

The English Language Textbook Project (2)

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One of the projects currently in progress in the Research Centre for Educational Programmes is that of creating an English language textbook for university students. As will be evident to anyone involved in English teaching in the Japanese university system, there is no shortage of such textbooks, and hence it seems appropriate at this stage in the writing process to offer some description of those features of the text that might be viewed as distinctive and even experimental with respect to the kind of teaching material already available.

In terms of the four basic language skills, the textbook can be categorized as a reading text. It consists of a sequence of short pieces of writing, each dealing with a different theme. Each of these passages is followed by notes, questions to be answered and a presentation of issues that might be used as a basis for discussion. This corresponds to the familiar format of the reading comprehension textbook.

The point at which the book might begin to diverge from the standard model and appear more distinctive has to do with the effort taken to ensure that the reading experience does not, from the student's perspective, become too arduous. For many young Japanese students reading English is inseparable from the exercise of struggling to translate relatively complex language into the mother tongue. The main problem with such intensive styles of reading is that they tend very often to have the effect of discouraging students from engaging outside the classroom in the kind of extensive reading which is undoubtedly the most effective way to absorb vocabulary and grammatical structures. We have tried therefore, as far as possible, to keep the language within the *range of difficulty which we felt that our own students might be able to manage without frequent recourse to a dictionary*. In general terms, then, the most challenging aspect of writing the book lies in trying to achieve the right balance between language and content. It is the problem of expressing ideas which are sufficiently complex to appeal to adult learners in language which is accessible enough to make the business of reading pleasurable.

The approach to vocabulary in this book might seem unusual for at least two reasons. Firstly, and in apparent contradiction of what has just been said above, we have not shied away from introducing terms which are probably unfamiliar to most first-year university students. But where we have done this, there is usually an accompanying explanation which is part of the text itself. The point of these explanations is not so much to teach new vocabulary as to enable students to see how unfamiliar terms often contain compo-

nents which they already know. Our hope is that, by showing how long words can be broken down and how meanings can be built up from relatively simple foundations, students might be encouraged to be more intrepid about guessing new vocabulary rather than believing, as many seem to, that if one has not previously learnt a word, then there is no way that its meaning can be understood.

The other somewhat non-standard feature of the choice of words is that we have allowed Japanese words to remain in the text in their original form. Part of the philosophy of the book is to show that cultures can merge as well as stand in opposition to each other. And so it seemed natural that this attitude should, at least to some extent, be reflected in the language(s) of the book itself. This goes against the assumption underlying many communicative English textbooks that the student should not be distracted from the foreign language by the intrusion of the mother tongue. But because this book is aimed at Japanese teachers of English teaching English exclusively to Japanese speakers in Japan, the notion that we might be able to promote some kind of immersion effect through a textbook alone, seemed questionable to us. Besides this we hope that by anchoring the discourse in the foreign language to an, often untranslatable, word or concept in Japanese might encourage the student by giving them the sense that they are on familiar ground.

Each unit in the book deals with a different topic. There is also, however, an overall theme unifying the book as a whole and, very often, an attempt to draw attention to some of the connections which might be made between successive sections of the book. In this sense the text possesses a kind of narrative logic that cements together its various segments.

Most books that try, like this one, to compare Japanese and British culture, set out to give a broad picture of the social realities of each country. This book focuses more on details. It does not try to offer a systematic description of the two cultures, but is more of a random collection of themes that appealed to the author. In this respect, it is a fairly idiosyncratic book. But at least this might have the effect of guarding against stereotypes.

One further aspect of the book that might be deemed unique is that, as follows from the explanation above of the approach to difficult vocabulary, the whole question of language is an integral part of the discourse about culture. The need to cultivate a sharper awareness of what it means to acquire a new language is itself a part of the general theme of assimilating a foreign culture. The novelty, then, lies in bringing the language work into the narrative. The learning of the kind of techniques that will make students better readers of English is contained in the story that they are reading.

Many of the principals underlying the book, especially with regard to its general subject matter and the treatment of vocabulary are illustrated by the following extracts taken from the opening chapters.

I. Introduction

The original idea behind this book was that it should be about 'culture shock'. This is the phrase which is used to describe the situation in which misunderstanding or distress is caused by the difference between cultures. Culture shock occurs when, for example, you visit a foreign country and find that the social behaviour, eating habits and religious beliefs of the people in that country are completely different from those in your own country. Culture shock is being offered live, giant maggots to eat by a rainforest tribe. It also happens to every foreigner who tries for the first time to buy a subway ticket in a busy Tokyo train station.

The problems caused by cultural difference do not only affect travellers and immigrants. They can also occur in countries which have large communities of people from different ethnic groups. Such mixed populations are often the result of immigration.

People who emigrate from one country to another usually intend to remain in the new country for the rest of their lives. This means that, although they might suffer severe culture shock at first, their sense of the strangeness of their new home will gradually fade as time goes by.

After years and decades of living in the new country they will have become fluent in the language and used to the way of life of the people. However, they will probably retain many of the customs of their old country, such as the habits of eating and religious practices. It is likely, though, that their children and grandchildren will feel more at home with the new culture than with that of their parents.

This process of change is sometimes called 'assimilation', a word which contains the word 'similar' meaning 'like'. To be assimilated into a group means to become so much a part of that group that you seem naturally to belong there. You become 'similar' enough to the other members to no longer be thought of as a foreigner.

Human beings tend naturally to try to assimilate themselves to new social environments. Often without even realizing it, we begin to copy the behaviour of those around us, so that they come to accept us as being like themselves. Usually the younger we are, the easier it is to do this. Children learn new languages and new ways of behaving very fast. Their culture shock fades quickly. Adults normally take longer, and sometimes have to study very hard before they can cope well with a new culture. A foreigner who comes to live in Japan, for instance, will probably have to spend a lot of time studying the language before they feel truly comfortable.

Even when he or she has mastered a foreign language, however, there will still always be times when they are made to remember that they are not native speakers. And there will probably be other things too that will always be difficult. There will always be some ways of thinking and kinds of behaviour which they can never fully accept. They might never learn to like live maggots. Culture shock fades, but not

completely.

There is also another problem that occurs for the person who lives for a long time in a foreign country. Part of the process of changing yourself so that you feel at home in the other country is that some aspects of your homeland begin to seem strange to you. And so, if you return home, you might suffer what is sometimes called 'reverse culture shock'.

This book is written by a Briton who has lived a number of years in Japan. But it is not just about how strange Japan looks through British eyes. It is also about what seems strange about Britain to a Briton who is not only accustomed to, but also very fond of, Japan.

II. Disorientation

When I first decided to come to Japan, I went to the Careers Advice Centre in my old university to find out how to go about finding a job here. I quickly got an appointment to see an advisor, who gave me lots of useful advice and showed me how to begin gathering information. The only thing that I can remember him saying, however, was that I should expect to suffer a certain amount of culture shock.

In fact, the advisor himself had visited Japan some years before, and remembered that he had felt disorientated the moment that he had entered the arrivals foyer of Narita Airport. Laughing, he then corrected himself, and said that it was not disorientation that he had experienced, but 'disoccidentation'.

To 'orient' or 'orientate' yourself means to determine how you are positioned in relation to your surroundings. It means to understand which direction you are facing, and so is also a part of knowing in which direction you need to go. An 'orientation course' in a university, for example, is where the new students are given the information they need about where to go and what to do in their first weeks. Japanese students call this *ガイダンス*.

To be 'disorientated' means to become confused about where you are, to lose your sense of direction. It can also mean to become confused because something unexpected or shocking occurs. That part of your mind that guides you and tells you what direction to go in, stops working when you become disorientated.

But the origin of the word 'orient' is in the Latin verb 'oriri' which means to rise. (Strangely the Japanese verb 'oriru' means exactly the opposite, i.e. 'to go down'.) So 'orient' also means East, because the sun rises in the East. The adjective 'oriental' is used by Westerners nowadays mostly just in reference to China and Japan, a part of what they call the Far East.

The opposite of 'orient', when it means East, is 'occident' from the Latin verb 'occidere' meaning 'to go down'. The sun sets in the West. So the careers advisor was playing a game with language. He realized that 'disorientated' could have two

meanings : a) lost and confused ; and b) 'de-easternized'. He thought that it sounded strange to say that you would feel 'de-easternized' on arriving in Japan. Actually you ought to feel just the opposite. And so he invented a new word, 'disoccidentation', to describe what happens when you encounter a culture very different from that of the West.