

Another Desire for English in Japan: One Japanese University's Response to Industry Demand for English

Anthony Crooks
International University of Japan

Research Proposal

This research proposal focuses on the ongoing provision of English training for non-native speakers of English who are either working (or about to work) in a globalized world where English is the lingua franca.

While provision of English training for non-native speakers of English in English-speaking countries has received increasing attention (see Vocational Courses run by the AMES¹ in Australia (AMES, 2010; AMES – Vocational Courses, 2010)), less attention has been focused on such training that occurs in non-English speaking countries. In locations, for example, Japan, this training has been somewhat sporadic and unfocused. Japan has always had an interest in the study of English (Howatt with Widdowson, 2004; Seward, 1999) that goes back even beyond the ‘opening’ of Japan and the arrival of the ‘black ships’ in the 1860s. Interest in English has been ongoing, but it has gone through waves of high interest and low interest dependent on a variety of factors – be they economic, political etc. ‘English as a hobby’ saw a boom during Japan’s Bubble era when disposable money of the ‘everyman’ (or ‘every worker’) increased, as did the ability to travel abroad and either further study or put their studied English to use. The government during this period also introduced the JET Programme (McConnell, 2000) which has gone through various moves in its history, and now seems to be diminishing and its responsibilities (i.e. the provision of Assistant Language Teachers AKA ‘ALTs’) increasingly being placed in the hands of ‘dispatch agencies’ (who offer those hired as ALTs far below the salary and benefits once afforded by those fully subsidized ALTs on the JET Programme).

Nevertheless, interest in the teaching and study of English continues in Japan, the latest linguistic juggernaut being the introduction in April 2011 of English to the ‘upper reaches’ of elementary school, a decision made by previous governments (Arita, 2002; Kato, 2009) but instituted under the auspices of the current Kan administration (Fukuda, 2011) that has drawn both criticism and praise (*Daily Yomiuri*, 2011).

¹ AMES: Adult Multicultural Education Services (formerly Adult Migrant Education Service)

The message that seems to be constantly transmitted by the government is ‘we need to have English in our national curriculum, but the question always remains ‘Why?’ On top of this question is the issue that while English is increasingly on the curriculum, the linguistic and pedagogic ability of individuals charged to teach it as a language *rather than as a subject*, and the communicative abilities of those who have gone through the rigorous inculcation of language (i.e. the students) remains a sore point – “After all this teaching, why can’t we speak (or communicate with others in) English?” (Clark, 2000).

As a parallel to this is the shaking off of the idea by Japanese business leaders that ‘Japan Inc.’ can operate internationally simply because of the reputation it has garnered as a role model for other industries and their countries, the decrease in literature of ‘the Japanese way’ and slavish interest in Japanese business models that emerged in the 1980s – airport bookstore shelves for the international traveler weighing heavy with books featuring the variations of the word “Japan” and featuring a *hinomaru*. The nadir of this was the appeal to the outside world of ‘Cool Japan’ a number of years ago – aping the music driven ‘Cool Britannia’ campaign of the early to mid-1990s in the UK (*Economist* 1998), a formerly powerful and influential nation would turn to Anime and Cosplay to prop up foreign interest in Japan after the management and marketing gurus/interest/fascination had lost its shine, just as the UK was looking something beyond the loss of its colonial and Industrial Revolution power.

But others have looked ahead in more practical ways, companies such as Nissan lead by Carlos Ghosn (Brasor, 2000), have, for better or worse, dragged Nissan onto the world stage with the insistence of its employees being not able to understand but to use English as a day-to-day operational language, even in Japan, in an effort to make themselves a powerhouse than can compete abroad. Other Japanese companies – looking at Nissan and also aware of the rapidly increasing share of the world market that China is taking, along with the lessening luster Japan holds abroad (quality electronic goods on a similar par to those previously made in Japan available from Korea & Taiwan...let alone China (e.g. Panasonic/Sanyo selling their ‘white goods’ arm to Haier China (Osawa, 2011) are beginning to see that being a member of Japan Inc. is no longer enough – there needs to be a competitive edge amongst its workforce (Matsutani, 2010). And that competitive edge is a far broader understanding and use of English which is seen as necessary for Japan to stay competitive (Terada, 2008).

Now that Japan sees itself less as the technological and managerial ‘Middle Kingdom’, and to which people and companies came to simply because they were less business-

competent vassals, Japan Inc. increasing sees itself as having to engage in the cut and thrust of the international marketplace, and, as a country, is attempting to internationalize itself from within its major companies.

This has been seen in the increasing reliance by certain companies when recruiting graduates, using their TOEIC scores (amongst the battery of other measuring tools they employ) as a vital tool in gauging applicants' suitability. The washback effect has been the effect ETS² (the company that manages the TOEFL, iBt TOEFL and other tools) has had on universities, with regular TOEIC tests being instituted throughout universities. This in turn has led teachers to focus on 'teaching to the test' which was not as prevalent before this move (undergraduate Japanese university English classes *did* have a degree of flexibility to them because they were not driven by a centralized exam system – teachers were free to employ a variety of tactics in the classroom – but this has begun to evaporate as TOEIC and its attendant scores have made their presence felt on university campuses) (Guest, 2011; Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999).

But what about current employees within companies – not the freshman who can be measured before selection with the TOEIC test? As a university, the International University of Japan (IUJ), the site of this proposed research, is becoming a go-to location for what have been termed 'non degree programs' – relatively short, intensive bursts of access to and practice of English in an English-speaking environment. Companies are beginning to see the potential of sending its employees an hour or two out of Tokyo to what amount to a 'foreign land' where teaching is not only in English, but where English is the lingua franca of the community. Rather than risk expensive and inconvenient overseas placements for their staff to enhance their English skills, they can be placed at IUJ for periods of time, a short distance from their HQ.

This study plans to look at the linguistic aspects of Japanese companies making use of IUJ as a host campus – a foreign land in Japan (see Kerr's (2001) reflections on simulacra foreign-environs in Japan). However, its key focus is upon the difficulties in catering for a business world where extended, outside-the-workplace in-service training is not familiar, not as familiar as it is in other countries (e.g. Australia (Australian Government, (n.d.)) that highly encourage employers to insist upon ongoing, extensive study and development beyond the workplace. It also challenges some employers' preconceptions of the time required for language acquisition – e.g. the concept that short periods for students with few English skills

² ETS: Educational Testing Service

will achieve substantial gains within relatively short periods at IUJ. It also plans to address these and other demands for language programs – planning for and delivering often highly customized courses at times that suit the customer, rather than understanding or working with the constraints of an academic institution (e.g. its yearly timetables etc.). In this respect, the commodification of teaching, especially English language teaching at a university time of increasing demand in Japan is planned to be investigated.

REFERENCES

- AMES (2010). *AMES – Vocational courses*, Retrieved from <http://www.ames.net.au/vocational-courses>
- AMES (2010). *AMES*, Retrieved from <http://www.ames.net.au/home>
- Arita, E. (2002, July 19). English education at early age gains momentum, *Japan Times*, Retrieved from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20020719b5.html>
- Australian Government (n.d.), *Professional Development*, Retrieved from <http://australia.gov.au/topics/education-and-training/professional-development>
- Brasor, P. (2000, November, 2). English teaching comes home to roost as foreign corporations invade Japan, *Japan Times*, Retrieved from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/fl20001102pb.html>
- Clark, G. (2000, January 30). Why Taro can't speak English, *Japan Times*, Retrieved from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/eo20000130gc.html>
- Daily Yomiuri* (2011, July 30). Readers Forum: Do you support mandatory English lessons in primary schools? p. 15.
- Economist* (1998, March 14). Cool Britannia, 346(8059), 20.
- Fukada, T. (2011, February 26). Are schools ready for English? *Japan Times*, Retrieved from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20110226f1.html>
- Guest, M. (2009, June 3). English course exemptions and money matters, *ELTNews.com*, Retrieved from http://www.eltnews.com/columns/uni_files/2009/06/english_course_exemptions_and.html
- Howatt, A.P.R. (with Widdowson, H.G.) (2004). *A history of English language teaching* (2nd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- JETRO (2005, March). "Cool" Japan's Economy Warms Up, Retrieved from http://www.jetro.go.jp/en/reports/market/pdf/2005_27_r.pdf
- Kato, M. (2009, March 5). Elementary school English: Ready or not, *Japan Times*, Retrieved from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20090305f1.html>

- Kerr, A. (2001). *Dogs and demons*. London: Penguin.
- Matsutani, M. (2010). Rakuten forces all workers to speak English by 2012, *The University Times*, August, 1.
- McConnell, D.L. (2000). *Importing diversity: Inside Japan's JET Program*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Osawa, J. (2011, July 28). Panasonic to sell Sanyo units', *Wall Street Journal*, Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904800304576473060080121304.html>
- Robb, T. & Ercanbrack, J. (1999). A study of the effect of direct test preparation on the TOEIC scores of Japanese university students, *TESL-EJ*, 3(4) A-2, 1-22.
- Seward, J. (1999). *Strange but true: Stores from Japan*, Tokyo: Tuttle.
- Terada, S. (2008, August 14). Japan urged to be creative to stay competitive, *Japan Times*, Retrieved from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nb20080816a3.html>
- Yoshida, R. (2001, May 24). Foreign managers bring change to corporate life, *Japan Times*, Retrieved from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20010524a4.html>