

A Brief History of English Education in the Japanese Public School System from the Tokugawa Era to the Close of World War II

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Introduction

English education in Japan is intricately intertwined with her history of relations with foreign countries. The peculiar circumstances of isolationism under which the language was introduced and the actions and attitudes of the leaders of Japan throughout recent historical eras provide valuable keys to understanding how English education in Japan got to the state in which it is in today.

Tokugawa Era

The political climate at the outset of the Tokugawa period dictated that the introduction of Western language and culture was entirely subservient to commercial activities and potential technological transfers. While Japan had long had relations with China and Korea, the Portuguese are thought to be the first Europeans to have contact with the Japanese beginning in or near 1542. The seafarers were driven ashore by an unexpected wind to a small island off the coast of Kyushu. Christian missionaries soon followed, the first including the Spanish Jesuit Francis Xavier who arrived at Kagoshima in 1549. The missionaries flourished for a brief time, found converts and

unwittingly acted as interpreters in disputes between traders from their homeland and the Japanese.

The first native English speaker recorded to wash up on the shores of Japan was William Adams of England. He arrived on a Dutch ship after a horrendous voyage in which three-fourths of the crew was lost. Adams found favor with Tokugawa Ieyasu who benefited from his knowledge of conditions in the North of Europe, mathematics and navigation. Ieyasu made Adams one of his vassals as well as a diplomatic agent between both Dutch and English traders. The Dutch began their trade with the Japanese in 1609. The English traded for a period of ten years beginning in 1613.

It may have appeared the groundwork had been laid for continued relations, from a Western point of view, with Christian missionaries finding converts and trade underway with European nations. In actual fact, with seemingly the same ease with which it was welcomed, Christianity was banned by the Tokugawa government in 1612. However, the ban was only mildly enforced as to avoid harming trade relations with pro-Christian merchants in Macao, the Indies and Manila. The religious infighting of the European nations and a growing suspicion of Christian leaders by the government resulted in the expulsion of the Spanish and then the Portuguese, who had been previously relegated to Deshima in Nagasaki, after the massacre at Shimabara in 1638, where many Japanese Christians lost their lives. The English had closed their trading post in 1623, due to a lack of profitability.

By 1637, Japanese were to leave the country under penalty of death. Foreign relations came to consist of limited and highly monitored dealings with the Dutch and Chinese at Deshima. The Portuguese made a mistaken attempt to reestablish relations with the Japanese by sending a ship from Macao bearing gifts as a reconcilatory gesture

in 1640. Some of the Portuguese crew were beheaded in Nagasaki and 13 survivors were sent back to Macao as witnesses bearing Japan's message of isolation. After a 50 year hiatus the English in 1673 sought to resume their trade relations with the Japanese, but were refused given the reason that Charles II of England was married to the daughter of the King of Portugal.

True to the intentions of the Tokugawa government, Japan maintained its isolationist policy for over 200 years. Gradually curiosity and the promise of increased knowledge, especially in the medical, scientific and military fields allowed for limited study of Western languages; particularly Dutch. Books espousing Christian ideologies remained forbidden. The school of Dutch learning was established in 1720. Japanese-Dutch dictionaries soon followed and the unlikely foundation for English language study was intact. For it was through the Dutch language that English was first studied in Japan. In 1808, an English naval ship came calling on Nagasaki seeking water and provisions. Disguising themselves as Dutch merchants, they were able to fool the Japanese and obtain their needed provisions. When news of the rouse come out the official in charge committed *hara kiri* as a way of accepting responsibility for the embarrassment. The incident alarmed the Tokugawa government and the need was seen to learn more of things foreign. The following year Japanese working in Nagasaki with the Dutch merchants set about to learn English. A Dutch professor taught the lessons. A conversation book was published in 1811, and an English-Japanese dictionary followed in 1814.

The Japanese continued to learn English from the Dutch until an opportunity arose for them to employ the services of a native speaker. Ranald MacDonald arrived on the Japanese island of Hokkaido pretending to be shipwrecked. His father was Scottish and had crossed over to the

United States where he married Ranald's mother who was a Chinook Indian. MacDonald came to believe that the American Indians were descendants of Japanese who had journeyed to America long ago. Although at this time it was not yet permitted for foreigners to come to Japan, MacDonald's story of being shipwrecked was believed and seizing the opportunity to take advantage of the native speaker, he was sent to Nagasaki from Hokkaido where he mysteriously washed ashore.

Shipwrecks played an interesting role in Japan's history of encounters with the West. Manjiro Nakahama, English name John Mung, was a shipwrecked Japanese who was rescued by an American whaling ship and brought to the United States in 1841. He returned to Japan twelve years later and was employed by the Tokugawa government as an interpreter in the early negotiations held between the Americans and the Japanese. He was not much trusted by his employers, however, being the only Japanese who spoke both English and Japanese fluently, so consequently, his role in the negotiations was limited. Nakahama became a professor of English in his home region of Shikoku where he wrote the first English conversation book ever written by a Japanese, in 1859.

Another shipwrecked Japanese who was rescued and brought to the United States was Joseph Hiko. He was educated at a mission school in Baltimore and later went to California for his university studies. He was befriended by a customs inspector who brought him to Washington D.C. where over a time he met Presidents' Pierce, Buchanan and Lincoln. Hiko was granted United States citizenship in 1859. He returned to Japan with Townsend Harris, the first United States consul general, and acted as an interpreter in the talks that led to the treaty of Kanagawa. The initial negotiations between the Jap-

anese and the Americans were a cumbersome process which involved the Dutch and Chinese languages. Admiral Perry brought copies of documents in Dutch and Chinese to Japan as well as Dutch interpreters. Joseph Hiko, along with the contributions he made as an interpreter, is also known for his efforts which lead to the first publication of an English newspaper in Japan.

Perry's arrival precipitated a shift in emphasis from Dutch to Western languages in general; particularly English. Research institutes such as the "Institute for the Study of Barbarian Books" were established, classes begun and all manner of dictionaries and grammar books were brought to Japan. Webster's dictionary appeared in 1860, and books related to science, geography and a host of other fields were obtained. By the end of the Edo era English had surpassed Dutch as the most studied language in Japan. Preparatory schools began teaching French and German as well as English and Dutch. While all this may sound quite progressive, much of this shift was carried out while the *sonno joi* movement, "to revere the Emperor and repel the barbarians," held considerable political sway. Anti-Western fanatics were responsible for a number of murders including Henry Heuskin, Townsend Harris' Dutch language interpreter. The influence of the era of isolation did not end with the Tokugawa government.

Meiji Era

When Admiral Perry first arrived in Japan, at present count less than 150 years ago, it is safe to assert that for all practical purposes no one in Japan actively used the English language. At that not too distant time, tables and chairs were not in general use, nor were spoons, forks and knives as Westerners know them. Suffice to say that 1868, when Japan involuntarily embraced the West in an effort to enrich the

nation, was a time of great befuddlement. Early Meiji leaders sought first to centralize power in the new government and modernize the political system. The prospects of civil war, foreign intervention and the knowledge of the outcome of the Opium War in China served as sufficient motivation. When the dust had settled and prefectures had been formed out of the former fiefdoms, the tasks of restructuring the economy, integrating Western technology and educational training were assailed. In 1872, an educational ordinance was issued to combat illiteracy. 1886 saw the dawning of the revised Ministry of Education.

While the wholesale introduction of things Western continued throughout the Meiji period, the necessity and the manner of incorporation of these imports was often called into question. English language skills were thought at first to be indispensable, but skepticism also brewed. Certainly diplomats and those who engaged in protecting Japan's international interests required these skills, but how much was needed in the school system? When should it begin to be taught and by whom? What method or methods should be employed? Such broad based discussion can still be heard today.

Between 1874 and 1878 the Ministry of Education employed a number of non-Japanese educators in Japan as well as sending and supporting the studies of many Japanese students in Europe and the United States. The Meiji government devoted a significant proportion of their economic resources allocated to the Ministry of Education at the time to further this end and up to 30% of the Ministry's budget was spent on the pursuit of knowledge from other lands. The significance of this 30% figure is revealed when one considers that more than a century later the item that occupies the single largest percentage of the Ministry's budget is the comprehensive funding of some 100 National universities which only amounts to approximately 20% of the Ministry's

over all budget.

The Meiji era was blessed with some of Japan's most progressive educators. Among many worthy of mention, here are some particularly noteworthy as pioneers in the field of Western learning. Yukichi Fukuzawa came from a modest samurai family and distinguished himself as a scholar. His many works on matters Western, published after his return from his studies overseas, established him as the chief authority in the field. Fukuzawa championed the cause for English education in Japan and made it a focal point in the curriculum at the school he founded which later developed into Keio University. Keiu Nakamura was a gifted scholar responsible for translations of works such as the Constitution of the United States, the book *Self-Help* and essays of Emerson. As an advocate of Christian morality and elements of Western culture, his influence was widespread in the interpretation of Western ideology. Jo Niishima, English name Joseph Neesima, risked the penalty of death and left Japan for the United States in 1864. Upon his return a decade later, he founded the Christian educational institution now known as Doshisha University. Kanzo Uchimura, a Christian educator who was dismissed from his position at the First higher School of Tokyo for refusing to worship the imperial portrait in 1890, stressed a communicative approach to foreign language study and conducted and published valuable research in this field. Uchimura, along with such scholars as Inazo Nitobe and Kakuzo Okakura, actively wrote and published works in English. These are just a few of the people who helped shape an era. It is clear that such people and ideas are not uncommon in Japan, yet in some quarters of the society these ideas are considered radical to this day.

In the latter half of the Meiji period an idea was hit upon that appeared workable. Educate a group of Japanese candidates in Japan

with Western instructors and send the cream of the crop overseas to complete their studies. Once they returned they could handle the teaching in Japan more efficiently being native Japanese speakers. Carried out as planned the idea may have worked. It turned out to be an economically-motivated scheme with severe repercussions affecting the development of the English education system in Japan until this day.

In 1897, Lafcadio Hearn, a teacher of English literature at the Tokyo Imperial University, had a monthly income of ¥450, while his junior colleague Souseki Natsume, who became one of Japan's premiere writers, was earning ¥900 per year. Some preparatory school teachers at the time were earning as little as ¥25 per month. The disparity in salaries generated ill will and was considered economically unsound. Thus a trend toward replacing the non-Japanese instructors was established. By 1904 Hearn had been relieved of his teaching duties at the Tokyo Imperial University.

It is of little surprise that English language ability was weakened by the removal of the non-Japanese staff. Students no longer had to communicate in the target language to learn, or so it became the practice. In the final year of Emperor Meiji's reign Souseki Natsume described why he felt ability in English had withered. Natsume cited the translation of textbooks into Japanese, that had formally come from abroad in Western languages, as a major influence in the deterioration of language skills. The classes were no longer taught in English, students were not required to discuss or find answers in English and the result was clear.

It must be remembered that at this time in Japanese history military campaigns had been successfully waged against China and then Russia which contributed to a growth of feelings of nationalism. Even men of the intellectual stature of Fukuzawa and Uchimura openly suppor-

ted the campaign into China. The national feelings of superiority also cooled the desire for things foreign. At the time the idea was advanced that English should be used only in English class. Japanese and Chinese verse for all else. English was relegated to use in the entrance examination system where the testing of the language functioned as a mechanism to control enrollment; the roots of the examination hell system of today. Interest in English dropped considerably except for those who studied it in order to gain passage into elite schools. The government still wanted people to know English, so they imposed a rigorous system of testing upon the students to make them study. This lead to the practice of memorizing difficult sentence constructions and patterns that appeared on such tests. The practice has continued and compilations of such sentence constructions used as study guides are available at bookstores all across the country.

Meiji Japan may have closed more doors for English Education than it opened. At the outset the study of English had yet to be formally introduced. At times an unprecedented amount of resources were devoted to the study. By the end, a study with promise had become a mutated form of a language that resembled more of a study of science than of communication. The military campaigns and occupation into the Asian mainland had made it evident that Japan had other priorities, and they were ambitious undertakings with far deeper ramifications than the haphazard study of foreign languages.

Taisho Era Through World War II

Throughout Meiji Japan a variety of teaching methods and approaches were introduced and in many cases the scholars behind the methods came to Japan to practice and teach their ideas. In 1914, at the conference for English educators, a different method was advanced by

Shunsui Sagawa who argued that the methods introduced into Japan, such as the direct, natural and psychological methods, were not well suited to Japanese students. Unlike French or German youngsters, whose native language is in some manner similar to English, the Japanese language has no commonality and should therefore be studied from a basis of grammar and translation. Language was to be understood as a code, not as speech. This conception may very well contribute to the preposterous notion many graduates of Japanese schools advance today; that they can only read and write English.

The Ministry of Education brought Harold Palmer to Japan from England to act as the head of the English Language Research Center in 1922. In his fourteen year tenure he stressed the importance of his oral method and continued his research in Japan. His theories amounted to several respected publications and were most fully realized in the Fukushima Plan of teaching English in Schools of Middle Grade.

In 1916, calls for the discontinuation of English education in middle schools were put forward. English education, compulsory since early in Meiji, had allowed for too powerful an influence from England over Japan. For students who would go on to study at the elite universities, English had a place, but for most students it was an unnecessary burden and of little practical use. Moreover, the study of English was thought to lead to the blind worship of foreign countries. In 1928, proponents of the abolition of English language instruction renewed their movement. Tsukuru Fujimura, a professor at the Tokyo Imperial University, argued the burden and uselessness as reasons to eliminate the study. The resulting situation found many English educators being relieved of their duties and the hours of class time decreased.

The oral method remained in general use and flourished briefly, even in rural districts, where it was thought less workable. In 1940, just

before the outbreak of the Pacific War, the results of a test given to rural middle school students was released. First year students who had studied the oral method for half a year scored higher overall in the English test than second year students who had studied using the reading and translation method for a year and a half. The first year students scored higher in the grammar section as well.

Japan's involvement in the military campaigns of the Taisho and Showa eras and the ideological climate at the time drained much more than the country's educational resources. Nationalism led to resentment of things foreign and English was eventually banned from print in newspapers, magazines and advertisements. Justification for such bans included criticism of English terms such as "Far East" which when translated made it sound as if Japan was not the center of the world. Signs were changed at stations and even words transcribed in katakana were expressed in Kanji. Some English books that were formally used in schools were banned. In 1943, all English and American educators were relieved of their duties and Japanese educators of English soon suffered the same fate. English was removed as a subject tested on entrance examinations. English textbooks had names of their characters changed from Tom or Mary to Taro or Hanako.

Epilogue

By the close of World War II concerns over pedagogy were not considered of high priority. The country had been ravaged and spent. Radioactive fallout and massive fire bombing called for the country to be rebuilt from the bottom up. It would be quite a time before the situation had normalized to the point where concerns over education could again move to the forefront of the national agenda.

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