

THE FOREIGN ENGLISH TEACHER IN JAPAN

Robert John Alagna

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1. Introduction

The decades of the 1970's and 1980's brought tremendous and unprecedented change to foreign language education in Japan society. The limited scope of this study allows us to discuss only two key historical changes. One unprecedented change in recent Japanese history was the stunning economic transformation from debtor nation to creditor nation. For the first time in its history, Japan became a country that could afford to pay. For the first time in Japanese history, the general public, too, had money to spare. This new wealth, would effect

foreign language education in Japan. Education itself became a “consumer” product. Many more people would begin spending money on education. English would become a “consumer” product.

The second new change to affect foreign language education in Japan was the “globalization” of Japanese economic power. Language competency could no longer be left up to a small number of “transcultural business experts” employed by Japanese trading companies. By being sent to his company’s branch office in a foreign country, the average Japanese employee instantly became a “transcultural” or “global” worker. New generations of Japanese workers would now have to be communicatively competent in the globalized work place of the Japanese company. By the late 1970’s, there was a nation-wide consensus among the business community, on the need to know English for Japan’s global business activities. Thousands of salaried adult males in Japanese companies would have to learn how to communicate in English, and very quickly. The importation of foreign English instructors began on a large scale.

Next, we examine the Japanese English conversation classroom environment, foreign teacher employment and cultural, education imperatives and constraints of the contemporary Japanese English as a Foreign/Second Language Education Classroom.

2. The Japanese English Classroom-Dual Learning System.

The Japanese junior college and university system has been, tra-

ditionally, a "closed campus" (places of learning only for individuals between the ages of 18 and 25). What is known as "continuing education" in America is, in Japan, known as "Outside Class Education", or "Extracurricular Education". As a rule, once Japanese "graduate", from junior high school, high school, junior college, or the university, there is no "going back to school". Occasionally, Japanese do go back to college. When they do, they are alone on campus. Foreign students, used to integrated campuses, are surprised to be surrounded mostly by classmates between the ages of 18 and 21. The educational needs of those younger than 18, the general public, and college graduates have to be served (if not in formal schooling) elsewhere. Today, extracurricular (beyond formal) education has become so popular it is offered both at the private (through local individuals, enterprises), and public (community services) levels, in villages, towns and cities throughout Japan.

For learning English in Japan, there are two environments, two systems. The first, and foremost, is the "official" (formal education system) environment. The second "unofficial" system for learning English in Japan is the private sector. It is in this second environment that the foreign English teacher is most often employed, and plays a key role. This "unofficial" environment for learning English in Japan will be discussed in detail in this paper.

In the unofficial environment, there are two major types of extracurricular education experiences: the "Okeikogoto" classroom (classes for social enrichment), and the "Juku" classroom (supplemental classes for academic competition).¹⁾ The "Juku" (entrance exam cram schools)

and "Okeikogoto" classes are offered publicly (as community service programs) and privately (as businesses). Both types can be found throughout Japan, in all sizes, from small, individual, neighborhood one-room "schools", to large, multinational education enterprises. Both education environments offer "English for Conversation" classes, and employ foreigners in language instruction.

The Japanese "Juku" classroom system (supplemental classes for academic competition) is, today, a multimillion dollar industry. The escalation of high school and university entrance examination competition began in the early 1970's. Today, the competition to enter desirable high schools and universities is said to have far outpaced the educational capacities of the public school classroom system. So much so that, it is said that children go to school "to take tests", then go after school, to the Juku "to learn to pass school tests". When it comes to official attempts at reforms, Ministry of Education (the government bureaucracy in control of Japan's official education system) efforts are said to be like the proverbial "dog that chases its own tail".

The very existence of an exclusive entrance exam system, plus limited enrollment quotas forces both schools and families to run the education "treadmill" race all the more feverishly, forcing the price of education in Japan to skyrocket. A "sellers' market" encourages the level of education within the school system to "hollow out", while stimulating the expansion of the Juku business. As the Juku education system is largely in the private sector, it is "customer driven". It continues to refine and redefine itself as "customer" needs demand, while the "official" school system itself steadily falls behind in meeting the

students' needs for passing ever more difficult curriculum, and related entrance exams. The great irony is that the "official" education system itself (funded by public spending) created the entrance exam system; which then created the need for the Juku. A parent in Japan must pay twice to allow a child the chance to compete equally. The current debate on education in Japan notes that there is no way out, within the present educational structure.

English is said to be one of the most difficult subjects to pass in Japanese junior and high school examinations. The Juku take up the slack. EEP (English for Exam Preparation), as a business, has experienced unprecedented expansion within the last two decades. In the 1970's, there were said to be 600 to 800 English language and conversation schools in the Tokyo area. By the late 1980's, there were an estimated 9,000 in the Tokyo area alone.²⁾ If Tokyo is any measure of this expansion trend nationwide, we can imagine the extent of this unprecedented growth in professional (as in business) English instruction in Japan.

While a Ministry of Education White Paper estimates that 60% of all students under university level education are attending some kind of extracurricular EEP (English for Exam Preparation) classes, enrollment levels at the local Juku suggest 80% or higher. In the Juku environment, English is mostly English for Exam Preparation. In the Juku, if English "conversation" classes are offered, they are usually taught by a foreigner. They are regarded as "frill curriculum", to supplement the expensive, grueling, hard core grammar-for-exam-preparation lessons.

The "Okeikogoto" (classes for social enrichment) programs offer English mainly for conversation. These are mostly ESP (English for Specific Purposes) classes. These English conversation Okeikogoto programs vary in purpose and content. Some are for pleasure, such as cooking classes done in English. Others are for cultural exchanges, international understanding, and business. Programs offering "language services" are of all sizes. These range from individual one-room owners, to big, multi-national corporations. Most are managed by Japanese owners.

Many of these owners are business people, not educators. Some owners are educators turned business people. Most of the foreign English teacher's employment opportunities and educational roles are to be found in the "Okeikogoto" classroom. Here, English Conversation is an important, if not the only, subject to be offered in the "Okeikogoto" program's curriculum. It is also a "product" in a "service market", meaning that the student is a "customer" first, a student second. The foreign English teacher's employment success in the "Okeikogoto" classroom may fully depend on his or her understanding of free market principles, as opposed to "sitting on one's credentials". This "Okeikogoto" classroom learning environment has experienced an unprecedented boom within the last ten years. It will be interesting to see what the 90's will be like.

3. Foreign English Teacher Boom

-The "Gaijin-San" Sensei.-

Starting around the late 1970's, the need for native-speaking English teachers (or "language personnel") became transparently, even painfully acute in "culturally isolated" Japan. Media "buzz words" like "global society", "internationalization" became themes for the Japanese business world. The study of "English for Conversation" enjoyed an unprecedented popularity. Japanese-managed chain-companies and franchises of Business-English Conversation classes sprung up throughout Japan. In the Tokyo area alone, by the mid-80's, there were an estimated 70,000 foreigners teaching English in some way, shape, or form.³⁾ In the decades of the 70's and 80's, a foreign English teacher's employment opportunities in this education environment was, though limited by content, abundant in demand.

With the Japanese university system pumping out thousands of non-communicative university graduates, the education system would have to do something new. The Japanese business world was suffering. As we pointed out earlier, the presence of foreign English teachers in the private sector had boomed from the late 1970's, ever growing through the 1980's. In spite of a glut today, the presence of foreign English teachers will very likely continue expanding through the 1990's. The growing presence of foreign English teachers in public schools (junior, senior, high schools, and universities) throughout Japan has been partly due to the "fashion" of having a "foreigner" on staff (a sales point for the public schools competing with the private sector) and, in part, in answer to social criticism over the lack of com-

municative competency after 10 years of English education. However, these employment patterns do not suggest a policy of “integration”.

4. Foreign English Teacher Work Space.

What then is the “Gaijin-San” teacher for ? Within the formal and informal English teaching systems in Japan, there are still two other systems. One of these is “English Taught by Japanese”. The other is “English Taught by Foreigners”. Within the same institution, these are separate entities, almost a kind of “segregation”. The Japanese English teacher is almost always mandated to teach English grammar, translation, and the reading of foreign books, while the foreign English teacher is always mandated to teach English conversation. It is rare for these teaching roles to change. For most Japanese, English is either something called “grammar” or something called “conversation”. The “Gaijin-San” teacher spends each “assignment”, acting as a “catalyst”, sometimes just an “attraction”, used by the Japanese staff for a more exciting English class. This arrangement was mandated more than 45 years ago, by Japanese labor laws, which stipulated that foreigners could not be allowed to work in Japan, unless it was work Japanese nationals could not perform better.

The official perception still, is that “the Foreigner” can teach the speaking part of foreign language education better than Japanese, hence the presence of the foreign English teacher in Japan. This is the “contradictory” situation that is common-place in the foreign teacher employment experience throughout Japan, a cultural and structural phenomena. At any rate, a program must have the “proper” appear-

ances, hence the presence, and value, of the foreign English teacher here. Thus, in a junior and senior high school work environment, the foreign English “expert” usually ends up being little more than the token “Gaijin-San Sensei”. For although English Conversation (at the junior and high school) is important for (the appearance of) a balanced curriculum, it is in reality, a very low-priority subject.

In the Japanese public school system, “insider” (tenured) teaching positions are, as a rule (as in the Law), reserved for Japanese nationals. On the other side, the private schools are relatively free to hire foreigners at their own determination, hence, longer term employment is more common at the private institutions. Longer term employment requires an “employment behavior” that blends with the mainstream. As a result of the current legal structure and hiring practices at most language learning institutions and schools, many foreign English teachers are hired, at best, as “outside”, “full time”, “limited” specialists (1-3 year renewable contracts). Salaries are negotiable at some places, and a flat monthly rate at others.

Those employed at private junior and senior high schools, or the junior colleges and universities can be found in one of three types of employment situations:

1. “Hijoukin” (an “outside”, “limited”, part time and/or full time position, responsible for classes and testing only, no regular staff responsibilities).
2. “Joukin” (“outside”, “limited”, full time position with full faculty responsibilities, but NOT tenured).
3. “Sennin” (a “semi-inside”, tenured, lifetime position, with full faculty job responsibilities).

There are three ways to be employed as a teacher in Japan. Being a "Hijoukin" is relatively easy to understand. One can be "Sennin" and "Joukin"; or one can be "joukin" (full time) without being "Sennin" (tenured). The distinction here is critical, whether the foreign teacher is hired in an "official" or "semi-official" environment, at a private or public junior or senior high school, a trade school, or an exam Juku school, on a 'moderately stable' contract, at one location, for a limited period of time. There is little, or no time for a "live" English language education in the "paper chase" exam preparation curriculum that dominates these levels.

The foreign English teacher has survived the interviews, been accepted into employment, and is ready to start an assignment. It is usually at this point that an institution's authorities will emphasize to the foreign teacher the importance of a "live" English classroom, and stress that the foreign teacher's performance be "different from the Japanese teacher", emphasizing the foreign teacher's "unique abilities". Employers will strongly stress, "You must do what our Japanese staff cannot do". Then, at the same time, they will, in many cases, be unable to offer a realistic program budget, or time schedule, for such a request to succeed. Finally, the teacher gets to meet his or her students. When the Japanese English teacher, or staff member introduces the foreign English teacher to his or her students, he or she will usually be introduced as the "Gaijin-San" teacher, from somewhere, not a "fellow colleague". The irony of this implicit cultural attitude of a Japanese "colleague" is seldom lost upon the foreign teacher.

In most cases, foreign English teachers may find themselves pigeon-holed as assistants to Japanese English teachers, or in charge of an LL classroom, doing “listening training for exam preparation” classes, with large classes of 40 to 50 very uninvolved, uncommunicative, preoccupied first and second year junior or high school students. This may very well mean being a round peg with a very square career. For the most part, the foreign English teacher’s employment exists in Japan to do what the Japanese English teacher is perceived to be unable to do as well, speak in English. As a rule, Japanese English teachers do not welcome the competition that the presence of the foreign “professional” entails.

The following is a sardonic list of employment guidelines for foreign teachers working in a typical Japanese educational environment. It was written by a Japan-experienced foreign English teacher, Russ Des Aulnier.

The Des Aulinier Ten Articles of Employment:

1. When you belong to our company you are the company’s property.
2. Don’t ask what your company can do for you, but what you can do for your company.
3. Refrain from questioning. Questioning is disrespectful, and coming a foreigner, quite possibly perceived as being racist.
4. Don’t exercise any creative teaching initiative without management authorization.
5. Don’t be too worried about teaching, concentrate more on being popular with your students.

6. Be serious about the institution's programs and teaching materials, even if your students are not.
7. Remember: Your employers know best about everything in Japan.
8. Any and all contracts are written for the institution, by the institution.
Interpretation: You are bound to it, not the institution.
9. Your direct superior or manager may be a foreigner, but he belongs to your employer.
10. In conclusion, pretend that 1 through 9 do not exist and that everyone in Japan is one happy, harmonious family.⁴⁾

This paraphrased version of Des Aulnier's "Ten Articles of Employment" suggests an appraisal of the foreign English teacher's employment environment in Japan that is, within this author's personal experience, less the sarcasm, close to the mark.

The English teacher employment field is wide open. Although there are lots of regulations, there is little regulating by regulatory agencies. When there is "trouble", the foreign teacher is usually regarded as the source of the "trouble", and there is little *successful* litigation in Japan. Once bad feelings occur in an employment relationship, the foreign teacher is, in almost all cases, deemed expendable. It is important to thoroughly discuss the work relationship before agreeing to employment.

The "bottom line" is that the employer wants the foreign teacher to create a lot of income for the organization, and the teacher wants adequate compensation for that effort. If one of these two parties

doesn't come through, the relationship is probably terminal anyway.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, We have examined the Japanese language education structures, and the Japanese English teacher's role. We have discussed foreign teacher role positions within the classroom and Japanese society. We have examined the foreign teacher's positions contingent to Japanese colleagues. Further, we have emphasized that credentials and experience achieved outside Japan are at best, referentially valuable. The foreign teacher's Japan experience is primary, each day and step at a time.

We point out that he or she must "win hearts", "perform", to be competent in Japan. That the foreign teacher has to learn cultural "bonding techniques" in order to control and affect learning in this classroom. That the foreign teacher will have to have a certain level of Japanese language competency to control the classroom. Today, speaking Japanese, having a certain amount of cultural experience in Japan is almost a prerequisite to being able to facilitate learning. Finally, we stress that cultural aspects must be considered in order to facilitate learning in the Japanese student's classroom, and need to be incorporated in curriculum materials and course development.

Cultural aspects, physical, structural constraints, lack of access, limited class hours per scholastic year, all contribute to lower performance parameters and expectations of the language learning environment in Japan. For better or for worse, most of the class time for

teaching/training English conversation will be spent in the regular classroom. With the current conditions and present assumptions of language learning and pedagogy, the efficiency level and ratio of language experience per student, in the Japanese language classroom will continue to be far less than we can be getting. We need to approach the Japanese language classroom with new assumptions. We need more research in the Japanese language classroom. Because the Japanese experience fundamentally challenges our most basic assumptions of the teacher and the learner, the problems we learn to solve, the approaches we develop in Japan will contribute in Europe and America.

In the 1990's, we as foreign teachers in Japan, need several things:

- 1) **Workable knowledge** (of Japanese society, workable competence in the Japanese language many institutions are now only hiring foreign teachers who can speak Japanese).
- 2) **Re-evaluation** (of language competency goals to reflect the limited conditions of the English Conversation classroom in the Japanese education system).
- 3) **Flexibility** (to make new assumptions about what can be accomplished here in Japan, and how to accomplish it).

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