

‘ENGLISH-AS-A-GLOBAL LANGUAGE’ EDUCATION FOR UNIVERSITIES IN JAPAN

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Abstract

In this article, I review a few of the more dramatic consequences of globalization on languages around the world and examine these consequences in relation to English language teaching in Japan. I conclude with a proposal for four units that should be taught alongside any English-as-a-global-language curriculum.

Introduction

Globalization is having profound and wide ranging effects on all aspects of life for all people around the world, no matter how far removed they might live from industrialized urban centers. Broadly defined as “what happens when the movement of people, goods, or ideas among countries and regions accelerates,”¹ this most recent cycle of globalization is both quantitatively (in terms of scale) and qualitatively (in terms of the depth of influence across domains of daily life) different from past cycles in many significant respects.

First of all, the sheer size of human migrations within the past forty years across the globe outpaces anything in human history. There are today over 180-185 million immigrants or refugees world wide, more than ever before. As an example, Sweden, with a population of 19 million, has 1 million immigrants; 34 million people living in the United States today are foreign born.² Another globalization phenomenon not seen before is the rise of ‘borderless information.’ Satellites, cable TV, broad-band Internet services, and other advances in communications technology have effectively de-territorialized information allowing images, music, news broadcasts, and other media, indeed, anything that can be digitalized, to travel more or less freely across national boundaries. A third unprecedented globalization phenomenon is the spread of global languages. The top ten most

widely spoken languages around the world (Mandarin Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, English, Bengali, Arabic, Portuguese, Russian, German, and Japanese) are spoken by around 50% of the world's population.³ This means that 3.1 billion people out of the world's estimated population of 6.2 billion, speak one of the above languages as a mother tongue. The spread of these languages, in particular 'killer' languages such as English, Spanish, and Chinese, is a chief cause of the extinction of thousands of the world's minority languages. Linguist Michael Krauss has predicted that up to 90% of the world's languages may cease to be spoken by the end of this century.⁴ In summary, globalization is bringing diverse cultures into close contact as never before; it has accelerated the speed and increased the quantity and type of information shared across national boundaries; and, importantly for this essay, it is having a profound impact both on the diversity of languages around the world and the very languages that we speak.

The case of English as a global language is unique among the top ten languages listed above in several respects. First, English has been the fastest growing language in terms of total number of (first and second-language) speakers. It has been estimated that within a decade, three billion people will speak English. Second, English is unique in that non-native speakers of English outnumber the native speaker by 3 to 1.⁵ Third, the unprecedented spread of English has spawned the appearance of many Englishes around the world. Especially interesting is the fact that many of the groups that have adopted English (or had 'inherited' it from their colonial past) have developed a positive awareness of their brand of English. Youth in Malaysia and Singapore relish their novel "Singlish" just as much as the Scots indulge the long vowels of their brogue. Lastly, English has become, for better or for worse, the language of communication for international trade and commerce, for science and medicine, for international conferences of all stripes, and in a score of other domains. "If you can't speak English, it's like you're deaf and dumb," says a self-taught 12-year-old Chinese youth.⁶ What are the implications of these circumstances for educational institutions around the world? In particular, how should Japanese universities meet the challenge of English-as-a-global-language education?

The Japanese context

Before the above question can be squarely addressed, however, it is useful to point out a few of the of the very serious issues and controversies that the spread of English has raised. For example, proposals to have English taught in Japanese schools are generally met with public approval, though not among all groups surveyed. A Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology survey of 36,000 parents and teachers conducted in Spring

2005 found that 67% of the parents agreed that English language courses should be mandatory in primary schools throughout the nation. The high approval rate is not shared by the teachers: only 29% were in favor of the proposal.⁷ While many among the public acknowledge the practical necessity for English instruction in the elementary school years, some Japanese educators see English as a threat to national and cultural identity. Burmese-born Bashkaran Nayar, who lectured in Japan in the Spring of 2005, states the case very well: “These days, English language culture has become in some ways a form of ideological domination. When I teach you English, I will also teach you English culture and English *weltanschauung* (comprehensive view of the world), therefore, someone like you and me from Asia, may think, oh Europeans are wonderful and we are useless.”⁸ Others see English as both not entirely necessary and as a barrier to learning other languages. Kei Nakamura, a professor of sociology at Seijo University, says that it is not possible to offer “meaningful English-language instruction” to all of Japan’s 605,000 university students and that the exclusive focus on English means that university faculties “will devote little attention to the teaching of and research in socially minor languages.” He claims that for “both practical and theoretical reasons, forcing all university students to learn English is not appropriate.”⁹ These issues and others have to be kept in mind while considering how Japanese universities should approach ‘English as a global language’ education.

We can easily appreciate that educating students in ‘English as a global language’ is quite a different matter to educating students in ‘English as a second/foreign language.’ English-as-a-second/foreign-language (or ESL/EFL) suggests a very narrow discipline indeed: ESL/EFL is simply the learning of just another language, in this case, English — an additional language, one of the several thousand possible languages. English as a global language, however, is rather more complex and engenders a broader spectrum of disciplines and understandings. Long gone are the days when educators can treat English as just a set of grammar rules and lists of vocabulary. Gone, too, are the days when educators can pass off English as an inventory of communicative functions. Just as with all languages, English is the bearer of a distinctive history and sets of cultural values, but, unlike the vast majority of languages, English has the power to deliver ideas, goods, and services to a global audience, the insight that the above Chinese youth’s remark captures.

Thus it is paramount for Japanese universities to make their students aware of the historical, political, and economic forces that drive English (and other global languages) into prominence. In other words, it is the business of universities not merely to teach foreign languages (including English), but also to offer critical perspectives on how English

(and other languages) arrived at its present status as a global language. Doing so will allow students to appreciate the fact that there is, indeed, no standard English, but there are many Englishes from Australian English to Zambian English in which some people will say *'to-mah-to'* while others will say *'to-may-to.'* When university programs approach 'English as an global language' from the point of view of the human agencies that drive languages — politics, economics, and history — students will come to understand the many roles that multilingualism has played in human history and that monolingualism is truly the non-natural state. Students will appreciate that national boundaries are not the determinants of language boundaries, that there are no 'boundaries' as such, but that, in contrast, the movements and contact among peoples, and more recently, contact through the technological and virtual worlds of the Internet, are the determinants of communication communities which include not only a mother-tongue language, but the full range of languages, dialects, and pidgins spoken in any given region. Students will appreciate that languages are dynamic and conventional behaviors that respond adaptively to social, political and economic conditions; that 'native-speaker competence' is purely an abstraction, a fiction, and is therefore an inappropriate goal for any serious language program. Critically, such an approach to educating Japanese students in 'English as a global language' forces them to recognize the ebb and flow of power relationships among languages around the globe. So while learning English may give one woman on one side of the world a coveted job opportunity, it may have the effect of depriving a whole generation of children on the other side of the world of their heritage language. For every individual who chooses to adopt English as their principle medium of communication, for what every reason, there are likely fifty fewer speakers of minority languages somewhere else. These, then, are the things that an education in 'English as a global language' should be all about.

In order to address directly the issues above, I propose the four following units to be a part of any Japanese university English-as-a-global-language (EGL) curriculum. The idea behind this proposal is that, if we, as teachers, are going to equip our students with a lethal weapon (i.e., English), we must, in good conscience, educate our students to use this weapon with care. The proverbial warning label on the bottle would read:

- Use English with caution.
- Use English responsibly and sparingly.
- Use English knowing that you are likely doing damage to the local, if not global, ecology.

Four units for the EGL curriculum

1. Globalization and languages

This unit would track the effects of globalization on the world's languages. It would include a discussion the about spread of global languages such as English, Spanish, Chinese, and Portuguese; studies of linguistic diversity around the world (for example, the fact that 60% of the world's languages are found in the Old World equatorial and sub-tropical zones); studies of the uneven distribution of speakers-to-languages around the world (for example, that around 50% or 3,500 of the world's languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers); and the effects of the globalizing economies and modern media (the Internet, new media, satellite TV links, etc.) on minority languages. Also included would be a discussion on how modern nation states' attempts to mold a unitary body politic inevitably involve the mandating of one or another language to national or official language status. (The former Soviet Union and India are the only two countries, to my knowledge, who had or have made efforts to preserve the linguistic diversity in their countries: in India by creating federal state boundaries along the lines of major regional languages and by the promotion of indigenous, state, and official languages through the adoption of the Three-Language Formula policy.)

2. Languages and their functions

A common question to ask of first-year university students in a liberal-arts class is 'What is language?' The reply, a misleading one, is most often, 'Language is for communication.' When asked, 'What is communication?' the reply is often, 'Communication is exchanging information.' These replies reveal a fundamental naiveté and an impoverished view of language. First, students should be made aware of the complexities behind attempts to define what a language is and how attempts to distinguish one language from another meet with a confusion of possibilities. Students should learn about the multiple functions of languages (e.g., referential, directive, heuristic, expressive, integrative, ritual/poetic, phatic, metalinguistic) and how these functions are played out in the life of a culture. In this connection, students should learn about the different speech varieties that exist: so-call language, dialects, pidgins, vernaculars, vehicular languages, creoles, and different language registers; and the relationships between these language varieties and the range and types of functions they serve in communication. Included in this unit would be a discussion about diglossic languages, the ways in which they function in a the life of a culture and their historical impetus.

3. Languages and cultural identity¹⁰

The links between language, culture, identity, and world-view should be fully explored with critical discussions of the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt, Edward Sapir, Benjamin Whorf, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and opposing views (see, for example, Steven Pinker’s entertaining rebuttal in *The Language Instinct*). This unit would include a study of how language shapes ethnic and cultural identity and the psycho-social processes underlying the ‘speech feeling’ of a mother-tongue language in contrast to that of a second-language learned as an adult. Additionally, students could participate in ‘sensitivity training’ role plays in which, for example, students are invited to assume the role of the last speaker of a language (the last representative of a culture), or in which students assume the role of speakers of a minority language which has just been proscribed by governmental decree.

4. The ecology of languages

Students should become acquainted with the functional, adaptational, and dynamic properties of languages (see Table 1 below) and how these properties are manifest in a linguistic ecology. The purpose of this unit, in particular, would be to raise awareness in students about how languages are transmitted through culture; how and why languages

Table 1 A framework for the ecology of languages

| | Individual level | Communication Community level |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Time Scale | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ontogenetic time scale - a human lifetime | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - historical time scale - tens or hundreds of years - human generations |
| Language Unit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (developing) language repertoire | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - multilayered linguistic ecologies |
| Unit of Change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - individual linguistic practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - community linguistic practices |
| How Languages Change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - brain lateralization - social cognition, intersubjectivity - language development in the context of social and cultural norms - individual attitudes and beliefs about languages | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - grammaticalization - social selection: community attitudes and beliefs about languages - dynamic and adaptive properties of languages - historical events, language contact - environmental contingencies and ecologies - language planning and language policies |

change over historical time; how the life of indigenous languages are jeopardized by, for example, the introduction of a global language into a local linguistic ecology; and most importantly, how languages within a communication community participate in multi-layered networks of functional relationships that, as in any stable ecology, are sensitive to the shifts and changes in the social, cultural, or physical environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many ways that Japanese universities can address in non-technical language the issue of 'English-as-a-global-language' education in the world today. One important way is to teach, alongside global languages such as English, a series of units whose purpose is to raise students' awareness of the profound and rich array of roles that languages play in the lives of people all around the world and of the processes underlying these roles. I have proposed four units that should be a part of such a curriculum.

These proposals, however, are not limited to universities in Japan alone. All institutions of education from elementary school through tertiary levels in all countries should begin to develop in their students a broader knowledge about language in general and global languages such as English in particular. Doing so will force students to understand how languages function in regional ecologies, to be empathetic to the cause of minority speakers, and to make better sense of the interrelationships and multifaceted nature of the globalized world, the mass movements of people, and fate of languages in history. Such an education will result in a more informed and sophisticated citizenry who will be less apt to invoke racist, linguistic, and nationalist ideologies when faced with complex and thorny issues, and who, instead, will be better equipped to make wise decisions and suggest realistic solutions to future problems.

Notes

1. Quoted from: Coatsworth, J.H. (2004). *Globalization, Growth, and Welfare in History*. In: *Globalization Culture and Education in the New millennium*, by M. Suarez-Orozco, D.B. Qin-Hilliard (Eds.), pp. 38-55. University of California Press.
2. Statistics on immigration come from Migration Information Source. (2006) Retrieved in March 2006 from the website: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/GlobalData/>
3. The source for language data comes principally from *Ethnologue*, 15th Edition (2005). R. Gordon (Ed.). SIL International Press.
4. Statistic quoted the article titled *The World's Languages in Crisis*, by Michael Krauss found in *Language*, 68: 1, pp. 4-40.
5. Data from the article titled *Not The Queen's English*. *Newsweek*, March 7th issue, 2006.

- For a thorough discussion of these issues, see David Graddol (1997) *The Future Of English?*, The British Council.
6. Chinese youth quoted from the same Newsweek article in Note #5.
 7. The Japanese Ministry of Science, Education and Technology data quoted from May 2005 article in the Daily Yomiuri.
 8. Quoted from an article titled *English Belongs to Whole World, Without the Cultural Baggage*, by Ginko Kobayashi, Daily Yomiuri, 30 March 2005. The article is an interview with Professor Bashkaran Nayar, senior lecturer in English and applied linguistics at Lincoln University in England.
 9. Quoted from the article titled *Mandatory Status of English Pointless*, by Kei Nakamura, in the Daily Yomiuri, January 20, 2004, p. 16.
 10. For an exhaustive discussion on these and other issues relating to language and globalization, see Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, (2000) *Linguistic Genocide In Education—Or World-Wide Diversity and Human Rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum: New Jersey.