

## The English Language Textbook

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The Centre's English Language Textbook Project is currently nearing completion, and it thus seems opportune to make a few brief observations on some of the aspirations underlying the project.

The primary intention has been to produce a text which was appropriate for the students of this University. We have therefore made as much effort as possible to keep the vocabulary and the complexity of sentence structure within the kind of range of difficulty which will be manageable by the first-year students. In terms of content, the guiding principle has been to anchor the text in the culture with which the students themselves are most familiar. Therefore, although the aim is broadly to present a meditation on differences between Japanese and British culture, the fact that the focus of the discussion will lie very often with Japan, should, it is to be hoped, lead to the readers feeling less alienated than they might be expected to feel when confronted by the kind of textbook which concentrates solely on English-speaking cultures.

One of the textbook's most unique features is the approach adopted to vocabulary. Most reading comprehension textbooks try to introduce new vocabulary to the student in each chapter, and this vocabulary is usually studied through translation into Japanese. Usually, however, students do not encounter the new vocabulary again in subsequent chapters and so often do not retain the new words. Such texts also tend to encourage an over-reliance on the dictionary as a means of understanding unfamiliar words. In our text we have attempted as far as possible both to recycle difficult vocabulary and also to show the student that it is sometimes possible to successfully guess the meaning of unfamiliar words by paying close attention to the context. On numerous occasions throughout the text, the question of vocabulary becomes a part of the content of the chapter insofar as language, and some of the confusions that it can generate in the cross-cultural context, is one of the central themes of the book. By bringing such questions into the narrative, as it were, we hope that students might find it easier to learn new vocabulary not only because it becomes inseparable from the context, but also because the context itself works to render the meaning accessible since it is explicitly concerned with the theme of words and their meanings. Some of these points are illustrated in the following extract from the text.

### Chapter 8

When someone from a foreign country comes to live in Japan, they will experience all

kinds of difficulties because of cultural difference. In most cases, however, the greatest challenge will probably be that posed by the language.

The problems facing a Japanese person and a native speaker of English in learning each other's languages are, in a sense, opposite. For Japanese people, as for most other nationalities, the main difficulties of learning English will lie partly in the grammar and partly in the lack of a consistent relationship between spelling and pronunciation.

The part of English grammar that is likely to present the greatest difficulty to the Japanese learner is the tense system. This is much more complex than the tense system in Japanese. But it is possible to learn to use tenses correctly because the system is very logical. Unfortunately this is not true of the relationship between spelling and pronunciation which is often highly illogical. This is made worse for the Japanese speaker by the fact that English also contains a large number of vowel sounds which do not exist in Japanese. This problem, in turn, is made worse by the way in which Japanese has adopted many English words and changed the pronunciation to fit the more limited range of vowel sounds available in Japanese. In English these borrowed words are called 'loan words' (外来語).

A good example of how loan words sometimes make it more difficult rather than easier to learn English can be seen in the way that the Japanese language has changed both 'coat' and 'court' into the word コート. A 'coat' is something that you wear in the winter to keep warm and a 'court', in this case, is a space, either indoors or outdoors, marked out for a ball game such as tennis or badminton. The pronunciation of these two words is quite different in English, but becomes identical in Japanese. In fact, the problem lies in the word 'coat'. The Japanese コート is quite close to the English 'court'. But Japanese has no vowel sounds close to that in the word 'coat'. The same change occurs for the words 'note' and 'boat' which become ノート and ボート. These two words provide the rhyme in this well known nonsense poem by Edward Lear.

The owl and the pussycat went to sea  
in a beautiful pea-green boat.  
They took plenty of honey and lots of money  
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

And, by the way, the word 'pound' here is another problem because, as a loan-word in Japanese, it becomes something closer to 'pond', which means something completely different.

These, then, are some of the problems which face the Japanese person learning English: the complicated tense system and the pronunciation. Both of these can be learnt, however, by reading and listening. Rather than learning rules, which is boring and difficult, the Japanese learner can absorb these in the same way as the native speaker did

when they were a child. This method is possible because English has a very simple writing system. It has only 26 letters and so learning to read is really very easy. And if you read a lot, you will learn the grammatical structures and the vocabulary without the pain of having to memorize information. The secret is to start by reading things which are easy.

Learning Japanese is different. The foreigner cannot do it just by reading because first they have to memorize a large number of characters. This is where the culture shock is. Japanese is not that difficult to speak. The pronunciation is not particularly difficult and neither is the grammar. The problem is that a lot of time and effort are required before it becomes possible to read. And it is not being able to read that makes it more difficult for the English speaker to learn Japanese than for the Japanese person to learn English.