

Cultural Values as a Strategy of Using English in Japan

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ABSTRACT: Japan has been implementing unique strategy as effort to propose English as second official language in Japan and to promote Japanese culture globally. This strategy is based on Nihonjinron and Kokusaika as cultural values of Japan. This paper discusses about how this strategy is implemented in Japan. Firstly, the writer explains how Nihonjinron and Kokusaika as Japanese cultural values have been used as strategy to fulfill the needs of using English. Secondly, the explanation is continued on discussing how Japanese cultural values have been implemented in language education policy in Japan from the perspectives of researchers. Finally, the writer concludes the discussion by presenting the writer's perspective.

Key words: cultural values, strategy, language education policy, English

INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that English has now spread all over the world and has been used as a means of global communication. English is used as native, second, or foreign language in countries. Japan is one of the countries which are using English as foreign language, but today, Japan is now proposing the use of English as second language in Japan. To regulate the use of English and the position of Japanese language as its national language, Japan has unique strategy to be implemented. This strategy is considered as unique since this strategy is the implementation of the ideology of using English in Japan, and therefore influences the language education policy, both for English and Japanese language. This strategy also allows Japan to nationalize Japanese language to all Japanese people and to foreigners while at the same time allows them to learn and to teach English in Japan. The influence of Japan's cultural strategy to the implementation of language education policy and to the Japanese culture itself becomes the major focus of this paper.

NIHONJINRON AND KOKUSAIKA: STRATEGY IN LEARNING EIL

Japan realizes that EIL (English as International Language) is the most important factor nowadays in communication context. Several programs have been established and implemented by Monbukagakusho, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology or so called MEXT, such as Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program and a five-year Action Plan

to fulfill the agenda: cultivating Japanese people with English abilities. The policies of using EIL and Japanese language to be promoted globally have been carefully arranged in each program of organizations and agencies in Japan, such as CLAIR (the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations), The National Institute for Japanese Language and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the role of The Agency for Cultural Affairs. These policies arrange the teaching of English and Japanese language for all people in Japan and the promotion of Japanese language education abroad. The use of EIL and Japanese language spread all over the country by deep penetration of mass-communication and also hastened by technological advanced.

Japanese culture plays very important role in determining why and how a policy should be implemented in Japan. As a way and ideology of life, Japan shares the same idea with Chinese and Korea, which is Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism is a term to describe how Confucianism and Japan's cultural identity bound together. Neo-Confucianism makes Japanese people believe that the universe could be understood through human reason if they create a harmonious relationship between the universe and individual, and also believe that their culture is unique and has become the center of the world. This belief is manifested through Nihonjinron, the key dimension of Japanese ideologies of cultural identity. The core element of it is that Japan is linguistically and culturally homogenous, 'uniquely unique' and no language can compare (Kubota, 1998).

Japan's uniqueness is expressed in several proverbs and common expressions, such as *teishu kampaku* or the father has the blunt and absolute power in the family; *Dera kugi wa utareru* (the nail which sticks up will be hammered); *Chinmoku wa kin* (silence is gold); *No aru taka wa tsume o kakusu* (skillful hawks hide their talons); and *rakka eda ni kaerazu, hakyō futatabi terasazu* (fallen blossoms do not return to branches, a broken mirror does not reflect again). (Murphy, 2009:10). Another cultural value of Japan is Kokusaika, a strategy emerged from the communication conflict between Japan and its international trade partners, particularly the United States. It allows promoting the teaching and learning English all over the country and therefore English is a very important foreign language to be studied, while at the same time allows preserving cultural identity of the country and promoting it globally. Therefore this ideological underpinning is also known as 'internationalizing the nation' perspective.

Based on these underpinnings as cultural strategy, and also regarding the importance of using EIL, Nakamura in his article (2002) stated that global literacy should become a new

paradigm for global education in Japan. Global literacy, according to Nakamura, is the cross-cultural competence or sensitivity along with transcultural and transnational perspectives one may have to get along with the rest of people in this world. He quoted Smith's prediction that we are no longer have to become more Western or to change our moral in order to use English well in international situations, but we can use English as a means of communicating our identity, culture, politics and way of life (Smith in Nakamura, 2002). Moreover, learners of English as international language do not need to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of English language, but they can internalize their own cultural identity and use English to communicate it globally.

In order to cultivate this paradigm, Nakamura stated that teachers of EIL in Japan should be aware of at least two cultures: the culture of English-speaking countries and the culture of Japan. Teachers of EIL in Japan should aware of the historical context of how English has become the lingua franca of the world, aware of the true meaning of globalization and multicultural in Japan context, and also teach their students the meaning and understanding of global literacy and demand their students to express it through their attitudes and behaviors. As a result, students will find out that they have 'multicultural citizenship' as the combination of Western culture and Japan culture, and therefore they will fit themselves in both global and local communities. Ideally speaking, they will be able to express their cultural identity as Japanese people by using EIL. Seven steps actions has been suggested by MEXT in Action Plan to improve English education in Japan: (1) improving English classes, (2) improving teaching ability of English teachers and upgrading teaching system, (3) improving motivation for learning English, (4) improving the evaluation system in the entrance examinations, (5) supporting English conversation activity class in primary schools, (6) improving Japanese language abilities, and (7) promoting the practical research (Nakamura, 2002). Consequently, to achieve this agenda, average junior high school graduates at least should master basic communication skills related to daily activities. For average high school graduates should be able to participate in normal communication, and for average university graduates, they should be able to use English at a professional level such as at work.

INFLUENCES OF JAPANESE CULTURAL VALUES TO THE LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN JAPAN

Discussion on major issue in this paper is first presented in the figure below.

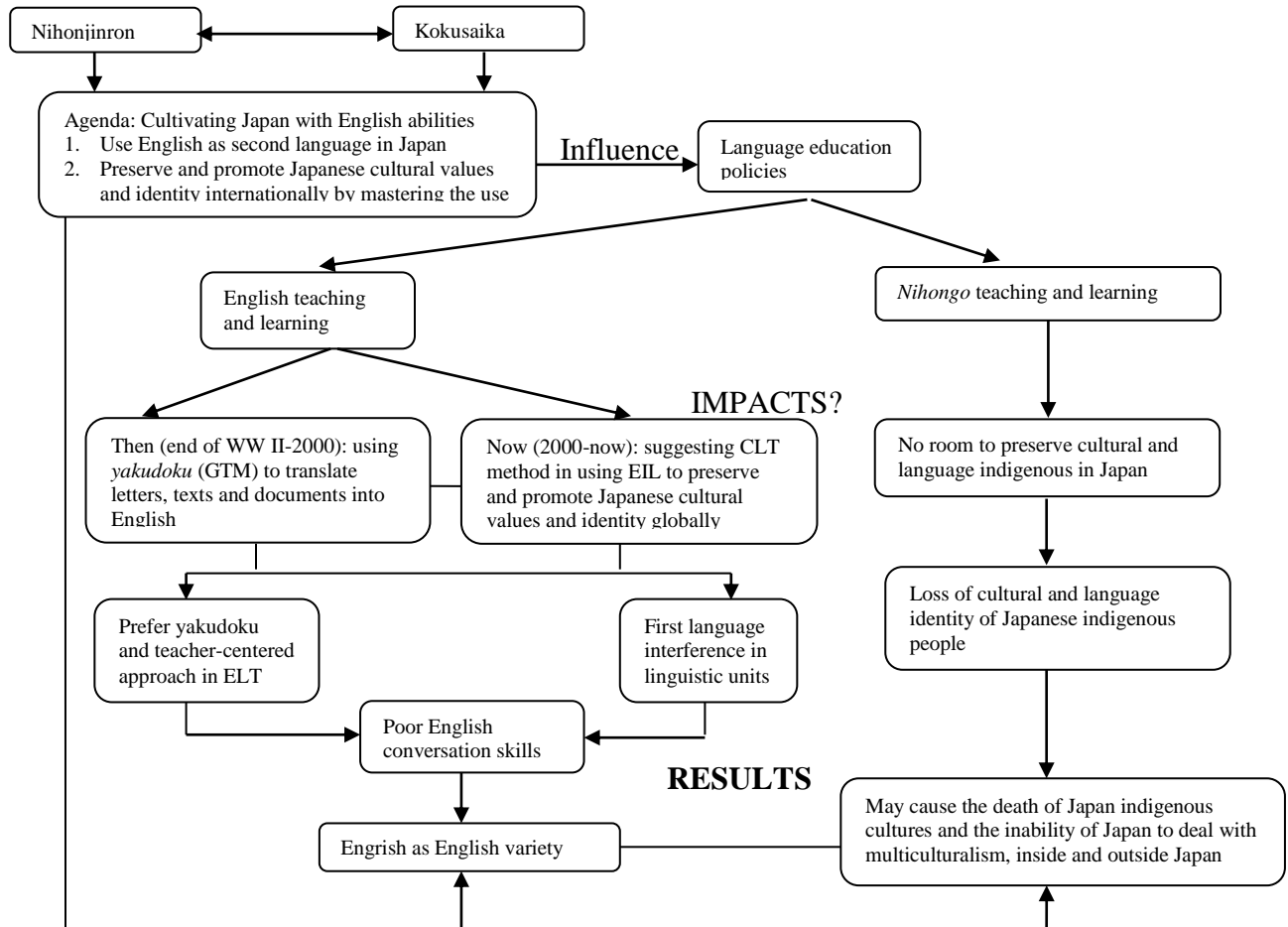


Figure 1. Japanese Cultural Values to the Implementation of Language Policy in Japan

Figure 1 shows how Japanese cultural values are implemented in the agenda of Japan. The agenda of Japan, of cultivating Japanese people with English abilities, deeply influences language education policies in Japan in terms of arranging the teaching and learning of EIL for Japanese people, as well as arranging the teaching and learning of Japanese language for all people including foreigners. In 2002, Chiba, Hildebrandt, and Matsuuda did a research about Japanese learners’ belief about communicative English teaching and learning. From more than 300 respondents, 91% respondents were more comfortable to learn correct pronunciation and

88% respondents preferred their grammar mistakes to be corrected by the teachers, while 67% respondents said that Japanese translation is very important in reading comprehension. In the other hand, 90% respondents agreed that oral practice should be taught primarily in classroom, and their teachers should teach Japanese culture in classroom. Interestingly, more than 70% respondents agreed that they do not have to give feedback about how English should be taught in the classroom (Chiba, Hildebrandt and Matsuuda, 2002).

It can be seen from the above data that Japanese learners preferred to learn correct English pronunciation and grammar, and used Japanese translation in English reading comprehension. Although they did not want to give feedback for their teacher about the learning process, they wanted their grammar and pronunciation mistakes to be corrected by teachers while at the same time they also wanted to improve their oral skills. All of those are characteristics of Grammar-Translation method and teacher-centered approach in learning English. Bainbridge in her article written in 2002 stated that Grammar-Translation method and first language interference are two major factors that caused Japanese people are poor in English conversation skill. Grammar-Translation method was used at the first time English came to Japan, because the way of communication with international people was made through letters and documents. This method has been adopted by Japanese people as an instructional style, or *yakudoku*, and makes them feel secure if Japanese translation is available for their reading comprehension in English learning process.

Today, in purpose of making English becoming second language in Japan, Communicative Language Teaching has replaced the position of Grammar-Translation method as an appropriate method to teach and learn English. Still, Japanese learners find it hard to adapt themselves to this method. In 2007 Kobayashi and Viswat conducted a research to find out Japanese students' cultural motivation in learning English. After comparing 90 Japanese students and 80 USA students, they found out four situations of Japanese learners' motivation; attitudes toward discussion, attitudes toward voicing objections to teachers' remarks, attitudes toward views about competition, and attitudes toward views about efficiency (Kobayashi and Viswat, 2007).

Besides the influence of Japanese cultural values to English teaching and learning, the influence to Japanese teaching and learning is also apparent. Outside the country, Japan is known as homogenously unique. Japanese homogenous cultural values and identity is considered as best

strategy to make sure that Japanese culture is strong and no imperialism can kill Japanese culture. Japanese language or *Nihongo* is treated as a reflection of Japan's race and nationality, and vice versa. But a strong argument came from Reiko Hatori. In her article Hatori wrote in her article published at 2005 that the influence of Nihonjinron and Kokusaika as Japanese cultural values to *Nihongo* policy in Japan can kill Japanese minorities. She stated that actually Japan has two indigenous groups, which are Ainus and Okinawas, and also foreign residents of mostly Korean and Chinese. They share different languages and cultural background with most Japanese people, but they are forced by assimilation policy to be considered as Japanese people. The impact is, they are threatened to lose their cultural identities and languages.

Hatori claimed that it is absurd how Japan can prepare itself to become more multiracial, multicultural and multilingual country by proposing English as second official language and giving opportunities to Japanese people to learn English and other foreign languages, but at the same time they seem not to know much about minority cultures/languages exist among themselves. This absurdity leads Japan to a narrow-minded nationalism. So, to survive from English imperialism that might lead to kill Japanese minorities' cultural identity and language, and also not to become a narrow-minded nationalism, Hatori suggested five initiatives for language education policy in Japan: stop implementation of English education in elementary schools, exclude English from all gate-keeping examinations, introduce minority languages for global literacy starting in elementary schools, leave a door open for English education as still a third language (foreign language) for those who wish to learn it, and promote critical pedagogy in language teaching (Hatori, 2005).

Liddicoat also raised the same issue in his article written on 2007. He believed that Japanese cultural identity of being a nation which is 'uniquely unique' is has drawn a line between what is called as 'Westerners' and the 'Japanese'. The strongest form of this uniqueness is *Nihongo* (Miller in Liddicoat, 2007). He quoted Hashimoto's statement that in the Japanese context, learning English merely means to express Japanese identity and Japanese point of view in an international context. The central theme of Liddicoat's article is that Nihonjinron and Kokusaika are not the effort of engagement with diversity. These Japanese cultural values are showing the light tension between imperialism of English and the effort of internationalizing Japan. Japanese people believe that their ideas and aspirations can only be expressed in *Nihongo*, and therefore all people should learn and use *Nihongo* in their daily life and formal education,

including all foreigners in Japan. This program has been regulated in the program of REX (Regional and Educational Exchange for Mutual Understanding), and also several organizations which have been mentioning before. So, English is only being viewed as a tool to achieve that primary objective. The impact is, according to Liddicoat, is a monodirectional goal of expressing Japanese culture and language to the world rather than engaging with international perspectives and interculturality with English-speaking countries or other countries.

WRITER'S PERSPECTIVES TOWARD THE MAJOR ISSUE

After displaying the discussions on the major issue, I point out two important aspects as results of Japan's cultural strategy. The first aspect is the empirical aspect of teaching and learning English in Japan. Japanese people's motivation in learning English is very important since it is influenced by cultural values. To discuss it, I relate the result of Kobayashi and Viswat's research (2007) with Neo Confucianism proverbs of Japanese that have been discussed before.

First, is the attentive listening and brief comments as attitude of Japanese learners' toward discussion. It fits with the Neo-Confucianism proverb *Dera kugi wa utareru*, commonly told to middle school students to not becoming outstanding in the group, and also *Chinmoku wa kin* which values suppression of self-expression. Second attitude is Japanese learners' attitudes toward voicing objections to teachers' remarks. For Japanese, harmony is a prime value and confrontation should be avoided as much as possible, as in proverb *No aru taka wa tsume o kakusu*, which is often said about people who modestly hide a great talent. Beside that, Japanese culture calls for respect for elders, especially father figure. There is a famous expression dominates every aspect of Japanese people's life: *teishu kampaku*. Figure of teachers can be seen as father for students in the class and therefore they feel hesitate to voice objections to teachers. Third attitude is about how Japanese learners view competition. Japanese values cooperative attitudes and therefore sees competition as something that should be avoided if necessary. And for fourth attitude, efficiency, Japanese learners generally gives priority to other's feelings. All of those attitudes are strengthened with other proverbs *rakka eda ni kaerazu*, *hakyō futatabi terasazu*.

From those four situations we can see how Japanese learners are struggling with their cultural influence, while at the same time they are also struggling with the implementation of

Communicative Language Teaching method in teaching and learning English. What makes me interested in Kobayashi and Viswat's article is because of the conclusion statement in their article; English language teachers should pay attention on Japanese students' cultural background and understand how cultural background affects Japanese students' motivation in learning English. It seems that English language teachers fail to realize the cultural needs of Japanese students in learning English and the impact is poor conversation skills of Japanese students.

As the influence of these cultural values, Japanese people considering themselves as unique nation, and therefore they want to learn English in their own way. They realize the needs of using EIL to be connected with the world outside Japan, and also to promote and preserve Japanese culture globally, but they do not want to adopt cultural values of English-speaking countries in learning English. Although Communicative Language Teaching has been realized as appropriate method to meet the needs of using English communicatively, they still rely on the use of *yakudoku*. Since this style is able to meet the needs of promoting and preserving Japanese culture to global through the use of letters and documents, they feel secure if they are not able to communicate using the correct form and style of English orally. The raise of English, a variety of English in Japan found in Japanese products and advertisements, is the proof that English is merely needed as a way to make Japan looks and feels modern, but in their own way. It seems to me that English is also one way to bridge the gap of linguistics differences between English and Japanese language in term of pronunciation, grammatical pattern and writing style.

The second aspect is socio-cultural aspect. I can say that in order to preserve itself from linguistics imperialism of English, Japan sacrifices its multicultural aspect by paying very little attention in preserving and promoting the cultural identities of Ainus, Okinawans, and other naturalized people from Korean and Chinese. Japan has decided to give biggest attention on preserving *Nihongo* as national identity of all Japanese people, while the same attention is also given to English as merely a tool to promote and preserve Japan's uniqueness as homogenous country. As a result, cultural identities, values, and even languages of indigenous people in Japan may fade away since there is no serious attention has been given by the Government to sustain them.

I consider that this cultural strategy of Japan is regarded as the best strategy to be executed. As for my perspective on the influence of cultural values to English education policy

and English language teaching as well, I personally agree on the position of English in Japan; as a tool to preserve and promote cultural identity and values internationally. What I do not believe is the attempt to smoothly reject the cultural values of English-speaking countries in teaching and learning English communicatively and the sacrifice of indigenous cultures and languages. I have two reasons for that. First of all, I believe that when we want to learn a language, the best way to learn it is to adopt the way how native people acquire the language itself. To learn a language means to respect the culture values of the language itself. Second, I also believe that multicultural of a nation should not be viewed as a threat in teaching and learning English for the nation itself.

Multicultural identity is a unique way to preserve our local and national identity as a global citizen, instead of choosing only one dominant culture to be represented as national identity for a heterogeneous nation. We can actually combine all strong traits from our nation's indigenous cultures to be our values to create an appropriate approach, method or instructional style, in order to meet the needs of heterogeneous culture in teaching and learning English. I believe that we have to give attention on preserving and promoting our local cultures, before we open ourselves to a possibility of making English as lingua franca inside our nation. Therefore, the biggest challenge also opportunity for us is to combine cultural values of English-speaking countries and our own heterogeneous cultures to find out the appropriate approaches, methods and instructional styles which meet our needs of preserving our own cultural identity without sacrifice the minorities, while also at the same time meet the needs of EIL communicatively.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the overall discussion, Japan's strategy to deal with linguistics imperialism of English in Japan is to promote and preserve their cultural values and identity. These values are expressed in *Nihonjinron* and *Kokusaika*. Japan's agenda, therefore, is internationalizing the nation through the use of English as International Language. What is needed by Japan is to find a way to integrate indigenous culture values and languages instead of ignoring it, in order to design appropriate method used in teaching and learning English to all people in Japan. It will enable them to engage with interculturality first inside the country, and engage with international perspectives and interculturality with English-speaking countries and other countries.

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