

Towards International English in EFL Classrooms in Japan

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Purpose of this Article

As Romaine (1994:221) puts it, 'language has no existence apart from the social reality of its users'. Sociolinguistics concerns the relationship between language and the social contexts in which it is used. Therefore, from my point of view as a teacher of English in Japan where English is seldom used in the home, we cannot stress enough the relevance of sociolinguistic factors in teaching English as a foreign language. It is, however, a fact that English is definitely important as a window to the world. English is the key to access knowledge and power. As a result of the influence of English in Japan, there are several unique aspects of the use of English in Japanese, such as the use of loanwords, that is, items of vocabulary originating in English. Morrow (1987) classifies this Japanese English as a performance variety.

In this article, I shall try to examine some sociolinguistic issues with particular reference to the situation of Japan. The first issue for consideration is the character of English as a global language in the world. In considering this issue, I will follow the taxonomy of its spoken features used in previous studies examined by Quirk to identify what kind of position English in Japan has. This article will then look at the use of English in Japan. Morrow (1987:61) points out that '[a]s with every other variety of English, Japanese English is unique.'

Through these discussions, I hope to investigate an adequate model of and approach to the teaching of English in Japanese secondary schools, in order to inform our understanding of how each factor may affect the use of English in the future of students. This article is intended for English teachers in Japan, but this information may also provide insight to any English teacher around the world.

English in the World

English is a global language but because it is a living language, it has inevitably changed in order to suit specific contexts or needs (Crystal, 1997). As English has spread all over the world, there are many varieties of English in the world. They are often categorized in two groups, "the center" and "the periphery". The center refers to native varieties of English, such as what Holliday (1994) calls BANA (Britain, Australia and North America). The periphery seems to be more complicated, because it does not always refer to non-native varieties. If we consider 'native' to mean people whose first language is English, many people in countries of Asia and Africa may be recognized as native-speakers (Prodromou, 1997).

Quirk (1990) divides the periphery varieties of English into two groups, the outer circle and the expanding circle, from the point of view that the center varieties of English (i.e. English in BANA) are located in the inner circle. The outer circle refers English as a first language in multilingual societies or English as a second language, for example Singapore English and Indian English. The expanding circle refers to English as a foreign language, such as English in Japan. From my point of view, the international language that is used in a wide variety of international contexts is included in this category, the expanding circle.

The reasons, however, for putting International English into the expanding circle are twofold. Firstly, there is the fact that it is often said that non-native speakers use English more as a lingua franca between themselves than in encounters with native speakers; thus, it is no longer the property of its native speakers (Jenkins, 1998; Prodromou, 1997; Widdowson, 1994). The situation or society where International English is thus used cannot fit in to any circle other than the expanding circle. Secondly, drawing on the previous citation from Romaine (1994) that language always reflects the real situation of its users, it cannot be said that the identity of International English could be identified with any one of the native or non-native varieties of English. That is, English as a lingua franca seems to be a foreign language to anybody (not only non-native but also native) to some extent. For example, native speakers of

English change their speech manner depending on their interlocutor; so called, 'Foreigner Talk'. 'Foreigner Talk' is the register used by native speakers when they address non-native speakers. It involves simplified, sometimes, ungrammatical speech to adjust one's utterance to the interlocutor to enhance their communication.

Jenkins convincingly argues this point and claims that, because the focus of learning English is shifting from native-like competence to international intelligibility, the term 'EFL (English as a Foreign Language)' may need to be changed into 'EIL (English as an International Language)'. Although I recognize that this is a gross simplification as far as 'EFL' countries, at least Japan, are concerned, this idea brings a model of English in the near future into sharp relief. Given the complex situation of English varieties, it can easily be imagined that varieties of English will become mutually unintelligible. This may affect the function of English as an international language in which people from various nationalities can communicate with each other. It seems, therefore, to be reasonable to devise or to support the idea of a common standard that everyone can use and understand.

Common Standard

In the current arguments, there are two approaches regarding devising a common standard. The first is to promote the teaching of a prestigious standard (e.g. British or American Standard). The other is to set up a common core for everyone to access and acquire (Jenkins, 1999, 1998, 1996). While both aim at international intelligibility, there are some points which need to be considered carefully.

This argument will start by considering the use of a prestigious standard as a common standard to teach English. In a teaching situation, teaching a prestigious standard such as British or American standard seems to be the easiest way to promote international communication, but, from the educational and sociocultural point of view, it is not always realistic. Teaching a prestigious variety of English may be feasible, but there are some issues we must consider in adopting this approach. Firstly, the notion of Standard English itself is very vague. Even in Britain, the influence of dialects, regional varieties of English language, in which people speak affects on acquiring their language and there is a need for an institutional support. This situation is clearly implied in the Kingman report (1988 in Quirk, 1990:4) which says that 'it is the duty of British schools to enable children to acquire Standard English, which is their right'. In this case, Standard means British English. Is it Received Pronunciation (RP) which is used by a minority of the population in England? Is it the kind of English based on the Nottingham or COUBILD corpus of so-called authentic spoken English? Since language is in a state of constant flux, new words emerging and established words changing in denotation or (more commonly) connotation, and even grammatical words and forms changing gradually, there is inevitably a time lag between the collection of data and the manifestation of "real English" in society. Considering these slippery variables, in an expanding circle environment like Japan, therefore, which standard should be taught is always debatable. Which standard should be taught to whom depends on the context (Norris, 1999). We must consider its appropriateness in the context.

The second point concerns Ellis' (1991) argument that some linguistic elements are difficult to acquire. As for the sociolinguistic competence, which is regarded as a key element in the acquisition of socially appropriate native-like use of English, he points out that the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence is found to be a very gradual process even in an ESL context and it is found to be undeveloped in an EFL context. Learners need a lot of exposure in order to acquire any kind of linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence is particularly difficult. In the case of Japan, most learners of English will find it difficult to have an opportunity to communicate in English, in particular with a native English speaker, except in schools. Moreover, according to Kachru, 'there are now at least four non-native speakers of English for every native speaker' (1996: 241). It can be said that there are more opportunities to talk to non-native speakers than to native speakers. Considering these situations, it seems that the acquisition of native like English is not an adequate goal for language instruction in an EFL context like Japan, at least in secondary schools, being compulsory education situations in which everyone must participate. As Widdowson (1994) argues, a role for teachers of English is to teach English as a school subject which keeps company with others on the curriculum, not as a general linguistic phenomenon. The English to be taught in schools is, therefore, rich and full of useful resources to foster students' potentialities. It is not educationally and linguistically realistic to drive learners to conform to a native variety beyond their needs.

The final issue is that adopting a prestigious standard in the Outer circle -- for example, in India -- can be problematic also (Quirk, 1990). As Kachru (1990) points out, given educational reality, it is almost impossible to keep in touch with standard English because of resources and overwhelming non-native input. Moreover, the users of English are expected to conform to local norms and speech strategies when interacting in intranational contexts. Some users of English also wish to keep the uniqueness of their English because their variety of English is closely tied up to their identity, such as Singaporean and Indian (Maley, 1997).

Despite these three kinds of issues, from the point of view of an educator, teachers' policy will, in any case, be to try to meet the learners' needs, whatever they are. Teachers, therefore, need to consider the fact that some learners need to, or want to, conform to a standard for various reasons, in particular some specific purposes such as educational or occupational ones. In such cases, it will be essential for teachers to have abilities close to a standard native model so that they can serve the possible requirement of students satisfactorily. Teachers need to play an important role as a best informant for learners.

Common Core

Given the above limitations and the reality that very few learners reach native like control of a foreign language, particularly in pronunciation, setting up a common core of spoken English, as presented by Jenkins (1999,1998,1996), seems to be a realistic approach. It would be naive to say that a language can be fixed. However, this attempt to set up a common ownership of English that can be accessed easily may hold appeal for language teachers and learners. Before examining this approach, it might be useful to give a brief overview of its background.

In the 1970s, there were some attempts to establish some sort of simplified, neutral, universal English, intelligible and acceptable to both native and non-native speakers. Gimson's 'rudimentary international pronunciation' (1978) provides a model of pronunciation by reducing the phonemic inventory (number of consonant and vowel sounds) of English. Quirk's 'Nuclear English' (1981) tries to do this for syntax and morphology. In fact, no form of language can be learnt without enough input, elaboration and interaction. Both approaches fail to take account of the fact that language development must proceed in an unplanned and natural, bottom-up manner. It is not realistic to impose a certain model in a top-down manner (Jenkins, 1998). Furthermore, in the current situation where there is a strong influence from non-standard varieties of English through various channels such as media, local norms, group identities, it seems very difficult to maintain a certain model.

Jenkins' idea of a 'common core' (1998) seems a more promising approach to the promotion of mutual international intelligibility. Her approach concentrates on 'the productive focus of pronunciation teaching on the three areas that appear to have the greatest influence on intelligibility in EIL (English as an International Language)' (p121). The areas refer to certain segments (core sounds of English), nuclear stress (the main stress in a word group such as a sentence) and articulatory setting (utterance of sounds with changes in their length, pitch and volume). Control of these areas, that is, knowledge that there are certain sounds which are unique to English (i.e. the consonants, "th" as in "the" and "th" as in "think"), knowledge of the individual character of English which is relatively stress-timed (stress occurs on important syllables in the speech stream) and articulation of words clearly changing their length, pitch and volume are all factors which facilitate and promote mutual intelligibility. To promote this approach, she claims that there is a definite call for the enrichment of teacher training course, in which not only non-native teachers of English but also native teachers of English need to learn the distinctive character of English pronunciation and how the core sounds of English are articulated. This approach may provide a realistic goal, considering learners' identities. However, the extent to which the language can be intelligible may depend on interlocutor or context. For example, as for phonological accuracy, the French accent which consistently pronounces "this" as /zi:s/ causes no more difficulties for understanding than a cockney accent which consistently pronounce "this" as /vis/. In this case, the French accent cannot be said to be inaccurate, because it holds intelligibility. In some respects, Jenkins' study may be impressionistic and incomplete; it may well be difficult to see improvements which would result from the fixed idea of a common core of English and it cannot be said that enough empirical studies were conducted. But what she has attempted to do provides a reasonable model of English in the world from a broad viewpoint.

English in Japan

Quirk (1990) assumes that the teaching of standard English may not face any resistance in a country, like Japan, where there is no legacy of English anywhere. In fact, the prevailing American influence through films, music, clothing and food is a worldwide tendency (Prodromou, 1997). Adding this, Morrow (1987) observes that, because Japanese has a more receptive attitude towards foreign borrowings than any other languages, the Japanese people are quite familiar with the process of drawing English vocabulary into Japanese and thus establishing so-called loanwords. The loanwords based on English are often called Japalish, which means Japanese English. Japalish also includes words produced by reformulating English vocabulary. The use of Japalish is to be seen in relation to theoretical issues of code mixing, not code-shifting and bilingualism (Morrow, 1987). Since Japalish is a variety of language the functional range of which is very limited, it can be regarded as a performance variety of English (Morrow, 1987). Firstly, I would like to describe and classify the character of Japalish at a general, societal level. I shall then attempt to present some arguments on the issue of Japalish.

The wide use of Japalish in many domains of society, particularly economy and media, indicates the large degree of assimilation of loanwords in Japanese. My focus here is to clarify a norm of Japanese usage, how English vocabulary is embedded in Japanese. Morrow (1987) finds phonological, orthographic and semantic uniqueness in the use of English loanwords in Japanese. Firstly, Japanese people use loanwords in Japanese conversation with the same accents as Japanese; consequently they are phonologically indistinguishable from native Japanese words. The phonologically assimilated loanwords are so ingrained in Japanese that most speakers would not be aware of them as foreign borrowings. The orthographic system operates in the opposite manner. In Japanese, there are three kinds of writing system (Kanji, Hiragana and Katakana), arguably a fourth Romaji (roman letters). Loanwords can usually be expressed using Katakana, whereas Japanese words are written with a combination of Kanji and Hiragana. In written form, loanwords are clearly distinguishable. Semantic restriction and extension in the use of loanwords also shows a unique Japalish phenomenon. While English words originally tend to have several meaning or senses, it is often the case that Japalish loanwords in Japanese are used for only one of those meanings. For example, 'smart' is exclusively to refer to a style of appearance. In contrast, it is also often the case that loanwords acquire new and quite different meaning and connotations. The word 'chance' is often used with the meaning of 'opportunity'. The word 'naïve' means 'delicate' and 'sensitive' and it doesn't have any negative connotation. It is therefore used as a compliment in Japanese, whereas, in English, it can be uncomplimentary.

As we have already noted, varieties of English may well become mutually unintelligible. Most Japalish also seem to be separate from its original meanings and sounds and therefore difficult to understand even for native speakers of English. The concept of code mixing shows a clear relevance to the uniqueness of Japalish usage, because loanwords can be regarded as a part of Japanese. However, code-shifting and Bilingualism are not relevant, because its usage is limited to particular Japanese context, and it is best regarded as Japanese and not any other languages. The uniqueness of Japalish, particularly in phonological and semantic senses, might often pose a serious obstacle to the learning of English. As for phonological issues, except the difference of pronunciation, people are uncertain which syllable of a word should carry the accent, because they habitually pronounce the word in Japalish, without any stress (Japanese is a relatively unstressed language). From the semantic point of view, since people already have a fixed idea about the meaning, sense or image of certain loanwords, misunderstanding and confusion arise when they learn English vocabulary. However, there is one good aspect of the Japalish influence, which is, as students know a lot of English vocabulary through loanwords, teachers can use it to facilitate students' learning English vocabulary. Teachers, in fact, need to be aware of the issue surrounding Japalish and be careful in their approach so that they can minimize students' confusion. By making students aware of the differences between English and Japalish, the teachers can promote the same consciousness of language difference which underlies Jenkins' approach to the promotion of a common core of English. The teachers' role as best informants for learners is essential.

Conclusion

'By better understanding how English is used at the present, we can more accurately predict how it will be used in the future, and given a sense of what our future needs will be, we can begin preparing to meet them (Morrow, 1987:61)'. In this article, the first focus was to look at the present feature and role of English in the world. The varieties of English and its changing nature will depend very much on a number of external and internal factors: for example, students' purposes in learning English (ESL/EFL/EIL), where they are learning the language and how interested they are in learning about the varieties of English and changes taking place in the language. To what extent learners need more up to date information on Standard English is debatable depending on the context.

However, as Jenkins (1996) convincingly points out, the importance of English as a world language lies in communication, community and bringing people from various nationalities closer together. In this sense, English may become a common linguistic property in the world and there is a need for further research in order to establish more effective approach to the learning of English. It is, therefore, extremely important to devise a common core of English to enable mutual intelligibility among the many varieties use of English. Jenkins' approach, involving the isolation of a common core of English pronunciation, in order to know the difference between the first language and English, holds great appeal.

As can be seen in the second discussion on the unique features of Japalish, even in an EFL context, there is a lot of influence of English, and its features have been drastically changed by the local culture. In Japan also, Jenkins' approach to the learning of English, which raises awareness of the differences between the linguistic properties of the target language and those of the locally existing variety, could become feasible in terms of pedagogy in foreign language (English) education in secondary schools.

Appropriate pedagogy considers the way to prepare learners to be both global and local speakers of English and to feel at home in both international and national cultures (Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996). In order to be fair to the learners, it is essential to provide them with some kind of framework for future learning so that they can use a range of varieties (e.g. International English, Standard English,

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