

*English as an International Language*  
— what native speakers of English should keep in mind<sup>1)</sup> —

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### 1: The Spread of English

English is acknowledged to be the leading language for global communication, whether French people resist it or not, or whether Chinese people claim that their language has the largest body of speakers in the world. English has the largest number of nonnative users around the world, having served in many countries and areas as a vehicle for science, for the news media and some kinds of international entertainment. (Stevens, 1981)

Bowen (1975) estimates that approximately 300 million people speak English as an L1 as in the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and other places. Another 300 million people speak English as a second language as in the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. Besides, 100 million people are said to be able to speak English almost freely as a foreign language. If learners of English at all levels, from novice to superior, are taken into account, the number will reach billions. Moreover, two thirds of the scientists in the world write their articles in English; over three quarters of the mail are written in English. And in most of the countries in the world, English is taught as a required subject at secondary education. Consequently, English is virtually a world language that bridges the linguistic gaps among people with different L1 backgrounds.

Today's prosperity of English language was predicted as early as in the late eighteenth century (1780) by John Adams, the second President of the United States. He proclaimed:

English will be the most respectable language in the world and the most universally read and spoken in the next century, if not before the close of this one. (cited by Kachru & Quirk, 1981: xiii)

Mathews (1931) states:

English was destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the past or French is in the present age. The reason for this is obvious, because increasing population in America, and their universal connection and correspondence with all nations will force their language into general use. (cited by Kachru & Quirk, 1981: xiii)

## 2: Japanese People's Familiarity with English

English is quite familiar in Japanese people's daily life. Many products have English names. Even some persons' names contain English such as Giant Baba, Tokoro George or Frank Nagai.

Many English words are used among Japanese speakers as loan words in our daily life. Some of the loan words or katakana words are incomprehensible to English native speakers because they are modified or invented by Japanese media to mean quite differently from the original words.

Many katakana words are so popular among Japanese people that we often fail to notice that they derived from English. For example, "Bye-bye" is much more popular than "sayonara" among children and young people when they depart their friends. You may hear young people use "Thank you." more often than "arigato." Everyone says "All right. All right." when they instruct a driver to move a car backward when they park at a parking lot or when they avoid an obstacle in the way. There are many more examples around us.

Some people are concerned about the widespread of English. They take the dominance of English in various fields of our life as "English language imperialism" that could lead to the destruction of our ethnic identity, or even the birth of a new social class that controls both power and wealth. (Tsuda, 1990; Tsuda, Oishi, Mizuno, Ito, Nakajima and Kusunose, 1993).

Obviously, the spread of any language is connected to the national interest of the target language community. The U. S. government, for instance, is promoting the Internet transactions, giving the U. S. dollar the status of the world currency and English that of the common language on the Internet. Another example is that in Hong Kong, where school started to use Cantonese right after the handover to the People's Republic of China in 1998.

## 3: EIL

The concept of English as an International Language or EIL was first proposed and boosted by Smith (1976), research associate at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. He claims "since English belongs to the world and every nation which uses it does so with different tone, color and quality." (1976: 77) Wong, then associate professor at the Department of English, University of Malaya, Malaysia (1980) maintains that

It would not be incorrect to describe English as belonging now to the entire English-speaking world, and not only to those people who use it as their native language. The realization of this fact should serve to point out to native speakers of English that there are other varieties of English besides theirs which are used in the world today, and that no longer can everyone in the English-speaking world be expected or required to use standard British or American English. At the same time, non-native speakers of English

should never be made to feel ashamed of their own variety of the language, no matter how deviant it may be from native-speaker English. (p. 107)

There are three types of communication using English. The first type is a native speaker-and-native speaker interaction. The second type is a native speaker-and-nonnative speaker interaction. The third is a nonnative speaker-and-nonnative speaker interaction. English teachers should try to get their students ready for any of these three settings. Traditional teaching methods tend to focus on the first and the second types. And the interaction between native speakers has been the only model presented to learners to follow.

However, this unified approach seems to be outdated because the model cannot serve to explain potential cross-cultural problems when the two participants in conversation are nonnative speakers of English living in non-English-speaking regions. For example, some textbooks or English language educators instruct that Japanese learners of English should look at the eyes of a westerner in conversation, which is not really common in Japan. The rule cannot be applied to the case when L1 Japanese speakers speak to Koreans or other Asian nationals. It is totally unacceptable for a Japanese learner of English to speak to a Chinese speaker with American gestures or attitudes.

In terms of listening comprehension, exposing our students to British and American varieties of English only is not enough. Again, Wong (1980) claims:

English courses everywhere, in native-speaker as well as in non-native-speaker environments, should expose students to varieties of English rather than standard British or American English or the regional standard of English as found in each particular country for purposes of comprehension, though not of production. (p. 107)

Among those three types of communication in English, it will be more common for L1 Japanese speakers use English with other nonnative speakers of English than with native speakers of English since English is becoming the common language among Asians. The widespread of English enables L1 Japanese speakers to communicate with native speakers of Chinese, Korean, Mongolian or any educated persons living in Asia without learning their respective languages.

English allows Asian to interact with each other in fair manners because it works as a neutral language, giving no edge to any particular national over others. The neutrality of English became the basis for Indians to choose to keep English as their common language for intranational communication in the multilingual society after the Britain left the subcontinent. A neutral language must have the small population of native speakers: the smaller the population, the more neutral it becomes. Thus, English is becoming better qualified as a neutral language since the birthrate in English-speaking countries is dropping.

#### 4: Separating Language and Culture

You may claim it is quite natural that any foreign language learners should learn cultural or behavioral patterns of the target-language community because language and culture are integrated. Too many people have blindly accepted this common idea as if it were an absolute truth.

Language and culture can be separated and should be separated as far as English language is concerned. English language education serves functions and purposes totally different from other foreign language education. English classes must be directed not only to English-speaking people but also to unlimited numbers of speakers with a variety of ethnic and L1 backgrounds for cross-cultural communication.

Of course, English-speaking peoples such as Americans and Britons are among those unlimited population. It is thereby quite appropriate to teach how Halloween is celebrated in the U. S. or how people there shake hands. The point is, however, that any foreign language speaker could be our student's conversational partner or business associate. Therefore, any partial treatment setting particular geographical regions or communities should be discouraged to meet the demand of today's intercultural communication.

#### 5: Early English Teaching

The new curriculum guideline issued by The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology enables primary schools to introduce foreign language classes, not necessarily English, at their discretion.

Research show that early introduction of any foreign language education produces more positive results than negative ones, not only in terms of linguistic skills, especially pronunciation and listening comprehension, but also in terms of social skills and communicative competence. Besides, children who learn English at early age tend to have favorable attitudes not only to English-speaking people and communities but also to people in other cultures. They are likely to become more tolerant and understanding, and feel less stress and strain when they encounter something different.

The society expects teaching English at primary school to be conversation-centered rather than grammar-centered. Many educators claim that English teachers should be careful not to increase the young learners of English who hate learning a foreign language by applying the same method currently used in most junior and senior high schools, which is the GTM or Grammar Translation Method for entrance examinations.

There are 67,000 Japanese English teachers in Japan. However, how many of them are qualified as experts to teach children? ALTs will play a bigger role to assist Japanese English teachers in that area in form of team-teaching.

At the same time, it is also important to reeducate Japanese English teachers by having them participate in workshops or to give them opportunities to study abroad or join overseas traineeships.

## **6: The Role of ALTs**

Assistant Language teachers or ALTs are expected to assist L1 Japanese English learners' learning EFL in many ways. Their contributions can be summed up as follows:

- 1) ALTs are expected to assist L1 Japanese English teachers in class but also help them improve their own English proficiency. ALTs may be asked to correct their pronunciation and intonation or teach them some chunks of classroom English. Japanese English teachers often depend on ALTs' expertise for authentic feedback to students' products: speech and writing. ALTs must be qualified to determine whether a certain utterance sounds natural or acceptable beyond grammaticality. Nonnative teachers can judge grammaticality but often fail to tell if it is commonly used among native speakers.
- 2) ALTs may be asked to play an active role in preparing for classes, making and improving handouts or providing some authentic materials for classroom use. They may be requested to make audiovisual materials by recording their narration.
- 3) ALTs can play a role of a cultural ambassador. School officials and teachers as well as students are curious about their country, society, customs and lifestyles. ALTs may be invited to various community events and see many people. They should be ready to describe their own culture, customs and society at anytime. If they encounter someone who misunderstands their country, they are the one who must correct it.
- 4) ALTs' roles are not confined to assistance for English class. They could be invited to other subject classes such as social studies, geography and history class where students are interested in ALTs' personal view on what is taught in class. They may be involved in some extracurricular activities, not necessarily an English conversation club but sports or other cultural and social activities.
- 5) ALTs may be asked to make accurate description of the communities where they have spent when they go home. They are expected to tell their family, friends and others not what they have heard but what they have seen with their own eyes, making accurate observations and possibly tell that Japanese people have their own distinct ethnic identity and culture, different from Chinese or other Asians.

## **7: Suggestions for Native Speakers of English**

Smith (1983) summarizes what native speakers of English should do:

Native speakers must be taught what to expect in spoken and written form when they communicate in English with other internationals. I think native speakers should listen to tapes of non-native speakers talking in English, read business documents written in English produced by multi-national corporations, and read literature written in English by

non-native speakers. (p. 77)

To add to his summary, the author of this paper would like to present seven specific tips of advice for native speakers of English to have successful communication with L1 Japanese speakers in English.

- 1) Native speakers of English should not dominate a dialogue. They have to give up their turns occasionally. L1 Japanese speakers often find it difficult to ask a native-speaker of English to slow down their speech or request to speak clearly. Instead, they often pretend to be comprehending what L1 English speakers are saying. To avoid this one-sided flow of speech, ALTs should yield their turn more often than they usually speak with other native speakers of English. Their speech should end within 10 seconds for each turn, for instance.
- 2) Native speakers of English may need to modify their speech not only in terms of the rate of speech or clarity of pronunciation but also in terms of word choice or even the content of speech. The modification of speech production for the sake of nonnative speakers or “foreigner talk” is characterized by Ferguson (1971) as follows:
  - a. it is slower and louder than normal speech, often with exaggerated pronunciation
  - b. it uses simpler vocabulary and grammar. For example, articles, function words, and inflections may be omitted, and complex verb forms are replaced by simpler ones.
  - c. topics are sometimes repeated or moved to the front of sentences, for example: Your bag? Where you leave your bag?

Of course, native speakers of English do not have to talk like this all the time, but they may need to follow some of these instructions depending on the learners' level. They may need to reflect on their speech, trying to find out whether their speech has some idiosyncratic features or personal traits that even English native speakers may fail to understand or feel irritated by.

- 3) When native speakers of English hear Japanese speakers speaking English, they should try to be patient and cooperative and should not expect to understand everything. Learners of English are speaking with a lot of difficulties; they must overcome the phonological, word-order, structural, and pragmatic differences between Japanese and English. Their blood pressure is going up, face flushing, and they often fail to articulate sounds accurately, producing incomprehensible words, phrases and sentences. Learners' attention is being paid to “how to say” as well as “what to say.”

- 4) L1 English speakers' frequent corrections of Japanese speakers' utterances should be avoided unless requested. Such actions not only provoke psychological inhibition on the part of the learners but also sound insulting to them. Fluency should not be hindered in favor of accuracy. This can be applied even in class. If native speakers of English correct students' English too often or even if they sound unclear, funny or often offensive and irritating, they will feel strained and depressed. And this could discourage the learners' motivation for speaking up.
- 5) English native speakers should not stare at the eyes of a Japanese person too long. Japanese people feel threatened by an intensive stare by anyone because it is not common in their daily life. Eye-contact is important in English-speaking countries; otherwise, people would take them dishonest. Instead, English native speakers should turn their eyes to other places such as shoulders or shoes. Besides, they should not stand too close to any Japanese people. Their social distance is not as close as that of English-speaking people's. ALTs should also refrain from touching any part of the body without any reason.
- 6) Saying "no" flatly is sometimes not really appreciated. Japanese people often take it rude or inconsiderate. English native speakers may need to learn how to reject an offer or an invitation indirectly or state a lengthy reason first, while waiting for the listeners to realize that they are rejecting them.
- 7) English native speakers should be ready for any offensive questions or comments from their students and possibly from their Japanese colleagues. Students may ask a question or make a statement which is very common in Japan but sounds so funny to English native speakers and they would say "For what?" or "Why do you ask that?" Some examples are as follows:
  - (1) What's your blood type?
  - (2) Why is your nose long?
  - (3) Do you have a gun?
  - (4) When are you going to get married?
  - (5) Why are you still single?
  - (6) Do you have a lover?
  - (7) How many boyfriends do you have?
  - (8) Japan is a safe country, but foreign countries are not.
  - (9) I'm sure you can't understand the hearts of us Japanese.
  - (10) How much money do you make?

All of the questions above are some samples the author of this paper have collected from dozens of ALTs. Sometime these questions are intended to develop a conversation to get close to each other. However, most of them are quite offensive or at least sound weird. It would be rather nice of English native speakers to be honest enough to introduce Japanese learners of English some offensive questions or statements in advance.

## NOTE

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