

Creating structures in which Japanese students specialising in English can learn effectively.

Martin Brennan

Introduction

In this paper I wish to reflect on my own experience of teaching Japanese students in a wide variety of contexts in Japan and the United Kingdom over the last ten years. This includes teaching English Conversation to individuals, small groups and classes of fifteen or more as well as teaching mainstream academic subjects such as economics or sociology to Japanese students in both countries. In this paper I will examine some differences between British and Japanese universities but my major focus will be on the administrative structures which are required for Japanese students to make substantial progress in English. I will suggest that both student exchange programmes and the opportunity for students to spend considerable periods in the United Kingdom as a fully integrated part of their four-year curriculum are necessary. I will examine the opportunities presented by such programmes as well as the obstacles which need to be overcome.

Japanese Higher Education

In a recent paper Tricia Walker has provided a useful overview of Japanese higher education.¹ She points out that Japan has over 1,200 universities and junior colleges and that more than three million students are enrolled at these institutions. This makes it the largest higher education system in the world after the United States. However, she is quite critical of the failure of Japanese universities to 'internationalise' and the lack of a positive work ethic amongst the students. There has been an increase in the number of foreign students in Japan, but more than 91% of them come from countries such as South Korea, China and

Taiwan. There are still very few 'westerners' or native English speakers in Japanese universities.

Walker is damning about the lack of seriousness of Japanese students compared with students in Europe or North America. She says:

'A Japanese university is not a serious place to be, progression is largely through class attendance, assessment is at the discretion (whim?) of the individual tutor and there is no evaluation, no second marking, no standardisation, definitely no criterion referencing. Students in Japan are kept very busy but not a great deal is expected of them and they don't have to produce much on their own.'

Walker is also very critical of the English abilities of Japanese students. She points out that all Japanese study English for six years at Junior and Senior High Schools, but that even after two years at university, 'It is highly unlikely that they will be able to hold even the simplest conversation on a simple topic'. She points out a number of reasons for this sorry situation including the poor quality of many Japanese teachers of English and the young native speakers who are often recruited by the Government with no teaching qualifications.²

My Experience of Teaching Japanese Students

There is, of course, an element of truth in Walker's generalisations, but, in my experience, much depends on the individual student and the particular university. Before visiting Japan for the first time, I had considerable experience of learning and teaching in a range of British universities and colleges. Since 1990 I have taught English Conversation and other subjects to Japanese students in a wide variety of contexts and institutions both in the United Kingdom and in Japan.

In the early 1990s I was based at Keio University in Tokyo as a Visiting Professor. At that time I taught English Conversation to a group of citizens in Tokyo under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. These citizens were from a wide range of occupations including businessmen and women, housewives and retired people. In 1994 I took up a post as Professor of International Economics at Oita University. At that time I taught the political economy of the South East Asian countries and British Economic History to senior Japanese students in English. I also taught an English conversation class to first years. In addition, I offered a special advanced English class for my fellow professors who wished to brush up on their English by communicating with a native speaker.

I stayed at Oita University for four years and then spent three years at King Alfred's College of Higher Education in Winchester in the United Kingdom. At King Alfred's College I had the opportunity to teach Japanese students in English in the field of Tourism and Heritage Management. These students required a lot of help as the field was new to them and they had to become familiar with some new terminology.

Since April 2001, I have been Professor of English at Beppu University. Most of my classes here are English Conversation classes. I teach a wide range of ages and abilities. Some of my students have spent one year abroad studying English at King Alfred's College. Others have attended the three week English Summer School at the University of Hawaii. Many of my students have never been outside Japan.

Japanese and British Students Compared

Does my extensive experience of teaching English to Japanese students bear out Walker's severe criticisms? Firstly, let us consider the institutional environment in Japan. There is no doubt in my mind that

student attitudes to study are very different in the U.K. and Japan. I found this to be the case at three very different universities - Keio, Oita and Beppu. Japanese students take a large number of classes per week compared with their British counterparts. Typically this could be fourteen ninety-minute classes in Japan compared with four two-hour classes in the U.K. That is twenty-one hours compared with eight hours in the classroom. Japanese students are often assessed by end of semester examinations, which are frequently of the multiple-choice type. British students usually have to write about eight lengthy essays of approximately 2,000 words each and also take a series of two or three hour examinations. Thus the learning regime is very different in the two countries.

In addition British students come to university with high philosophical expectations. They expect to do extensive, in-depth reading, discuss topics at length with professors and fellow students and turn themselves into well-informed and critical human beings. Their secondary school education, which is highly specialised in three or four subjects, has given them these expectations. Japanese students on the other hand, have experienced a broad, general curriculum at high school, which continues when they enter university. They do not expect to be able to explore subjects in great depth until they do their graduation thesis. Furthermore, these different learning and pedagogical practices are underpinned by sharp cultural differences. Throughout their secondary schooling Japanese students spend more time memorising than questioning and this leads to a passive attitude to critical issues. British students on the other hand, particularly in the humanities subjects, are actively encouraged to ask questions and to explore knowledge in a variety of ways.

The practical function of a university education in relation to employment is also different in Japan and the U.K. In Japan it is

necessary to obtain a certain number of credits in order to graduate. Getting these credits is not too difficult for the student who attends regularly. Success in the employment market depends on the university's reputation with employers and the company's entrance test and examination. In the case of the U.K., the final qualification at graduation, usually called an 'honours degree' is strictly ranked and classified. The basic classes are First Class, Upper Second Class, Lower Second Class and Third Class. These classes have a strong influence on employment chances. Of course the prestige of a university is significant as in Japan, but the class of degree is also extremely important. Thus if a student gets a First Class or Upper Second Class degree, their job prospects are usually very good. However, if they get a Third Class degree, they may struggle to find employment.

Basically the teaching, learning and assessment regime in the U.K. and Japan means that British students have to work very hard to succeed and get a job. Japanese students on the other hand simply have to attend for four years and gain sufficient credits. Add to this the cultural differences which encourage extensive reading in the UK system and very little in the Japanese one, and we can see why Japanese students seem to neglect their studies in comparison with their British counterparts.

All of this tends to support Walker's contention that Japanese students are not serious. Their university education is too broad and shallow and the expectations of them by the teaching staff are too low. Inevitably Japanese youth has also been changing under the pressures of the modern world. In my view, Japan is still the most civilised country in the world using the true meaning of the word 'civil'. Civility is a virtue in Japan. This means that people of all ages and occupations treat each other with a high degree of consideration and politeness. There is no other country which comes anywhere near Japan in terms of this

criterion. However, there are some signs of slippage amongst Japanese youth even in relatively conservative areas such as Oita. Students are invariably polite and considerate, but bad habits such as sleeping in class and turning up late seem to be on the increase. Attending a class but not participating actively may also be a regrettable trend.

Learning English in Japan: Tokugawa versus Meiji?

How does all of the above impinge upon the teaching and learning of English and especially English Conversation? It seems that for many students learning English at university simply represents a continuation of the tedious grind they were subjected to at high school.³ They never speak English in their daily life, they have little desire to visit English-speaking countries and they are very secure in a Japanese society which is rich and provides everything they need. If they show interest in going abroad it will be as part of a package tour where the Japanese English-speaking guide will behave like their mother.⁴ If they watch an American film, it can be dubbed in Japanese. Ironically these students often sport the most outlandish clothes and the most bizarre hairstyles. But, in reality they are the most conservative and traditional Japanese. Perhaps they are continuing that fine tradition of isolationism, which, after all, served Japan supremely well when the Europeans and Americans were rampaging around the world occupying dozens of countries between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries. Are they the heirs of the Tokugawa? Perhaps subconsciously, these students realise that the English language is the spearhead of modern American imperialism and they want nothing to do with it? Is this the reason why Japanese comedy and chat shows often find speaking a few words of English so hilarious? It could, in reality, be quite a powerful defence mechanism against a hostile world, which, after all, is far from perfect in the current context.⁵ Is the English language a virus, which can undermine Japanese society including all its highly attractive civil

values?

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the students who are extremely internationally minded. They see English as their passport to the non-Japanese world. They understand the phenomenon of globalisation and they appreciate that Japan has achieved its greatest success by engaging with other cultures rather than remaining isolated from them. Maybe these students are the true heirs of the Meiji Restoration? For the teacher of English Conversation, these students are a joy to teach. They are highly motivated, industrious and deeply interested in the cultures of the English-speaking countries. I am happy to say that this type of student is in the majority in my department at Beppu University.

But even the well-motivated, internationally minded students need a clear structure in which to pursue their ultimate goal of becoming bilingual in Japanese and English. The conclusion I have come to after ten years experience is that English cannot be learned in Japan alone. In fact I would go further and say, that, in contrast to some other countries, learning English in Japan is almost impossible. In China I have met many people who are fluent in English even though they have never been out of China. I think this is impossible in Japan. The reason is that there are some significant barriers to learning English, and even more, speaking it, which are unique to Japan. Firstly, many students are not serious enough about their university studies. They need to be more committed and industrious. Secondly, there is the isolationist defence mechanism I have referred to above. Because this still pervades Japanese culture especially at the deep, traditional level, many English speakers seem to be shy of speaking English in the presence of other Japanese. Secondly there is the problem of the *katakana* script. This is widely and increasingly used to adapt English words and absorb them into the Japanese language. The difficulty is that, once absorbed and written in *katakana*, most Japanese people cannot recognise the English original. In

fact the *katakana* pronunciation becomes an obstacle to learning the correct English pronunciation.

Creating New Structures

After reviewing the early (1975) debate between Hiraizumi and Watanabe about the teaching of English in Japanese universities, Hajime Terauchi makes some suggestions of his own.⁶ He advises that class sizes should be reduced, there should be skills-based language lessons, content based language lessons and more in-service teacher training. Strangely, he does not mention anything about study abroad. For me this is the key to the success of the teaching of English as a major subject in Japanese universities. Of course there are already many opportunities for Japanese students to participate in exchange programmes and to attend summer schools. However, most of these schemes are fairly ad hoc or voluntary. Also, they are often quite short, just a matter of weeks or months. This is not sufficient for a student majoring in English who wishes to become fluent in the language.

Much more ambitious and creative programmes and structures are needed if Japanese students are really to succeed in becoming both confident and proficient in English. Fortunately, the Japanese university curriculum is quite conducive to structures, which incorporate extensive periods of study in English-speaking countries. This is because it is four years long rather than the three, which is common in the UK, which allows sufficient time for periods to be spent abroad.

In the case of Beppu University, a highly innovative and ambitious programme has been pioneered by the Department of English Language and Literature under the leadership of Professor Kenji Ueda. I will look at this programme as a model of the way in which new structures can be created for the benefit of Japanese students specialising in English.

Beppu University has a number of links with other universities in various countries, but I want to focus on one relationship in particular and that is the one with King Alfred's College in Winchester in the United Kingdom.

The first exchange programme between Beppu University and King Alfred's College was set up in 1996. The two universities are of a similar size and have a similar academic profile. Both are very strong in areas of the humanities such as English language and literature, history and archaeology. At that time King Alfred's College also had a course in Japanese Language and one of the reasons for the exchange was to allow KAC students specialising in Japanese to spend one semester at Beppu as part of their programme. At the same time Beppu students could study English at KAC. This aspect of the exchange continued until 2000. Although Japanese Language will not feature in the future, the exchange programme remains open and is likely to focus on new areas of the curriculum which are now very popular – business studies tourism and heritage management.

As well as participating in the exchange programme, an increasing number of Beppu students have been attending KAC for one full year to take a special English course for international students. This has been very beneficial for these students and has stimulated the idea of incorporating study at KAC more formally into the Beppu English course.

The New Beppu University English Programme

The new proposals for an integrated English programme at Beppu University will begin as a trial run in the year 2002. This programme is highly innovative and probably unique in Japan. It is likely to be very attractive to High School students who not only wish to major in English

but also would like to become fairly fluent and get a good job in which they can use their English ability. The main features of the Beppu programme are as follows:

1. First Year.

These students will be taught a special course in English on United Kingdom society and culture by Professor Martin Brennan who was recently recruited from King Alfred's College. The aim of this course is to prepare students for their year in the United Kingdom by making them familiar with that country's history, politics, economy and culture.

These first year students will also be taught English Conversation by Professor Brennan. This course is essentially 'situational English'. It involves extensive role-playing based on arrival in the UK and life in Winchester and London.

2. Second Year.

Students will spend one full year at King Alfred's College, Winchester. They will be given a specially created, dedicated programme of study of English language and British culture which will be closely integrated with what they have studied at Beppu in the first year and what they will study upon their return to Beppu for their Third Year.⁷

3. Third Year

Students will take special programmes relating to UK and Japanese culture with a particular focus on tourism, heritage and business in the two countries. They will also be taught English Conversation which focuses on a range of relevant international topics.

4. Fourth Year

Students can continue with similar courses to those undertaken in the Third Year and can also undertake a graduation thesis, which is related to a study of the United Kingdom or comparative studies of the UK and Japan.

Advantages of the New Beppu Programme

1. A full year of studying English in the United Kingdom is available to all students without restriction.⁸
2. The English programme is specially created for Beppu students and will be closely integrated with their four-year studies in the Department of English Language and Literature.
3. Students will be based at King Alfred's College (KAC) in Winchester. Winchester is not only a beautiful historic city and the ancient capital of England; it is also one of the safest places to live in Europe.⁹
4. At KAC, Beppu students live in special eight person houses or student dormitories in which they are one resident and the other seven are British students.¹⁰
5. Upon returning to Japan, students will take follow up courses and benefit from expert tutorial guidance so that they can obtain employment in which they can use English either in Japan or overseas.

There is no doubt that a full year spent in the United Kingdom is of enormous benefit to students majoring in English. I have taught a wide range of students at Beppu University and I have observed a huge difference in English ability between those who have been to KAC and those who have not. The advances made by the KAC returnees are particularly in the area of English communication. Because of the reasons I have outlined above students who live only in Japan find it very difficult to become good communicators in English. However, the KAC returnees have developed high-level skills in two particular areas - confidence and vocabulary. Because of their total immersion in British life for one full year, they do not hesitate to speak freely in English. They therefore have the confidence to overcome the 'Tokugawa' mentality. They have also developed a vocabulary which is both extensive and colloquial. Much of this has been learned in the many informal situations they have encountered whilst living in the UK.

Necessary Conditions for Setting up Innovative English Learning Structures at University Level

The problems and obstacles of setting up such a radical programme as that at Beppu University should not be underestimated. I list below some of the factors, which should be considered:

1. The first vital pre-requisite is support and understanding from the university authorities at the highest level. Without this, the necessary exchange agreements and high-level contact between university presidents and administrators cannot be facilitated.
2. The second essential ingredient is energy and vision at the level of the English Department. The Head of Department and other members must be willing to spend time on the considerable

amount of work that is required to prepare students for their one year in the United Kingdom and to make all the necessary administrative arrangements.

3. Thirdly, there must be a strong and lasting relationship between the two institutions involved. Frequent negotiations may be required over such issues as the level of fees and accommodation. These negotiations cannot succeed unless there is a high degree of trust between the parties involved. Occasionally these negotiations may require visits by either the Japanese or British professors to each other's universities. Face to face discussions may be necessary to achieve a breakthrough on certain key matters.
4. Ideally, the Japanese university should provide a context in which a Japanese professor can accompany the Japanese students to the United Kingdom to help them settle in and to introduce them to their British teachers. For a large group of about twenty students this may be essential as there will inevitably be some individual problems which require speedy solution. The professor who accompanies the students should therefore know the British university well.

Conclusions

Japan has a peculiar cultural and historical background which makes the learning of English to a high level complex and difficult. Many Japanese and foreign scholars and policy-makers have agonised over this question for at least the last thirty years. Superficially it seems that Japan is a very rich country with a highly-advanced education system. Therefore the learning of English should be easy. However, when we dig more deeply we find that some apparent advantages are, in fact,

disadvantages. Japan's very wealth helps to make it self-sufficient. Most people do not need to leave Japan in search of a better life. They are happy here, and whilst they are here, they only need to speak Japanese.

I believe that Japan is a highly creative country which has spawned many new ideas and inventions. However, Japan is also famous for its production and implementation skills, even if the idea came from elsewhere. This facility for imitation has served Japan well from the Meiji Restoration onwards. It is also reflected in the language where thousands of words are absorbed from English and metamorphosed into a distinctive script known as *katakana*. Unfortunately, as I have pointed out above, this can also be a disadvantage to the learner of English because once the English word has been changed, many learners cannot recognise or pronounce the original leading to some confusion.

Japanese students can also benefit from a substantial period spent in a different higher education environment. This will allow them to make cultural and educational comparisons and lead them to be more critical in the best academic sense. There are merits and demerits of all educational systems and exposure to these can only be advantageous to a student's intellectual and emotional development.

My conclusion is that Japanese learners need to leave Japan for a lengthy period of time in order to become proficient in English. Students specialising in English at the university level need to be fully immersed in British culture and language for at least one full year. This is why the Beppu University programme is likely to be popular and successful. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, but my experience has already taught me that students who go to the U.K. for one year make enormous progress and start to overcome some of the obstacles I have alluded to in this paper.

Notes and References

- 1 Walker, Tricia (2000) 'An outsider on the inside: viewing Japanese Higher Education' *The Japanese Learner*, Number 22, October 2000 pp 2-11
- 2 Despite the optimism expressed by Katsuaki Okihara in his article on 'English teaching in Japan: the current situation' in 'The Japanese Learner: Context, Culture and Classroom Practice' Oxford University 2001, I am very sceptical of the JET programme under which native speakers are sent to Japanese schools even though they have no teaching qualifications. Teaching is a highly skilled occupation and Japanese youngsters should not be subjected to unqualified teachers any more than patients should be subjected to unqualified surgeons.
- 3 For a full discussion of English teaching in Japanese universities, see Terauchi, Hajime 'Issues in English Language Teaching in Japanese Universities' in 'The Japanese Learner: Context, Culture and Classroom Practice' Department of Continuing Education, Oxford University, 2001
- 4 I am sure that everyone has seen tour guides shepherding adult Japanese around like children and doing the simplest things like checking in at airports on their behalf.
- 5 Many people have not been impressed by the ahistoricity and cultural insensitivity displayed by the great 19th and 20th century imperial powers, the U.S. and the U.K. since September 11th 2001.
- 6 Terauchi, Hajime 'Issues in English Language Teaching in Japanese Universities' in 'The Japanese Learner: Context, Culture and Classroom Practice' Department of Continuing Education, Oxford University, 2001
- 7 This programme at King Alfred' s College is also available to foreign students although the time spent abroad may have to be shorter.
- 8 There is some debate about the merits of British English versus

American English. However, learning English in England where the language originated will probably provide the students with a sound foundation.

- 9 Winchester is very conveniently situated near to London and Heathrow Airport. Key cities in Europe can also be accessed within a four-hour train journey.
- 10 This enables the Japanese student to listen to and speak English on a daily basis as well as making British friends.