "deep-structure" reasons are even more serious. Professor Harasawa cites two: first and foremost is Japanese isolationism, which has given rise to a habit of regarding Japanese language and ideas as the only ones having any objective validity or existence: "neither English nor any other foreign language can ever succeed in invading their linguistic consciousness". The second is a need to "Japanize" everything, so that foreign languages are treated in the same way that ancient Chinese was. (It is instructive to compare Professor Harasawa's views on this with Professor Watanabe's very different and approving attitude, for which see below.) Professor Harasawa points out that in ancient times there was little chance or need for personal contact between Japanese and Chinese, so this approach to language was more justifiable; however the modern situation of Japanese and English is quite different. He sees little hope of altering these "deep-structure" characteristics of the Japanese people and the only improvement that he can see lies in changes in the "surface-structure", e. g. improvements in the university entrance examinations and the retraining of teachers. The abolition

of English as a compulsory subject, in his view, could be accomplished by having it dropped from the entrance examinations altogether, and would make it easier to motivate students, in view of their "having chosen to study English rather than having been forced to do so".

Comment

Professor Harasawa's paper presents an even more pessimistic picture than the gloomiest foreigners would paint of the future of English studies in Japan. It is disturbing to the foreign observer to find a Japanese so convinced of an almost impenetrable psychological barrier between his own and other nations. However, as an Englishman I detect a ray of hope beyond the one he advances at the end of his paper. It is, of course, a fact that isolationism exists in many other countries, notably England, though admittedly to a lesser degree than in Japan. Professor Harasawa mentions the surprise of a Japanese girl visiting America when she realized that people around were actually conversing in English. I myself had a similar reaction when I first went to France at the age of sixteen and was confronted by the reality of people conversing in French, and I know of other English people who have felt the same. Until very recently, and perhaps even now in some circles, it was regarded as "a bit of a joke" for an English person to be able to speak French, and one might feel shy about using it, however validly, in front of other English people. Uncertainty and reserve towards foreigners and their ideas are to be found in all countries. But just as England has changed recently in this respect, so may Japan. Two big differences between England and Japan are, firstly, that by an accident of history our own national language has come to be used internationally and, secondly, that it is far easier to go abroad and also meet foreigners in England than in Japan. In both these respects Japan is more physically isolated, and so the legacy of centuries of Tokugawa seclusion is upheld. However, in recent years it has become much less difficult for Japanese people to travel abroad, and although I have no statistics to offer it is my definite impression that since my arrival here seven years ago more Japanese are travelling

abroad in small groups or as individuals, thereby meeting and conversing with foreigners more freely than is possible in the goldfish-bowl anonymity of the guided tour or *nokyo* group. Some evidence for this may be seen in the mushrooming of small travel agencies catering for small parties. This factor of increasing individual Japanese-to-foreigner contact may brighten the picture more rapidly than Professor Harasawa has allowed for.

His article makes the suggestion that English might usefully be eliminated from the university entrance examination, and also that "it has been absurd trying to teach English to the whole population". These points coincide closely with the views of Mr Hiraizumi, to be discussed later; before leaving Professor Harasawa's paper, however, I would like to draw attention to one more of his observations, namely that so much of the energy of English studies in Japan is devoted to *minutiae* not in any way concerned with practical manipulation of the language. He cites the concern with grammatical details, and I can testify from personal experience to the frequency with which foreigners are asked to explain constructions which are rare, obsolete, or of little utility. (Which, for example, is better—"Try as hard as I may" or "Try I never so hard"? The answer is neither; no Englishman, except perhaps a very, very old schoolmaster, would dream of using either of them in speech or writing.) The objection to this sort of thing is that it encourages people to concentrate on learning *about* the language, on filling their minds with nice distinctions between tiny obscurities, instead of learning how to *use* the language, the everyday units of grammar and vocabulary which can nonetheless be used to express, orally and in writing, quite sophisticated ideas. Learning and learning *about* are two distinct activities, just as studying a motor-car engine is different from learning how to drive. This is not to deny that such attention to details may be mentally exercising and in its way interesting, and I have every sympathy for High School teachers who wish to find out the answers to such questions in order to advise their pupils, whose exam results (and therefore lives) may depend, at present, on their skill in handling

these hair-splitting distinctions. But Professor Harasawa is right to call in question an approach to language, strongly evidenced in the entrance examinations, which rewards the ability to distinguish between obscurities that mean nothing to a native speaker—which, in fact, require the Japanese learner to be a greater “expert” than the native.

One reason why language study may get absorbed in theoretical knowledge rather than everyday practice is, of course, when teachers and pupils doubt if the opportunity to use the language practically will ever arise. This impression has certainly informed Japanese educational circles for a long time, and recent developments in travel and business have not greatly changed it, above all in country areas. Professor Harasawa makes no direct mention of this point in his article, but it is central to Mr Hiraizumi’s argument, which I shall now examine.

II

Mr Wataru Hiraizumi is a Liberal-Democratic member of the House of Councillors, and comes from a well-known and respected family. I understand that he is very proficient in all aspects of English as well as being a skilled politician, and both these qualities could be inferred from the clarity and erudition with which his proposals are set out. Presented to a conference at ELEC, they were later published in the *ELEC Bulletin* and have since been re-printed in other publications and discussed by a number of English teaching experts. Many High School teachers I have spoken to have acclaimed his plans, and I find this both a source of encouragement and a cause for anxiety; encouragement, because Mr Hiraizumi’s view of English as a means of practical communication is widely, I think rightly, accepted; anxiety, because his recommendations appear to me to contain important weaknesses which his supporters often fail to notice.

I said earlier that Mr Hiraizumi could be regarded as a “revolutionary”. This is because he proposes, if not the total discontinuance

of English studies in the regular school system, at least its drastic curtailment. His study is divided into sections, which are sub-divided in clear and methodical fashion. Many of his premisses depend on a view of language which is now widely accepted among linguists in the world at large. The main divisions of the study are i) foreign language studies in Japan at present; ii) some points for discussion; iii) some proposals for reform; iv) the aims of foreign language studies in Japan.

First of all, Mr Hiraizumi points out that virtually all Japanese people are obliged to study English, but he says that their expertise is none the less poor. He gives some reasons for this, which correspond broadly to the "surface - structure" reasons of Professor Harasawa. To these three reasons he adds the important one that, in his view, there is little motivation for most people to learn English in Japan. He then asks three questions: Is it right to force almost all children to study English? Is English the best choice for a second language? Is there some way of getting better results?

Mr Hiraizumi's answers to these questions make up the main part of his study. He concludes that English is the obvious choice for a second language, but that it is unreasonable to make everybody study it. This is because it is less useful for daily life than subjects like science and social studies, less valuable as a mental discipline than subjects like mathematics, and time - consuming on account of the need for much memorization. He therefore believes that English should be almost eliminated from the school syllabus. Instead, Junior High School pupils should have a brand-new course of "World Languages and Culture", the details of which he does not go into. "Common - sense" (*joshiki*) use of English should be conferred at the first year level of Junior High School. By this he means that children should learn basic grammar and vocabulary on the lines of the present first - grade English syllabus. In Senior High Schools, English should not be compulsory, and there should be no English component in the university entrance examinations. However, in order to encourage a small number of pupils to study colloquial English, a national system of practical English

examinations should be instituted, and diplomas issued. High School pupils who study English should be given daily training of two hours, and an annual intensive course of one month.

Mr Hiraizumi ends his study by saying that given the present - day needs of Japan in the world, it is desirable for about 5% of the population to be able to use English well, i.e. about 6,000,000 people. He thinks that his proposals would result in some such number electing to study English at Senior High School.

It is not claimed that these proposals are anything beyond a starting point and Mr Hiraizumi has lately clarified a number of vaguenesses, for instance in his *Reply to Professor Shoichi Watanabe*.⁴⁾ In particular, he has conceded that language studies have a value as mental training, and that he regards all four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—as important, not just the ability to undertake simple conversation as some of his critics have believed. He also does not insist on the figure of 5% as the optimum for proficient users of English.

Comment

When these proposals were first published, they met with some enthusiasm, to judge from the reactions of many teachers I spoke to, though at that time I myself did not know their contents in any detail. To the foreign observer, Mr Hiraizumi's viewpoint appears to have the following advantages:

i) It is recognized that language study should be seen primarily as a "skill" subject, involving the acquisition of practical abilities, oral and written. It regards English first and foremost as a means of communication between living people. This contrasts with the traditional status of English (and other foreign languages) in Japan as a "knowledge" subject in which facts and grammatical propositions are examined through the medium of and in comparison with the mother-tongue, mainly in order to study written materials aimed at edifying and giving mental discipline, not for communication with foreigners. The Hiraizumi view does not in fact preclude the possibility of advanced studies in

4) W. Hiraizumi: 渡部昇一教授に反論する, *Shokun* (Bungei Shunju), June, 1975.

which literature, translation and formal grammar could play their part, but it leaves these aspects on one side so as to concentrate on practical considerations of the kind accepted in most countries in the world for the learning of foreign languages. The present tendency to fragment English studies in the watertight compartments of "English Literature, English Language and English Conversation" (*Eibun, Eigo, Eikaiwa*)⁵⁾ is here reversed, and we are left with the study of *English*, a means of communication.

ii) One of the biggest hurdles in the reform of English studies in Japan has always been the university entrance examinations. The difficulty of revising them so as to test more modern and colloquial English has often been stressed by experts.⁶⁾ Mr Hiraizumi's proposals cut the Gordian knot by doing away with them altogether.

iii) Although these proposals are an outline only, they provide a logical plan of campaign for the reform of English studies from the start right up to university level.

Despite these good points, and the refreshing directness of the proposals, there are grave disadvantages in Mr Hiraizumi's ideas. I cite the following:

i) The figure of 5%, although not insisted on by Mr Hiraizumi, plainly indicates his view of the numbers required. But if it has been foolish, as he and Professor Harasawa say, to try and teach English to everyone in Japan, the reduction in numbers in these proposals represents a massacre. Japan is a large industrial nation with great and potentially greater political and economic power. She therefore needs plentiful contacts with the outside world in order to gain useful expertise and avoid isolation. At the same time, her own language is not understood by more than a few people abroad, and its complexity, especially in writing, makes it hard for foreigners to learn. To reduce the national access to an international language so drastically would

5) see my lecture to JACET 13th General Convention, summarized in the *JACET Bulletin*, No. 21, Jan. 1975.

6) e. g. the 1962 Conference of Experts on the Teaching of English.

spell isolation. Where in the world is there a large industrial nation where only 5% of the population is able to communicate directly with people and ideas from abroad? Even in Britain and America, which are in a peculiar position since their own language already serves as a vehicle of international discourse, virtually everyone learns a foreign language for several years at school.

I understand that Mr Hiraizumi has said that the degree of cross-cultural flexibility needed for the efficient learning of a foreign language is so great that if more than a few people in Japan really mastered English the result might disturb the integrity of traditional Japanese culture.⁷⁾ This fear of further “erosion of national values” is a familiar one in Japan. Naturally, the tremendous changes of the past hundred years are bound to be a source of anxiety to those who love their country. But in my opinion—and in that of many Japanese and foreign people I know—this anxiety rests on some mistaken views of the current situation. To begin with, Japan today is a vastly stronger and more sophisticated nation than she was 120 years ago when the Black Ships broke the Tokugawa spell. This is true in spite of recent events having shown some of her economic weaknesses, as outlined in Frank Gibney’s recent book *Japan : the Fragile Superpower*.⁸⁾ According to a review of this book in the *Asahi Evening News*,⁹⁾ Mr Gibney has given much evidence, based on thirty years experience of Japan, for the view that the Japanese “are the possessors of a unique genius to adapt to changes and to superimpose new ideas and techniques without actually replacing or discarding wholly the old”. If this is true, then it surely betokens an unnecessary lack of confidence to try and restrict the interchange of ideas by limiting linguistic contact with the outside world. Secondly, I believe the “cultural erosion” argument rests on an outdated and defensive view of English as a vehicle of foreign intrusion and—popular word—“hegemony”, rather than as a medium for the fruitful exchange

7) Discussion at ELEC, Aug. 3, 1974, reported in *ELEC Bulletin* 48, p. 16.

8) Now published by Tuttle, Tokyo.

9) May 20, 1975.

of ideas between individuals and nations. The days should be past when we can regard English as the "property" of Britain or America; it is a universal language and coming to have less and less connection with the particular culture of any one nation. Thirdly, even if one should accept the notion that widespread mastery of English is harmful or un-necessary, there still remains the fact that many scientists, doctors and others need to know how to read English so as to have access to technical developments of benefit to Japan. The alternative is an army of specialist translators. I cannot believe that Mr Hiraizumi's limitations on English study could provide enough people for either way of satisfying this great and increasing need.

ii) Mr Hiraizumi does not discuss how the selection of pupils for English study is to be made. Is this to be self-selection? If so, then it is at least arguable that he would find himself without even the 5% of proficient English users that he wants. This is for two reasons. Firstly, not all those who decide to learn English at High School will necessarily be gifted at it, and so the wastage rate on the English courses might be rather high. Secondly, the total removal of English from the required syllabus for the university entrance examinations would mean that many pupils (and their parents) would feel it necessary to drop English in order to concentrate on whatever was helpful for getting to a top university. Opinions vary about how serious the impact might be on English studies. Some teachers I have spoken to believe that many pupils would still elect to take English, but others think that English might virtually disappear from the High School programme. This extreme viewpoint is held by Sen Matsuda, editor of the *Reader's Digest's* Japanese edition, as quoted by columnist Andrew Horvat in the *Mainichi Daily News*.¹⁰⁾ Says Matsuda: "Taking English off the list of required subjects would result in no English being learned whatever, for like people everywhere, the Japanese learn only what is required".

iii) Related to the last point is the difficulty Mr Hiraizumi's plans

10) "An SOS to Professor Higgins", *Mainichi Daily News*, 16 April, 1975.

would confront over specialization. Streaming and specialization have always been disliked in Japanese schools, and attempts to introduce them have been resisted, as in the Toyama Prefecture controversy some years ago. The Hiraizumi plan for English would mean, in effect, that pupils entering Senior High School would have to choose whether to give up a great deal of their time for the vital pre-university years to the study of English. Such an important decision, and such early specialization, could hardly fail to raise an outcry from all quarters.

iv) What, incidentally, is to replace English in the university entrance examinations? This matter is raised by Professor Watanabe, as we shall see below.

v) Mr Hiraizumi refers to the re-training of teachers, but not to the English teachers who would be made redundant if his proposals became reality. Some teachers could no doubt be re-assigned to other subjects but many could not. In any case, the total change in the nature of the English programme from the first year of Junior High School onwards would need great adaptation by the teachers who were retained.

In short, to the foreign observer Mr Hiraizumi's proposals are both a revolution and a counter-revolution. They adopt premisses about language-learning which are refreshingly modern, especially that the school English programme should aim at practical, all-round ability rather than grammar, translation and literature. This is a revolutionary viewpoint in the Japanese context. But he then goes on to suggest the application of these opinions in such a way that most Japanese would be unable to make contact with the outside world and have to rely on a very small number of experts to extract from abroad those elements needed for the economic and scientific development of the country. This is a counter-revolution, putting the clock back to Meiji. It is tempting to see Mr Hiraizumi as a modern exponent of the old tradition of *Wakon, Yosai* (Japanese soul, Western knowledge).

III

Some of those who reacted against Mr Hiraizumi's proposals did so from a traditional viewpoint, "tradition" meaning in this context the system presently employed for the teaching of English. In other words, their disagreement did not stem from the feeling that Mr Hiraizumi's plans were a false direction for reform, but from the conviction that the present system is in fact the one most in keeping with a truly Japanese approach to foreign languages. A vocal critic of this school is Professor Shoichi Watanabe, of Jochi (Sophia) University in Tokyo. He is an expert in German historical grammar and a translator and interpreter of German. Since grammar and translation are the cornerstones of the traditional method, it is not surprising that his views should be conservative.

Professor Watanabe's article in *Shokun* bears the alarming title "National Ruin through the proposals for the Revision of English Teaching". He opens with an extended commentary on *ressentiment*, as defined by Nietzsche, and he explains this as a feeling of dislike or resentment of those in positions of power, *urami* (恨み) in Japanese. He wonders if Mr Hiraizumi and others in Japan have come to feel *urami* about the English language because of painful memories of the inability of so many people, especially teachers and scholars of English, to communicate efficiently with the Occupation forces after the war. He asks if this is why they are still uneasy about their inability to use English for communication. Professor Watanabe links this to Mr Hiraizumi's suggestion that English study should be largely excluded from the curriculum and only included, for a few pupils, in its practical aspect. He believes Mr Hiraizumi's plans to be inappropriate. Even before the war there were many excellent translations into Japanese of foreign literature, and the fact that the scholars producing these translations were unable to speak English well is, in Professor Watanabe's eyes, an irrelevance. This is because the *real* purpose of

studying foreign languages in Japan is that laid down in the time of Shotoku Taishi (6th century). This purpose is to study interesting and difficult texts rather than learn how to speak other languages. This view, say Professor Watanabe, is “in the blood and sinews of the Japanese people”¹¹⁾. In his opinion it is useless for people in remote regions of Japan to attempt to speak a foreign language, but the present-day method of study involving grammar and translation gives them “potential” ability which can be turned into “actual” ability later.¹²⁾ He believes that Mr Hiraizumi has failed to take account of this distinction. He disagrees with Mr Hiraizumi that English is less useful than mathematics as a mental training, and cites cases from Germany where success in Greek and Latin studies correlated with ability in science (this is the “transfer of training” argument). He asks what Mr Hirai-zumi would use to replace English in the university entrance examination, and claims that adoption of the Hiraizumi proposals would entail the ruin of Japan, since the balance of education would be upset, and also those who elected to study English would have no time to study anything else adequately. He concludes by saying that the present way of studying English shows self-confidence and this is valuable and should not be disturbed by sweeping reforms. For the time being, says Professor Watanabe, English teachers should concentrate on *Eiyaku*, *Eisakubun*, *Bumpo* (English translation, English composition, grammar) and keep up their *yuruginaki-jishin* or self-confidence. Practical speech should be left aside till after High School days, when the potential abilities can be developed by “marriage with a cultured foreigner” (教養ある外人の異性と結婚) or attendance at a “small private conversation school” (町の会話塾). Am I wrong to detect a certain sarcasm in this conclusion?

Comment

For the foreigner, Professor Watanabe's article is very interesting for three reasons. One is that his arguments do not depend on the logi-

11) 日本人の血肉になっている考え方だと思うのである

12) 潜在力 (potential ability) 顕在量 (actual ability)

cal sequence of thought that a Westerner expects in a paper of this sort. This is not a criticism; I simply mean that he approaches matters from a very Japanese standpoint which adopts a different logic and different criteria from those a Westerner would select. This throws valuable light on the whole problem of language teaching in Japan, for plainly expectations and attitudes are not the same as one finds in other countries. Typical of this approach is Professor Watanabe's assumption that because Shotoku Taishi established a certain way of approaching the Chinese language and classics, this is a good reason for modern Japan to take the same course with English. To the Westerner this argument is inexplicable, but he must accept that for many Japanese people such an appeal to ancient tradition no doubt holds good.

Secondly, and stemming from the above, there is no interest in recent developments in Japan or abroad in language teaching methodology or the psychology of education. Professor Watanabe is not concerned, as perhaps a foreigner would be, to compare Japanese teaching methods with those which have evolved in other countries. His only detailed reference to foreign teaching is to support his theory of the "transfer of training" by mentioning research studies done in Germany—but against this I would set Harding¹³⁾, Lovell¹⁴⁾ and Wall,¹⁵⁾ who all indicate that the old beliefs about "transfer of training" need to be revised. Clearly Professor Watanabe approaches the question of language learning from the position that the only relevant criteria are those of Japanese tradition.

The third point of interest for the foreign reader is that, in spite of the essentially Japanese arguments used by Professor Watanabe, nevertheless at the back of the mind—certainly of the English mind—there stir vague recollections of one's having heard this sort of thing before. One has; many of these arguments for the non-practical grammar-

13) D. H. Harding: *The New Pattern of Language Teaching* (Longman), chapt. 2.

14) K. Lovell: *Educational Psychology and Children* (Univ. of London Press) ch. 10

15) W. D. Wall. *Education and Mental Health* (Harrap), Appendix C

translation method, for “transfer of training” and for the moral value of studying edifying texts were advanced in Britain earlier this century in favour of the study of Latin and Greek. Since there was plainly no possibility of meeting an ancient Greek or Roman, the oral aspects of these languages could be safely ignored. However, in Japan it is less unusual to meet an English-speaking foreigner, so the analogy with Greek and Latin breaks down.

In spite of all this, a foreigner can accept, and even welcome, many of Professor Watanabe’s arguments. It is natural enough for many Japanese to feel resentment over the communication gap after the war and for this feeling perhaps to colour the views of some researchers. But in the matter of deciding the future of English studies, where a wise decision would be to the advantage of all, negative emotions and resentments must be set aside, and this Professor Watanabe urges us to do. It also seems reasonable for him to query Mr Hiraizumi’s wish to do away with the English component of the university entrance examinations; so big a step would involve enormous reorganization and could not be undertaken lightly. Professor Watanabe must also be on sure ground when he argues about the figure of 5% mentioned in Mr Hiraizumi’s proposals—though his reasons for contesting this are not perhaps the same as those a foreign observer would first raise.

It is apparent that Mr Hiraizumi and Professor Watanabe are discussing two entirely different things. In the *Reply to Professor Shoichi Watanabe*, already noted, we read that for Mr Hiraizumi “language proficiency” is a matter of practical use of the four skills, whereas for Professor Watanabe it lies in the capacity to make good translations from other languages into Japanese. The difference between translation ability and conversational ability is well known, and a classic instance, cited by Mackey,¹⁶⁾ is that of André Gide, a celebrated translator of English writings into French, whose command of everyday English was so small that he was unable to ask a London busman where to get off. Attested facts like these call in question the general relation between

16) W. F. Mackey: *Language Teaching Analysis* (Longman) p. 161.

“potential” and “actual” ability, made so much of by Professor Watanabe. Professor Hiraizumi asks whether Professor Watanabe has considered the dissatisfaction of parents, who complain that after years of study of English (i. e. of gaining “potential ability”) they fail to give evidence of “actual ability” when the need for it arises. More research is needed into the connection between understanding of grammar and actual fluency. Direct Method enthusiasts (e.g. of the Berlitz school) believe that grammatical explanation is superfluous, while the personal experience of teachers is that students can be psychologically helped by an explanation (perhaps in their own language) of grammar points. But grammar needs to be supported by adequate practice (drill and guided conversation) in the second language if any “actual ability” is to be developed. Such is the view of Mackey,¹⁷⁾ Finocchiaro,¹⁸⁾ Billows¹⁹⁾ and others. This takes us back to what I said in section I of this paper on the difference between learning about a motor-car engine and learning how to drive a car. It is therefore instructive to see the analogy drawn by Professor Watanabe in his reply to Mr Hiraizumi in the June 1975 issue of *Shokun*.²⁰⁾ Here he compares the “potential ability” supposedly conferred by the grammar-translation method to the exercises done by a would-be swimmer who has no access to the sea. To this one can make two comments: i) has anyone ever learned swimming by this method? ii) the extent to which such exercises would help the potential swimmer surely depend on their being simulations of the real thing, i. e. they are practice of a skill, not the learning of facts and comparing of activities. The real analogy with Professor Watanabe’s potential swimmer seems to me to be not the student of grammar and translation, but the student in a language laboratory, who practises sentence patterns and conversations with tapes in the absence of a live native speaker.

17) *op. cit.* part III, chapt. 1.

18) M. Finocchiaro and M. Bonomo: *The Foreign Language Learner* (Regents) ch. 1.

19) F. L. Billows: *The Techniques of Language Teaching* (Longman) chapt. 2.

20) S. Watanabe: 平泉案は新しい“廃仏毀釈”だ (i. e. The Hiraizumi Plan is a New “Haibutsu - kishaku”) *Shokun* (Bungei Shunju) June, 1975.

IV

To summarize the main points arising in this paper: some present-day Japanese experts agree that the present way of studying English seems unsatisfactory to many, but they differ both in their assessment of the problems and the best solutions. They all believe (as do most foreigners) that the situation of Japan is special and so poses some unique psychological problems where language-learning is concerned, and Professor Harasawa goes beyond this to say that the Japanese are temperamentally unable to approach foreign languages in their own terms, but have to see them through a process of "Japanization", which leads to a preoccupation with grammar and translation rather than actual practice. Professor Watanabe in reality shows a similar opinion, but for him this "Japanization" is not to be regretted; he believes that the present methods have evolved over many centuries to suit the Japanese character and that in fact there is not much wrong with them; he only regrets that since the war the Japanese have been too anxious about their *speaking* ability in English, which he sees as irrelevant, the true purpose of foreign language studies being for him translation and textual analysis. Mr Hiraizumi takes an attitude which is both "revolutionary" and "counter-revolutionary", since on the one hand he advocates a fresh approach to language study based on the modern international interest in language as a skill in communication rather than an intellectual exercise, but on the other hand he proposes a severe limitation in the number of people who study it on the ground that few people need it and that too much study of English might disturb Japanese cultural patterns. Both he and Professor Harasawa want a change in the English component of the university entrance examinations, or even its complete abolition, and they recognize in different ways the need for the re-orientation of teachers.

Bearing in mind these diverse opinions, I shall now suggest, as a foreign instructor, some possible ways in which I believe the problems

of English teaching might be approached. I emphasize once more that this is a personal suggestion, and am very conscious of rushing in where the proverbial angels fear to tread. However, I feel very strongly that the more the matter is aired and suggestions, even far-fetched, are advanced, the easier it may become in the end for educators in Japan to reach a suitable consensus. I shall follow very broadly the frame of reference used by Mr Hiraizumi if only to facilitate comparison; this frame is as follows: i) foreign language studies in Japan at present; ii) some points for discussion; iii) some proposals for reform; iv) the aims of foreign language studies in Japan. But I think it desirable to change the order of these points. In a recent article about Mr Hiraizumi's proposals, Professor Kenji Fujita of Ohtani Women's College has cogently argued the need for a clarification of aims before one can really diagnose present failings or set about curing them. As he says in section IV of his article, it is not possible to talk about "getting a better effect" (成果があがる) unless one's aims are clear and concrete in the first place.

i) *Aims of Foreign Language Education*

Considering Japan's role in the modern world :

1) It is desirable for many Japanese to have a *basic practical knowledge* (including the ability to understand, speak, read and write at a simple level) of an international language in order :

a) to foster awareness of other cultures, for the promotion of world peace and the appreciation, through comparison, of Japan's own unique culture ;

b) to facilitate practical communication for those who go abroad for business or pleasure, or whose work brings them into contact with foreigners.

2) It is also desirable for many people to have a *good reading ability* of an international language for scientific and commercial purposes.

21) K. Fujita: 「平泉試案」をめぐって (i. e. "A Look at Mr Hiraizumi's Proposals") *Modern English Teaching* (Kenkyusha), June, 1975.

3) A few people should have *advanced command of all foreign language skills* for specialist purposes (e. g. interpreting, diplomacy, big business) or for liberal arts studies at universities. Advanced grammar and analysis should not be forced on all the population, however.

ii) *Foreign Language Studies at Present*

Here my views correspond to the combined views of Professor Hara-sawa and Mr Hiraizumi, in other words :

1) Almost everybody is forced to study English on a very high level which is also non-practical—that is, grammatical facts, translation and literary studies.

2) The results are unsatisfactory in terms of the above mentioned *Aims*, for the following reasons :

a) The national psychology is resistant to the study of foreign languages, except as far as they can be viewed through Japanese ;

b) This encourages a method of study which is not suitable for practical ability, especially speaking.

c) This tendency is further encouraged by the kind of examinations, especially for university entrance.

d) In any case, no clear aims have previously been defined in such a way as to embrace the entire teaching and examining system.

iii) *Some Points for Discussion*

These are the same as Mr Hiraizumi's namely :

1) Is it right to force almost everyone to study English ?

2) Is English the best choice for a second language ?

3) Is there any way of getting better results ?

iv) *Some Proposals for Reform :*

1) As stated under the *Aims*, it is not desirable to force advanced study of foreign languages on everyone, but basic ability in all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) should be imparted to all in one major foreign language, as in other industrial countries (e. g. France, Germany, Great Britain, the United States).

2) It is proper to choose English as a second language after Japanese, but investigations should be made on the desirability of encouraging

a few courses in other important languages (e. g. French, German, Russian, Chinese, Malay, Spanish, Portuguese) at university level.

3) Better results can be obtained by changing the teaching and examining methods. However, any changes should be carried out in a manner which will facilitate adaptation by teachers and pupils and do not, at least initially, involve the acceptance of too many new ideas at once (e. g. specialization in High Schools). Possible courses of action might be :

a) Research into the feasibility of introducing English in the last year of Primary School. This may be hard because of the necessity for consolidating *Kanji* at this time, but :

i) many people have studied English at private primary schools without ill-effects on their Japanese ;

ii) many psycholinguistic experts (e. g. Lenneberg,²²⁾ Mackey²³⁾) agree that it is best to begin study of a second language earlier rather than later ;

iii) one contributory factor to poor foreign language attainment among Japanese pupils may be that they start studying them later than pupils in other countries (USA : age 9, France and UK : 11, Japan 12²⁴⁾).

b) Mr Hiraizumi's plan for a course in "World Languages and Culture" at Junior High School should be studied. Perhaps one class period a week could be devoted to it. In any case, English at Junior High School should be compulsory and the practical element should be encouraged. Many of the present texts are quite practical, but they could be improved. More systematic use of foreign advisers should be encouraged so as to have error free texts.

c) The Senior High School entrance examinations should be modernized where necessary to include more techniques for testing real use of everyday language. This could be done in ways which do not require the help of skilled English-speaking examiners or actual oral

22) E. H. Lenneberg: *Biological Foundations of Language* (Wiley) 1967.

23) W. F. Mackey, *op. cit.* p.120.

24) see Japanese Ministry of Education: *Educational Standards in Japan* 1970.

tests ; certain recognition procedures give a high correlation (see Lado)²⁵⁾. The tests should include ability to manipulate basic grammar, discriminate between sounds and stress/intonation patterns and listening comprehension. Tests of this kind are already being developed and used in some prefectures (e. g. Osaka).

d) In Senior High Schools, English should be an elective subject, but in practice almost everyone will study it because of the university entrance examinations. However, this will not be a disadvantage if these examinations have been revised suitably. Pupils not intending to go to the university (e. g. at Commercial and Technical High Schools) should be given the opportunity to drop English if they wish.

The number of hours for English in Senior High Schools should be reduced from six to four per week. However, for some of their lessons the classes should be divided in two (or more) groups so as to facilitate oral practice and also avoid teacher redundancy. Two periods per week should be of "Modern English", covering the four skills but with the emphasis at least during the first year on oral skills, backed up by tapes and, where available, language laboratory practice. This course should follow on logically from the level attained at the end of the Junior High School course instead of jumping at once to a much more complex level as happens at present. The remaining two periods per week should be based on the study of "English Reading". The texts should be easy in the first year but become progressively more difficult both in structure and vocabulary. They should be on a variety of topics, including science, technology, literature and current affairs (e.g. newspaper articles). The emphasis should be laid equally on translation, ability to answer simple questions in English and to answer more detailed questions in Japanese. Texts should be prepared by consultation between the Ministry of Education, Japanese experts in language and other fields and foreign advisers, together with representatives of publishing companies. They should include exercises and some explanations in Japanese of key grammatical points. If possible, the "English Reading" texts should be

25) R. Lado: *Language Testing* (Longman) 1961.

related in structure to material in the "Modern English" course being studied at about the same time.

Research should be done on the desirability of allowing those intending to study English at the university, or those wishing to acquire a more specialist technical vocabulary, to have extra classes in "literary" or "scientific" English during their final year at High School. This raises the question of specialization, so might have to be shelved or introduced later if circumstances and public sympathy permit.

e) The university entrance examinations in English should be kept, but ought to be greatly revised. This might be done in connection with the *Kyotsu Test* for unified entrance examinations, now under discussion. The relative importance of the English component should be reduced, but it should constitute a qualifying test i.e. a minimum standard should be required of all candidates. There should be a test of basic ability in the four skills (i.e. of "Modern English") and of translation into Japanese and comprehension of texts (i.e. of "English Reading"). The "English Reading" test should allow a choice of "scientific" and "literary" texts. If the plans outlined above for specialization in the last year of High School are effected, then perhaps an obligatory extra paper should be given to people intending to study English at college.

4) A major task to undertake if thoroughgoing revision of the English programme is carried out is, of course, the re-orientation of the teachers. The Government would have to be ready to lay out a lot of money for in-training and pre-training programmes which should include seminars with foreign and Japanese experts and study trips abroad for key personnel. Nor should it be unthinkable to have, in major cities anyway, some foreign assistant teachers each dividing their time among several High Schools for advice and oral English lessons. Such assistants have for many years been a feature of foreign language instruction in other countries, but so far there have been very few in Japan.

Whatever reforms are made, it must be accepted that many teachers will find it hard to adjust to new methods, and some will be unable to

do so. State and university authorities must be prepared to wait for a long time before the full benefits of any changes can be felt. During this period, standards cannot be high and the human problems of adjustment must be regarded sympathetically.

Advantages of the above outline

1) It provides aims—basic fluency, reading ability and an opportunity for advanced studies for those who wish—which would hopefully be capable of satisfying a wide variety of aspirations.

2) The modernization of teaching materials, the reduction in study load at Senior High School and (perhaps) a modest degree of specialization should go a long way towards solving the motivation problem.

3) The plan tries to unite syllabus, teaching methods, texts and examinations in a common pursuit of the stated aims.

4) Certain areas—for instance, Junior High School and university courses in English—are left more or less unchanged. It can be argued that university freshmen would start their courses with less knowledge of intricate grammar than now, but this can be answered by saying that even now students' knowledge of these intricacies is patchy at best, and that they will be more likely under the new plan to have a fair command of basic skills.

5) By the end of Senior High School, many students should be in a position to make simple conversation with foreigners and also to read material which could benefit them in their careers. These facts will help business, research and international understanding, and so enhance Japan's position in the world.

Disadvantages

1) The projected reforms are rather sweeping—though not so much as Mr Hiraizumi's—and would involve many areas of study, many people and much money.

2) Many teachers would find it hard to adjust to the new methods however much they may wish to do so.

3) These plans would have to overcome stiff opposition from those wishing to preserve the *status quo*, whether for reasons of habit, ideology

or vested interest. However, even as I write this paper, the *Mainichi Daily News* reports the results of a survey on the attitudes of educators to the possible reform of English studies. Some of the figures in this report²⁶⁾ sound encouraging.

Conclusion

The above rather immodest proposals, and also my critique of the experts on the teaching situation, can of course be faulted on many points by those who are more acquainted than I am with the complexities of the situation. I know that however great the difficulties as I see them, in reality they are no doubt more difficult. Far more thought needs to be given to so vast a project as the analysis and possible reform of an entire nation's long-established language-learning habits. My excuse for this contribution is that possibly a foreign instructor's viewpoint may offer some fresh perspectives.

I shall conclude by quoting Professor Akira Ota of Tokyo University of Education:²⁷⁾

“It is of vital importance for the future of the Japanese to participate actively in promoting the peace and welfare of the world…… for this reason, an adequate knowledge of English as a means of international communication is considered to be vitally important”.

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- 26) “English Education Far from Practical”, *Mainichi Daily News*, May 26 1975. According to this article, 34% of those questioned believe that more lessons in daily conversation should be given; 70% believe English studies should be compulsory; only 18% want university entrance tests to stay as they are.
- 27) A. Ota: “Language Problems in Science and Technology Education in Japan”, *The English Teachers' Magazine*, (Taishukan), June 1975.