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TESOL Training and Japan: Applications and Caveats A Progressive Case Study of the Successes and Obstacles that TESOL MAs Face in Japan

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Introduction

This study explores the benefits and shortcomings of TESOL (Teaching English to Students of Other Languages) training from the perspective of four EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers entrenched in the Japanese education system. Through correspondences with TESOL MA graduates currently working in a Japanese elementary school, junior high school, high school, and university, I sought to inquire about, identify, and analyze the various successes and difficulties that TESOL MA-equipped EFL teachers face in the Japanese English education system. The main focus of the case study was placed on determining which elements, theories, and methodologies acquired during their MA TESOL training were readily applicable to the teaching situation in Japan, as well as those that were not, and why. Other topics like the compatibility (or lack thereof) between administrator and teacher philosophies, Japanese cultural considerations, and the current state of English education in Japan were also explored.

The Study, Research Questions, and Participants

This case study is particularly interesting to me because I myself am a TESOL MA-trained EFL teacher at a Japanese university. It seemed obvious to me that the best way to see how TESOL-trained teachers are faring in the Japanese education system was to ask them directly about it. In order to achieve meaningful discourse with my informants,

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I opted to use an ethnographic/case study approach for my research questions, and I also guaranteed my informants full anonymity. I used four basic questions with my informants to elicit some general responses about TESOL-based English teaching in Japan, which in turn opened up numerous avenues for discussion. The questions went as follows:

- 1) What are the most significant things (ideas, techniques, philosophies, etc.) that you learned in your TESOL training?
- 2) How have you applied your TESOL training in your job? How has your training helped you?
- 3) What are some difficulties that you've faced at your job?
- 4) Have any of your views, ideologies, teaching techniques, or philosophies changed since you've entered the Japanese educational system?

These issues are of great importance for those of us who plan on teaching English in Japan in the future, and can even offer various insights into English teaching/learning for other professionals in the TESOL field. While the English educational system in Japan is undoubtedly a unique one, many parallels exist for language teachers in various situations.

The participants for this study all achieved their MA's in TESOL, and at the time the study was conducted were working at some level of the Japanese educational system. Out of my four informants, two were women and two were men. Two of the respondents were Japanese, and two were American. Each level of the Japanese educational system was represented: the elementary school level, junior high school level, senior high school level, and the university level. The correspondences took place from the Spring of 2005 up until Fall of 2006. All of the correspondences were conducted via e-mail. All of the participants agreed that e-mail was not only convenient but allowed them ample time to reflect on the various issues that were raised. Each informant was asked the same four questions, although the course of our discussions afterward differed with each individual.

A Brief History of English Education in Japan

Before plunging into the correspondence data and my analysis of it, perhaps a brief overview of the development of English education in Japan is in order. An abbreviated history of the evolution of English education in Japan will help the uninitiated to better understand the current state of EFL in Japan. Japan's English system has always been a point of interest for those in the field of TESOL. The unique social structure, history, and basic educational philosophy found in Japan create an interesting challenge to those who teach English in Japanese schools. The fact that Japan is a homogeneous society with a keen fascination for Western culture makes English an essential foreign

language for many Japanese, not to mention the deep-rooted economic ties that exist between Japan and the Western world. Despite large financial resources directed towards a nationwide English curriculum, in 2003 Japan ranked 22nd out of 23 Asian nations in average TOEFL scores, placing it only above North Korea. To try and bring about a change to this educational embarrassment, communicative English has become a key point for improvement for the Japanese Ministry of Education within the last 20 years.

English has been taught at Japanese junior and senior high schools since the late 19th century. Japanese secondary education has always been synonymous with a system that emphasizes the importance of entrance examinations as a means of determining academic ability. This examination-based system found in junior and senior high schools “seems to help propagate the heavy reliance on the grammar-translation method of instruction” (Brown & Yamashita, 1995) as well as memorization and rote learning (Browne & Wada, 1998). The examination system “has come to be so deeply embedded in both the society at large and the secondary education system within which students and teachers function” (Amano, 1994) that national education administrators have been hesitant in moving towards more modern methods of judging performance in foreign languages.

Because Japanese college entrance examination questions are largely discrete-point and passive in nature (Brown & Yamashita, 1995), grammar rules and translation methods have historically taken precedence over actual human interaction in the EFL classroom. While more communicative teaching methods have recently started to emerge in junior and senior high schools, studies show that teachers “continue to work in the shadow of an educational system where ‘yakudoku’ (grammar-translation) remains the accepted and primary teaching method for preparing students for ‘juken’ (entrance examinations)” (O’Donnell, 2005). In Japan, often the prospect of landing a good job depends on the school attended, meaning that “success or failure on an entrance examination can influence a student’s entire future,” (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Considering the undeniable importance of entrance examinations in Japan, it is not surprising to discover that proponents of communicative methods face a daunting obstacle in that most Japanese English students rely on their English solely to pass entrance examinations (Garant, 2000), and thus spend their time studying English in ways that will increase their examination scores.

With the rapid pace of globalization and the importance of English as the language of international business in Asia, however, Japan has finally started to see the light, and has begun to foster more communicative methods of English education. Today, the Ministry of Education defines the overall aim of English education in Japanese secondary schools as “developing students’ abilities to understand a foreign language and express themselves in it, to foster a positive attitude toward communicating, and to

heighten interest in language and culture, deepening international understanding” (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 1994).

Despite the Ministry of Education’s goal of developing students’ communicative competence in English, “many obstacles still exist in secondary English education,” (Browne & Wada, 1998) and other research shows that “current reform measures appear to be implemented unevenly within the educational system” (O’Donnell, 2005). The definition of teacher roles, cultural boundaries, teacher qualifications and the ominous presence of entrance examinations in Japanese schools pose significant obstacles for English acquisition in Japanese classrooms, not to mention that English education also starts relatively late (usually at the junior high level), class hours per week are relatively few, and class sizes are large (Takanashi, 2004). To what extent do these different aspects inhibit English education in Japanese schools? Through discussions with my various informants, I hoped to gain some insight as to how English teachers in Japan view this question, and more importantly, how they have overcome some of these daunting obstacles.

TESOL-Trained Teachers and Their Experiences Teaching in Japan

Although I used the same questions with all four of my informants, the answers that I got from each teacher varied. Some recurring themes also became apparent throughout the discussions. Obviously, the variations in the informants’ answers had a lot to do with the fact that each teacher taught at a different educational level, but some of the similarities that are evident seem to be a repeating theme in English education throughout Japan. For this section of the paper, I will give each research question followed by all of the informants’ responses in succession, which are in turn followed by my analysis. This should provide some immediate comparison opportunities and will also easily highlight the similarities and differences in opinion between the respondents answers. The teachers’ responses will be coded as follows:

- Mr. A – An American EFL elementary school teacher
- Ms. B – A Japanese EFL junior high school teacher
- Ms. C – A Japanese EFL senior high school teacher
- Mr. D – An American EFL university teacher

Question # 1: What are the most significant things (ideas, techniques, philosophies, etc.) that you learned in your TESOL training?

Mr. A – “I went through TESOL in the mid and late 80s, when Krashen had pretty much become dominant throughout the U.S. in TESOL and applied linguistics. So I will admit that I absorbed the whole Natural Approach. Elements of it may be

overstated or still open to debate, but my experience and subsequent study has strengthened my conviction in the learning/acquisition dichotomy (including a neural basis for it), and that the classroom teacher must consciously seek to promote acquisition-type activities over traditional language learning methods. That idea I combine with Widdowson's theories of communication and communication content (although he comes off as far too ivory tower for the real world).

I also consciously try to give [comprehensible] input to the students, but I am very careful to keep it in a schema-based context. My ideas of schema are of course based on Patricia Carrell's research, but simplified for my purposes. In that end, I also use Krashen and Oller's ideas of here and now content, learnerese, and emotional relevance."

Ms. B – "Well, it's very difficult for me to tell what exactly influenced me most since it may be not a single idea or technique but a mixture of them. So, I'll tell you the things I felt interested in throughout the TESOL program:

I felt very interested in the cognitive approach in that I thought this would be very effective way to teach grammar in middle schools in Japan. Well, before I talk about how effective it could be, let me tell you what I think about English teaching at middle schools in Japan.

In the states, I think, the questions of whether and how to teach Grammar in L2 instruction has been kind of controversial among SLA researchers. While form-focused instruction is still considered, communicative language teaching seems to be very popular. In Japan, on the other hand, there is no controversy over the necessity of grammar instruction since almost all teachers think explicit grammar teaching is very important, considering the university entrance exams their students will take. (It is also true that some teachers can only teach grammar and cannot speak English at all.)

I was one of those teachers in Japan. I strongly felt that I need to teach grammar explicitly, and I hold this still now (which means I'm not a fan of Krashen!). At that time (before coming to the US), however, I also felt very uncomfortable with the old-fashion deductive grammar instruction. Students can get high scores on their tests but I could see that they were not learning but just memorizing the grammar rules. So, these Japanese students will of course forget most of the things they learn as they get older; after graduating from universities, they find that they cannot speak English at all even though they studied it for more than 6 years.

More and more I felt that I want my students to THINK in class, not MEMORIZE what I explain; therefore, cognitive approaches are very appealing to me in that they focus on what's going on in learners' brain and that I can think of how to teach based on the theory."

Ms. C – “Before coming to the US, I never taught English in an inductive way. In class, I always explain the grammar rules first and then have my students practice. However, I realized that in deductive instruction, students don’t really need to think in class. What they have to do is memorize the rule & practice it So, I realized the importance of inductive instruction.

This is significant for me as one of the English learners. I myself learned English by memorizing grammar rules..., so it was really hard for me to produce it orally at first. Now I feel that I learn a language in order to “communicate”, so this approach made sense to me a lot. Also, this let me realize that language competence is a complex of different abilities, such as grammatical, discourse, strategic...etc. Well, while this really inspires me, when thinking about teaching in middle schools in Japan, I felt it would be difficult since language input is limited.

Not only the use of authentic materials is effective, but authentic/semi-authentic tasks such as get specific info by listening to an automated voiced message on the phone etc. are very motivating. Well, although it’s not easy to give students authentic tasks in Japan, using a variety of authentic materials in class would be very effective.”

In 1994, the Ministry of Education introduced the new Course of Study Guidelines, which, “for the first time in Japan’s history, emphasize the development of a student’s communicative ability in English as a primary goal” of secondary English education (Goold, 1994). In English textbooks, awkward ‘exam-English’ still takes precedence over more practical English.

Mr. D – “The most significant two things I learned in my TESOL training were first, the importance of professionalism in the field, and second, the potential of technology for teaching language. In terms of professionalism in the field, I was specifically influenced by my program advisor who is well-published in applied linguistics while also being a great teacher in the classroom. While I entered my TESOL program not interested in research and only interested in how I could become a better “teacher”, I finished the program much more aware of the breadth of the language education field, and I was genuinely interested in what research was taking place and how I could contribute to the teaching community.

In terms of technology for language teaching, through my TESOL classes and my advisors I learned much about recent issues and uses of computer mediated communication for language learning and about first and second language corpora. Both of these realms of TESOL were basically new for me, and eventually I wrote my Master’s paper on telecollaboration between Japan and other countries, a natural product of my newfound interest in how computers can be used for language learning.”

Question # 2: How have you applied your TESOL training in your job? How has your training helped you?

Mr. A – “See above answer also for this question. In addition, I will say that my TESOL training has made me a sharper critic of what is not effective--behaviorist types of learning like audio-lingualism, which, sadly, are still very prevalent in Japan. My job was to develop an English program for elementary school children, and I semi-consciously followed Krashen’s natural order hypothesis, I’m sure, but probably more consciously follow Chomsky’s competence/performance dichotomy, and (for me it was Palmer, but many others have espoused it) the Krashenist idea of comprehension strongly preceding production (particularly to avoid fossilization).”

Ms. B – “I’ve put the ideas I learned (mostly the things above) into practice. Since I also learned the SLA theories, I felt more confident in teaching than before. Well, in most classes, I’ve tried to use only English and had my students think before I explain. I’ve also tried a variety of activity types, such as individual, pair and group, and adopted authentic materials such as song lyrics and newspaper as much as possible.”

Ms. C – “I think that one of the biggest areas that my TESOL training helped me with is in my general knowledge of grammar and in self-confidence in teaching. Before I studied in the U.S. for my TESOL MA, I was always a little unsure of myself and my English abilities, but my studies abroad helped to make me a stronger person. I also feel like I have more empathy for my students who are trying their hardest to study English in Japan. Even if I don’t know all of the answers, I know that I can help my students to be motivated and excited about learning English.”

The qualifications of JTEs are a source of complexity in the English education dynamic. Many teachers study English literature and then immediately proceed to become English language teachers. Some people view the introduction of the ALT (native-speaking Assistant Language Teacher) into the secondary Japanese school English class as a sign of inadequacy on the part of the JTE (Bullough, 2003). Although the qualifications for new JTEs entering into the public school system are stricter than they have been in the past, the reality is that there are many under-qualified JTEs currently embedded in the educational system. Many JTEs have never been abroad, and there are many JTEs who had never spoken with a native-speaker before meeting the ALT assigned to their school. Because virtually all of the older-generation JTEs came through the grammar translation/standardized examination English educational system, oral communication was not a priority for their English study. This ideology is reflected in

the teaching methods of these older-generation teachers, namely one that has little or nothing to do with communicative teaching, but rather focuses on grammar-translation and rote memorization.

Mr. D – “I have made efforts to continue pursuing my interests in using computer mediated communication for language learning whether through keeping up on new research or by trying to work with the technological tools available at my new teaching position. Specifically, I went on to publish a revised portion of my Master’s paper, and these days I am starting telecollaborative projects between two of my classes and two different classes in the United States. My TESOL training gave me the confidence and knowledge to pursue these projects.”

Question #3: What are some difficulties that you’ve faced at your job?

Mr. A – “Put simply? Amazing ignorance and incompetence on the part of Japanese English teachers who have control of English education in the crucial junior high school period.

A less vicious and more detailed answer? First, in trying to establish an elementary school program, having to depend on the actual Japanese home-room teachers to provide supplementary teaching. For every one elementary school teacher who can actually speak passable English, and teach simple English in a communicative way, I must deal with four or five who either cannot speak even the simplest English sentences, or cannot actually communicate English to their students using extra-linguistic clues, or else cannot shake themselves from the horrible mode of learning they were indoctrinated with in junior high and high school--rote memorization and analysis of English grammar and immediate translation to and from Japanese.

My bigger frustration now is that while I have, thankfully, enough control over the elementary school program that, despite the aforementioned odds, is showing many positive results, I must turn the students over to the junior high school program, which, in Japan, has not fundamentally changed in over 50 years.

The other major frustration and obstacle I face in Japan is the problem of student motivation. Lambert, et al. have long ago identified the importance of integrative motivation among language learners. In Japan, that is almost nonexistent. Japanese primary, junior high school, and even most senior high school students have almost no motivation to study English for communication, and they harbor no expectations of becoming competent in the language. Such motivation, if it comes to play in Japan, is usually not seen until during or after University age, a time that is too late, because most students have already acquired terrible learning habits.”

Ms. B – “For me it is the class size. I knew that the large class size is a trouble since I used to teach the class of 40 students, but when I changed my lesson from teacher-centered traditional grammar lesson to students-centered inductive grammar or communicative lesson (I’m teaching both grammar & communication classes.), the large class size is really disaster.

In conversation classes, students start to chat to each other in JAPANESE even when I ask them to speak in English, and I cannot check all of them if they are using English since there are 35 students in the class....

Ms. C – “Students’ low motivation in learning communicative English is a big problem for me. I was surprised to know that most of them feel that they are forced to learn English, and their purpose of studying English is to pass high school or university entrance exams. Therefore, they believe that learning grammar is valuable to them and actually expect me to teach grammar rules explicitly instead of practicing some useful English expressions.”

Another problem that JTEs must deal with concerning the current state of English education in Japan is the issue of entrance exams as a barrier to teaching communicative English. “Despite the Ministry of Education guidelines and the large impact that the JET program [the program that introduced ALTs into the Japanese classroom] has had, other pressures such as the need to teach the contents of the textbooks and the need to prepare students for entrance exams still affect classroom activities,” (Browne & Wada, 1998). At the end of the day, JTEs still have to worry about fulfilling the tasks with which they are ultimately measured by; how well their students perform on high school or college entrance exams. Because the overwhelming majority of these tests still focus on grammar points and translation abilities, communicative learning often takes a back seat to rote learning when the exam season draws near.

Mr. D – “It is always difficult to put theory into practice, and certainly that has been a challenge. Practice is inevitably messier than the pristine initial idea. Also, just starting a new teaching position means teaching under a new system with new guidelines and resources. I found in my present job that it took me a semester to understand some of the basic ways the system works, and I feel that it may still take another semester before I truly feel like I understand everything. In the same way, I have had to adjust to new students, trying to learn about their needs and motivations.

Specifically, at my current university teaching position, I have found that students’ motivation levels vary widely. This very well may be due to the Japanese university system itself. I have read and heard many accounts by teachers in Japan which

mention that entrance exams into Japanese universities are very rigorous and they encourage voracious study habits when students are in high school. However, the accounts also relate that after entrance into university, many students relax, as their performance as university students will not necessarily affect their job prospects after graduation. Specifically regarding English teaching, I have heard firsthand from some of my students that they neither like English nor do they feel they need to learn English for their future.

Obviously, the students who vocalize this are less than eager to leave the comfort zone of speaking their native tongue or to engage in the challenging task of learning English -- a language much different from their own and a mother tongue of a very different culture.

A second challenge also pertaining to teaching Japanese students involves what I believe to be Japanese cultural habits about communication. My students are very wary of having to speak in English in front of their peers or to have their writing scrutinized in front of their peers. While this is relatively true of many language learners, it seems that Japanese students are especially aware and concerned about the opinions of their peers. This keeps them from volunteering in class, from voicing direct and clear opinions, and from speaking in general."

Cultural and other affective barriers are yet another hurdle for EFL teachers in Japan. These communication impellers can be chalked up to aspects of Japanese communication that have a noticeable effect on students' motivation and their preferred communication styles in English (Takanashi, 2004). Some of these culturally-influenced methods of communication "include 'dual structured' communication, implied meanings, tacit understanding, and sensitivity to social and contextual factors such as formality, status, power, and social distance" (Takanashi, 2004).

Question #4: Have any of your views, ideologies, or teaching techniques and philosophies changed since you've returned to Japan?

Mr. A – "Not in any great way. If anything, most of my core ideas have strengthened. However, my own application of, say, Krashenesque ($i + 1$) teaching is probably not what he envisions--in that the plus 1 element really doesn't move very far past the actual comprehensible input content. Again, that comes from the low motivation from most Japanese students, who have extremely low--frighteningly low--tolerance for language ambiguity. My own learned and evolved ideas of acquisition and communication are that they require language negotiation. But that involves, obviously, negotiation on the part of the learner. In Japan, that is largely impossible, and the language teacher must become much more narrowly focused and attuned to

the learner's actual competence level."

Ms. B – "After teaching for a few months, I realized that there are much more limitations than I expected in teaching English to junior high school students. I gave up my student-centered instruction and now I talk around 60% of the class period. Also, instead of giving students as much input as possible and having them think or find the rules of the language, I teach grammar purely explicitly. In conversation classes, I try not to give them a lot of open tasks but give them highly controlled exercises. Well, right now, I feel like I gave up most things I thought it could work & would be effective to English learners of Japanese, and the main reason why I can't do in the way I like is that these kids have to take university entrance exams and that is their purpose of English learning. Since this is because of Japan's educational system, I can't do much about it. Therefore, I'm actually thinking about quitting this job and working for university students or adults."

An over-reliance on one-way communication is another obstacle to be overcome in Japanese classrooms. The teacher-student relationship in Japan is historically one of little interaction (i.e. lecturing and note-taking). Therefore, asking students and teachers to start interacting with each other, especially in a foreign language, can be a daunting task for all parties involved. Cultural codes for respecting authority (like not looking a teacher in the eye when being spoken to) can make things like eye contact and dialogue with a teacher frightening for many students.

Ms. C – "I think that maybe I have gotten a little more realistic since I came back to Japan. Before I came back here to work, I thought that I could change a lot of things and make English learning easier and more enjoyable for students. I think my TESOL degree has helped me to do that, but not as much as I thought it would in this area. Although none of my methods or techniques have changed very much, my ideals for changing the Japanese system have become much weaker."

Another source of frustration for team teachers in Japan is the infamous bureaucratic educational system that makes even the smallest push for change at local levels an arduous, if not impossible task. Course curriculums, textbooks, and testing procedures are standardized in public schools, which leaves little leeway for creativity or tangential discussions in the classroom. Also, because teachers transfer from school to school every few years and are only fired under dire circumstances, younger, more qualified teachers are having a very hard time finding jobs in secondary schools.

Mr. D – "None of my major views, ideologies, techniques or philosophies have

significantly changed since starting work in Japan. However, due to the ‘difficulties’ noted above, I have certainly tried to adapt my teaching to the Japanese university environment. I try very hard to make students comfortable in my class. This means, unless I have especially good rapport with a certain student, I try not to ask them ‘pop questions’ which they have not yet thought about. I encourage answering a question in groups or in writing before asking for individual answers.

Likewise, I often give the option of working or presenting in groups rather than only as individuals, thereby trying to offer a kinder environment for students who are severely distressed by speaking alone in front of others. I try my best to give individual speaking practice to learners through approaching them and talking amid other activities so that not all the classes attention is focused on them. Finally, I have tried my best to make the content of my classes interesting and appealing for all types of students. I would be happy to be able to inspire students for whom English has previously only been a ‘class,’ and a bad one at that.”

Conclusion

Eventually, a major shift away from exam-based teaching to communicative language learning will be necessary in order to bring about real change in English education in Japan. On the surface, the usage of ALTs along with JTEs looks like a nice solution to the problems plaguing secondary Japanese EFL classrooms. Unless some fundamental aspects of English education in Japan (i.e. examination-based education) are modified to become more interactive in nature, however, 10 ALTs in each classroom will not impact the improvement of the communicative abilities of Japanese students, who must employ rote memorization techniques in order to successfully answer many of the questions that compose the all-important entrance examinations. Research has shown that many secondary students achieve high proficiency in English communication, but these same students attended “outside English lessons that were not mainly aimed at raising test grades” (Beebe, 2001). It is interesting to note that the only informant who did not lament the existence of the entrance examination was the university teacher, who being beyond the secondary system does not have to teach for it.

Taking English outside of the classroom and showing its uses in normal, everyday activities should also be something that English teachers should focus on, not only with their students, but with each other as well. By showing students that English is useful for other things besides tests and homework, teachers could improve their students’ motivation and interest in learning English. This demonstration of the communicative potential of learning a foreign language would build upon the interaction experienced in an ideal EFL classroom.

One positive point of change in this restructuring of English education at the

examination level is evident in many universities, which have been including listening comprehension components to their university entrance examinations (Browne & Wada, 1998). This was first started to avoid determining new students' English abilities solely on TOEFL scores (Clankie, 1995). Nowadays, most university examinations assess three different English language skills: reading/writing, translation, and listening (Brown, Yamashita, & Okada, 1995). When secondary schools start to follow suit and make some fundamental changes to the philosophy of EFL in Japan, the English classroom could reach its true potential and become a major contributor in improving the communicative proficiency of Japanese students.

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