Promoting Progressive Change
in the Work of Secondary School JTEs

James W. PORCARO

Introduction

The effects of the wholly inadequate teaching methodology of most Japanese junior and senior high school teachers of English are painfully manifest. After six years and as many as one thousand hours of English language instruction (Mulvey, 1999), the skills of most students in all areas – speaking, listening, reading, writing, as well as grammar – are acutely stunted. In addition, they enter college holding “awkward and unproductive strategies and expectations for what English study and learning is” (Christensen, 2003, p. 16). Japanese students are then branded by distorted stereotypes, “fictions [that] have been woven into a pervasive discourse that shapes our descriptions and then our perceptions of Japanese learners” (Susser, 1998, p. 64). Some of the traits commonly ascribed to them include passivity, shyness, lack of individual thoughts and opinions, and preference for memorization over originality, formula over creativity. These characterizations are often given as if they are innate and invariable, leaving college teachers but to accommodate them and not to expect much from any efforts to change them. However, as McVeigh (1995) points out: “There is nothing deterministic or anything uniquely Japanese about [this] cognitive style” (p. 3). It is, in fact, a very rational response to the instructional methodology Japanese students endure throughout junior and senior high school. Yet, it is clear from my own experience of nineteen years as a college and university teacher of English as an international language (EIL) in Japan that students, even just weeks after leaving their high school classrooms, readily respond to stimulating and effective communicative teaching methodologies and can proceed to acquire meaningful and useful English language proficiency.

The focus of attention, then, needs to be on the junior and senior high school Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and their teaching methodology. “People have been criticizing English pedagogy in Japan for the same reasons for over 100 years, from a time preceding the university entrance exams” (Mulvey, 1999, p. 135). As we are now well into the 21st century, functional English language skills are a necessity for many people in various positions of employment and in society. The language is no longer just a tool for acquiring knowledge from the world beyond Japan as it was in the Meiji era. It is not just for the interest or pleasure of learning about the cultures of countries in which the majority of people are native English speakers, such as the U.S., the U.K., and Australia. It is not just for the convenience of traveling in many part of the world. Proficiency in the English language now relates directly to the life chances of students entering an intensely integrated international order. It is long, long past the time when wholesale change is required in the language teaching methodology of JTEs in order to fulfill their responsibility to prepare students for engaging and succeeding in their choices of work and activity among the wide and diverse offerings in the world today. It is also a matter of dealing with Japan’s “marginalization” and “disconnectivity” in the world – politically, economically, and academically – caused by the linguistic barrier that continues to isolate it from the rest of the world (Lehman, 2002).
It is not unfair either to challenge the work of JTEs or to lay on them these responsibilities to their students and society. Far harsher views are everywhere presented to the public, as in the following examples.

“The problem rests with the inferior quality of English instruction provided by Japanese teachers.... [who] cannot speak the very language they are supposed to teach. Indeed, the problem today is not this appalling truth itself, but the fact it has eluded redress for so long. The teachers have naturally opposed attempts to reform the system because they have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo” (Kwan, 2002).

“It is an open secret that [JTEs] have little incentive to teach and little knowledge of how to teach a foreign language.... They express progressive opinions just for show, to save face and look like “good” teachers.... The truth is that they... are more concerned about their own safety than about students' happiness” [quoting a high school JTE] (Childs, 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to suggest some essential and critical realities that junior and senior high school JTEs need to address and what can be done for JTEs to assist in the transformation of their work in order to effect positive results in the development of the English language proficiency of their students.

Smashing myths: Yakudoku and English entrance examinations

Approximately 80% of JTEs use the yakudoku method of language instruction (Gorsuch, 1998; Takeda, 2002). Yakudoku means “translation reading” but is widely referred to as “grammar/translation”. The justification most commonly offered for employing this so-called grammar-based methodology is that Japanese teachers must prepare students for university entrance examinations. These claims, however, in fact are myths and before any positive advance can be made in overhauling the instructional orientation and methodology of JTEs in junior and senior high schools, it is absolutely essential that these myths be systematically smashed. The yakudoku method, in fact, has little to do with teaching English grammar or reading skills (Guest, 2000; Mulvey, 1999) and “the content of university entrance exams cannot legitimately be used as justification for the yakudoku teaching methodology” (Guest, 2002). Indeed, this instructional approach is the principal cause of the generally poor English language proficiency among Japanese students and their generally poor performance on English entrance exams for university as well as standardized tests such as TOEFL.

Takeda (2002) describes yakudoku as a method of instruction in which students give a word-for-word translation of an English text into Japanese. The resulting translation is then reordered to suit Japanese syntax. “The teacher corrects [students’] translations by offering grammatical explanations and provides a model translation. The goal of the class is to have students understand the exact Japanese translation; therefore, instead of working within the English text, the students concentrate on Japanese translations” (p. 16). The language of instruction is overwhelmingly Japanese. Indeed, it is reported that JTEs use Japanese for over 90% of the talking time in their lessons (Murphey & Sasaki, 1998). Gorsuch (1998) further reports from classroom observations that students never actually produce any English and their translations are not discussed but simply declared “right” or “wrong” in a strongly teacher-centered classroom. Indeed, “yakudoku is really about teacher control.... [It] is [a] pedagogy that affords teachers powerful control over students' language learning activities” (Gorsuch, 1998, p. 27).
Guest (2000, p. 24) cites a definition of grammar given by Swan and acknowledged by more and more scholars. Grammar is defined as the rules that show how words are “combined, arranged and changed to show different meanings.” It is “the structural means by which meaning and communication are realized.” Guest summarizes the findings of a number of studies that analyzed Japanese high school classrooms. They reveal that something very different is meant by grammar in those settings. Samples of English texts that are used are usually decontextualized and not intended for the purpose of clarifying meaning. The translation exercises involving these texts are invariably at the sentence level and the grammar taught is invariably prescriptive rather than descriptive. Guest concludes: “It is best then that teachers who teach in this manner do away with the term grammar when describing their pedagogy as they are not teaching grammar [emphasis added] but rather rules of syntax, which is a part of grammar but cannot be equated with the term as a whole.” The tasks that students are subjected to in yakudoku lessons are not really grammar exercises, but “sentence syntax transformations”.

This analysis leads Guest (2000) to propose some obvious questions related to the rationale offered for the dominant practice of yakudoku pedagogy. “Do entrance exams really include tasks that involve direct transformations of texts like these, focusing upon established rules of syntax? Do these tests really require a predominance of English-to-Japanese translation skills?” (p. 24-25). After a detailed inspection of “center” exams (Daigaku Nyushi Center Shiken) and an entrance exam given by Kyushu national university, Guest reaches the following conclusion: “There seems to be little connection between high school teachers’ stated need for an emphasis upon grammar and the key items or tasks that appear in either the center or public university entrance exams” (p. 27). In fact, fewer than 10% of the questions require the discrete syntactical transformation kind of exercise practiced by students under yakudoku classroom pedagogy. In addition, very few questions focus on English-to-Japanese translation skills, particularly at the sentence level. Guest (2002) found that most questions on the university entrance examinations “required a combination of lexical knowledge..., an understanding of cohesion from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph, an understanding of English rhetorical patterns..., and the ability to make inferences ... [from] longer, more comprehensive passages of text.” Clearly, these are not at all the skills learned and practiced by students in junior and senior high schools under the prevailing teaching methodology of JTEs.

Reading and English entrance examinations

Mulvey (1999) completed an exhaustive and careful study of the relationship between junior and senior high school classroom reading pedagogy and textbook content in Japan and English entrance examinations for universities. His findings and conclusions serve to smash the myth of the necessity of the yakudokku teaching methodology to meet the requirements of these exams. “The content of these exams can neither explain nor justify the extreme inadequacy of the methodology currently used to teach English reading skills in the overwhelming majority of Japan’s junior and senior high schools” (p. 125).

Yakudokku methodology with its teacher-led and dominated line-by-line translation as described above is a wholly deficient reading pedagogy for preparing students to tackle the content of the English entrance exams. Mulvey (1999) notes that “the reading passages on entrance exams are generally native-speaker level in complexity, with the relevant questions that the students must answer most often integrative/comprehension in nature, i.e., ones that demand advanced structural and lexical recognition skills” (p. 130). Yet the reading pedagogy employed by JTEs “generally produces - and indeed seems designed to produce - students with limited
context-recognition skills, poor vocabularies, inadequate rhetorical/schematic preparation, and deficient cultural background knowledge, i.e., just the areas that a truly ‘test-centered reading curriculum’ would seemingly emphasize” (p. 133). In short, the *yakudoku* methodology is irrelevant for aiding students to pass the English reading sections of university entrance examinations.

Evidence of the utter ineffectiveness of the current methodology utilized by JTEs is borne out in a comparison of the TOEFL scores among Japan and other countries in Asia and around the world. In 2000-01, the average Japanese score was 505. Japan ranked 24th out of 26 Asian countries and 75th among 88 countries worldwide (Takasuka, 2003). Mulvey (1999) debunks the traditional rebuttal to this data that in most other countries only elite students take the TOEFL. He points out that from a closer inspection of the data “it could be just as easily argued that it is the Japanese educational elite that are taking and doing poorly on the exams in high numbers” (p. 137). In fact, Mulvey notes that the average TOEFL reading scores of Japanese students have been decreasing steadily for more than 20 years. This point is supported anecdotally as probably all veteran university English teachers, both native English speaking and native Japanese speaking, would agree that the reading comprehension ability of Japanese university students has been decreasing in recent years and that this is a grave problem.

The myths involving *yakudoku* instruction and the content of the English language sections of university entrance examinations, while they almost seem to have been invented by design, certainly have served far too long to cover and perpetuate the defective and failed teaching methodology of most junior and senior high school JTEs. It is paramount that these myths first be shattered so that JTEs can then move forward as a group to transform their work by acquiring and adeptly using effective instructional approaches that will advance their students’ overall English language proficiency as well as their ability to demonstrate their skills by successful performance on university entrance exams.

**Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs)**

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program is a government operated and financed program that was started in 1987. It brings native English speaking “assistant language teachers” (ALTs) into junior and senior high school classrooms. “The overt purpose of the JET program is to have the ALTs and JTEs interact in English, raise JTEs’ awareness of English as a communicative medium, and promote communicative English language teaching in the classroom” (Gorsuch, 2002, p. 6). As of April 1, 2002 the number of JET participants (90% of whom are ALTs) was 6,254. 43% are from the US, and 50% are from Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (*The Daily Yomiuri*, July 13, 2002). The annual operating budget is now well over US$250,000,000 (see Gorsuch, p. 6). In addition, there are hundreds more ALTs that are hired by some prefectural and municipal education boards from the private sector. (*The Daily Yomiuri*, July 19, 2003).

This paper takes a position that may be contrary to conventional thinking about this program, but one that seems to have a growing undercurrent of strength and resonance among JTEs themselves and others in spite of the continuing expansion of the number of ALTs in Japanese schools. I believe the program should be abolished for the following reasons.

1. Data on the background of ALTs seem to be entirely lacking. However, from personal contact and conversation with a number of ALTs and scores of JTEs on this subject, it seems fair to say that the vast majority
of ALTs are young people recently graduated from college with little or no experience as teachers of anything, let alone English as a foreign language, who are in Japan for the first time. The majority seems to stay just one year, although some renew their contract for a second year. Very few stay beyond that period of time in Japan as ALTs. As the vast majority of JTEs receive almost no formal teacher training and inadequate in-service training (Browne, 1998; Gorsuch, 2002; Mulvey, 1999; Murphey & Sasaki, 1998), and employ yakudoku as the only known instructional methodology, while the vast majority of ALTs are new and untrained teachers, the classroom work of paired teams of JTEs and ALTs is truly a case of the blind leading the blind, at least insofar as implementing effective communicative-based language instruction. Although anecdotal, my personal experience of conversations on teaching methodology with paired teams of JTEs and ALTs at a Toyama junior high school supports this characterization.

2. It seems there are no studies with empirical evidence to show that the presence of ALTs in junior and senior high school classrooms over the past 17 years has effected any notable advance in students’ English proficiency levels or the quality of communicative language teaching (CLT) in Japan. There are assertions and some research that suggest the program has had some positive impact on the English language ability of JTEs (Browne, 1998; Gorsuch, 2002). However, even this evidence is from very limited samples of self-assessment and it seems generalizations should be made with considerable caution.

3. At a cost of more than 1/4 billion US dollars a year for the JET program, a cost/benefits analysis would seem to suggest that the presence of ALTs in schools involves a massive expenditure for very limited and unproven gains. I believe taxpayers’ money would be far better invested by conducting long-term, intensive training of JTEs in workshops, seminars, and courses throughout the year for which they would be paid for required attendance. Instruction would be provided both to raise JTEs’ levels of English language competence and to develop their knowledge of and skills to deliver effective, communicative teaching methodologies. Experienced, successful EIL teachers and teacher-trainers, both native English speakers and native Japanese speakers, from within Japan and from other countries should be employed with this money to work with junior and senior high school teachers both in workshops and in JTEs’ classrooms. Furthermore, class size should be significantly reduced and more trained teachers hired in order to facilitate successful implementation of CLT. Normal class sizes in Japan of up to 40 students are comparable to those in the least developed countries of the world. The total educational environment of primary and secondary schools in Japan would benefit enormously from major reductions in class sizes which can be funded by more productive reallocation of government financial resources.

The Ministry of Education will begin a five-year program to improve the English skills of JTEs at public schools. 60,000 junior and senior high school teachers will be required to take English-training courses. Also, about 100 teachers will be sent overseas to graduate schools (Monkasho, 2002). While such efforts are positive, far more could be done for far more JTEs with the enormous amounts of money now paid to ALTs from other countries whose contribution to English language education in Japan seems to be very limited at best.

4. The single most important and desperate need is for JTEs to use English as the language of teaching and learning in their classrooms. They are potentially the greatest resource and motivator for their students, who need to hear their teachers using English with them and to be provided with opportunities and support to use English themselves. Instead, the presence of ALTs in their prescribed roles allows JTEs to continue to avoid employing English as the language of teaching and learning in their classrooms. They can continue to argue that using Japanese is more comfortable for them and their students and that it is only natural that “[w]e Japanese” use the Japanese language among themselves (see Murphey & Sasaki, 1998).
5. The presence of ALTs in classrooms allows JTEs to evade their responsibilities. One JTE (Miyashita, 2002) with 20 years experience in high school classrooms publicly expressed his view on this point.

“The JET program should be abolished.... It is we Japanese teachers of English who should take more responsibility for bettering English education in Japan. We are the ones who should study more about cultural differences, improve our skills in verbal English communication and do our best to be role models for our students. It is our duty to help students grow into mature Japanese citizens with healthy and balanced international viewpoints. The Education, Science and Technology Ministry, therefore, should start sending many more Japanese teachers of English abroad so that they can broaden their horizons as well as acquire proficiency in their language skills.”

What more can be done for JTEs

Once the myths - concerning the “grammar/translation” (yakudoku) teaching methodology and the content of English entrance exams for universities - which sustain the status quo in language education have been smashed and the ALT program dismantled, with its massive funding redirected to serve the genuine and imperative needs of JTEs, a number of positive measures beyond those mentioned above can be taken to promote progressive change and effective outcomes in the work of JTEs at junior and senior high schools.

The Ministry of Education has already set a goal for junior and senior high school JTEs to attain one of three levels of English language proficiency: pre-1st grade of the STEP Test (Eiken), 550 in TOEFL, or 730 in TOEIC (Monkasho, 2002). To achieve these levels of demonstrated competence in English, I believe it is the obligation of the Ministry to mandate intensive English language instruction from the best EFL teachers that can be hired for those JTEs who fall short of meeting these standards. JTEs needing this instruction should be released from classroom assignments at full pay for a reasonable period of time until they reach one of the designated levels of English language proficiency. Kwan (2002) is correct to suggest that “those who do not meet the criteria would be guaranteed their present salaries but retrained in other professions. Moreover, an early retirement program could be instituted... offering older teachers a viable exit option.”

There already exist a number of workshops and seminars for JTEs to advance their understanding and implementation of effective, communicative language teaching in which English is used as the language of teaching and learning. Murphey & Sasaki (1998), for example, report on Leaders Camps organized by the Ministry of Education and local prefectural boards of education. The Ministry must mandate attendance at such workshops and that JTEs discard their traditional instructional (yakudoku) methodology and replace it by CLT in order to meet the objectives and targets of its Strategic Plan to Educate Japanese Who Can Use English which was devised in 2002. The best teacher-trainers, both native English speakers and native Japanese speakers, must be hired to conduct these workshops. Yet while the rhetoric of implementing meaningful language learning in Japanese schools rises ever higher with ever new official guidelines and strategies, observations such as Christensen's (2003) reveal that in classrooms, even with aspiring young teachers, there is still “a near total lack of language teaching/instruction in classes nominally labeled English” (p.16). Indeed, he reflects that over the years it seems there has not been much change at all in the language learning experience of Japanese students and “still no serious attempt at teaching communicative English at schools in Japan.” (See also O'Donnell, 2003.)
It is absolutely essential that teacher-training gatherings of JTEs be conducted entirely in English. Some are, such as the annual weeklong Language Institute of Japan Summer Workshop for Teachers of English. The teacher training for implementing the Ministry of Education’s “strategic plan” is to be conducted “in principle” in English. The aim of these workshops must be not only for JTEs to learn and develop new teaching methodologies, but also to advance their English language competence and confidence. JTEs personal use of English and the English language instruction they deliver in their classrooms are inextricably related. Their lessons will never be more communicative and meaningful, more effective and more interesting, unless they and their students use English in the classrooms. Yet, if JTEs refuse to make the effort and take the risk to use English among themselves at these workshops and seminars, how can they ever legitimately ask and expect their students to use English in their classrooms? From where will come their moral authority to elicit English from their students in the classrooms? If JTEs at such gatherings cannot collectively make all feel comfortable and secure using English among themselves, how do they expect ever to make their students feel comfortable and secure using English in their classrooms? If JTEs themselves do not acquire the tolerance to accept not being able to express themselves as fully as they would like to or not being able to grasp fully what they are listening to, how will they ever be able to instill this critical element of language learning in the students in their classrooms? Indeed, these workshops and seminars are precisely the places where JTEs should have the opportunity to develop these fundamental and essential elements of foreign language teaching. At the same time it is important to recognize and emphasize the pedagogical advantages of bilingual JTEs teaching English as an international language “in knowing their students' culture and first language, and in being models of successful language learners” (McKay, 2003, p. 139).

JTEs must understand that merely speaking English in the classroom does not equate with using English as the language of teaching and learning. CLT involves employing a methodology for student-centered, interactive lessons; utilizing appropriate teacher-constructed learning materials (see Porcaro, 2003); and demonstrating effective classroom management skills. Indeed, as for the latter point, Sakui (2002), in a longitudinal study investigating a group of twelve junior and senior high school JTEs trying to implement CLT, reported: “The most significant difficulty teachers outlined was classroom management, which is more complex for CLT activities” (p. 21). JTEs must learn to operate in an environment far different from and far more challenging for them than the rigidly teacher-controlled environment of yakudoku pedagogy that does not at all require communicative ability in English on the part of the teacher. Furthermore, they also must learn how to train students to function in a communicative language learning classroom. The challenge and the need for intensive training is clear also from the investigation conducted by Browne (1998). He reported:

"In light of the fact that the vast majority of English teachers receive no formal training, that only 34% of vocational and 33% of general high school teachers in the survey reported ever [emphasis added] making their own lesson plans, and that every Monbusho-approved textbook comes with a teacher’s manual that has detailed lesson plans emphasizing translation and drill-focused techniques, it is not surprising that a wide gap exists between...communicative goals... and actual classroom practice."

Universities with courses for obtaining a teacher’s license in English must require that those students enrolled are taking English language courses in which English is the only language used for teaching and learning and a student-centered, interactive, communicative-based methodology is employed. Gorsuch (2002) has cited research that indicates “of all the influences that can be accounted for, teachers’ previous educational experiences have the
greatest influence on teachers’ eventual instructional practices” (p. 9). As most JTEs learned English themselves from yakudoku pedagogy in junior and senior high school, it is imperative that future teachers now at universities at least have the opportunity there to learn English in an instructional environment that will not only advance their own foreign language competence and confidence but also serve as a model for their own future pedagogical practice.

It is very important for current JTEs at junior and senior high schools to see that their very own students can understand, actively participate in, enjoy, and benefit from communicative-based lessons that are delivered solely in English. Universities should establish outreach programs in which their best English language teachers, both native English speakers and native Japanese speakers, who instruct in this way, can be invited by schools to give lessons in English classes there. Personally, I have done this successfully at elementary, junior and senior high schools and from the response of both students and teachers I would like to think that a lasting impression and influence were left behind. This scheme should also be a part of in-service training programs. Murphey & Sasaki (1998) state correctly that “what many JTEs don’t realize is that there are ways to make their teaching in English comprehensible and ways to make it possible to learn more English through actual use” (p. 24). Guest lessons of this kind can be an important part of the retraining of JTEs.

One last thought is that those of us who are parents have an added obligation to be as active as possible in our children’s education at school. We must attend parent-teacher conferences and open classroom events, for example. It is our right as parents and our duty as language educators to discuss appropriately with our children’s teachers the issues presented in this paper. We need to promote change where it is needed and to encourage and support those teachers and educational settings that provide our children and all students with a full and rich learning experience.

References


