

English Language Textbook Project

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1. Cultural Perspectives

One of the basic premises underlying the textbook is that it should not constitute an attempt to provide students with a knowledge of the cultures of countries in which English is used as the first language. Or at least this will not be the primary aim.

In this respect the coursebook could be seen in the context of the current debate on the role of English as a global language. There can perhaps be little doubt that, for the foreseeable future at least, English will become increasingly important as the only common language available to the international communities of business and politics. But it is also true that there are many varieties of English capable of fulfilling this role. And it has been argued that the *lingua franca* adopted by Asian business people and politicians should be described as Asian English, as opposed, for example, to British or American English. What is meant by this is that the English used in communication between people of different Asian countries has developed into a distinct variety of English which reflects the indigenous cultures of the region.

The relevance of this kind of perception to the development of new teaching material is that it leads to a reassessment of the cultural content of the English language textbook. Most simply it entails the realization that students might be better served by being taught a variety of English appropriate to their own culture, and hence it might no longer appear necessary to teach the language through cultural and behavioral models which are foreign to them. Such a shift in attitudes 'will not only liberate generations of Asian children who have had to learn to ask what time the next train to Liverpool Street leaves, but will also alter the nature of what represents an authentic text' (Andy Kirkpatrick, *The Guardian Weekly*, Learning English, November 2000, p. 3).

2. A Text for Students of Shinshu University

There are also sound reasons why this kind of approach is particularly relevant to the students of Shinshu University. Shindai is a provincial university and a large proportion of the students have come from and can be expected to spend most of their working lives in provincial areas. Hence it seems reasonable to assume that they are unlikely to have much direct contact with people from English-speaking cultures. Some students will find employment after graduation with companies which then send them to work abroad. But

in such cases these graduates are more likely to find themselves in another Asian country rather than in an environment where they are communicating with native speakers of English.

3. Cross-Cultural Perspective

In view, then, of the arguments presented above, we have opted to produce a textbook which offers an alternative to the standard format whereby the English language is taught through “Western” cultural values or what Kirkpatrick calls “Anglo” cultures. The principal problem with the traditional approach is that it insists on too close an association between English language and “Anglo” culture. Such a cultural focus, it is argued, is both irrelevant and possibly also demotivating because English is thus inseparable in the student’s mind from a culture which is unfamiliar to the point of being alienating.

One answer to this problem would be to situate the academic exercise of learning the English language entirely within the context of the Japanese learner’s own culture. The danger here, however, would be that one would thus deny altogether the importance of recognizing that cultures are different. To try to bring home to students that many of their own cultural assumptions and behavioral norms are not shared by people from other countries would seem to be a valuable educational aim in itself, regardless of whether or not the students might also, by pursuing such themes, become more proficient in a foreign language.

For an advocate of Asian English the answer lies obviously in designing material which reflects the cultural diversity of Asia. In this respect, the most useful approach for the Japanese student would involve exploring the cultural differences between Japan and those countries in the region with which Japan is most closely linked for reasons of trade and commerce.

It is unclear at this stage how feasible it would be for the current project team to produce a text of this nature. But it seems to be worth remarking that the University has a large number of students from other Asian countries, and this community could conceivably provide something of the kind of perceptions and impressions that would be needed to construct a comparative view of the cultures of Japan and its neighbouring countries.

One approach which does, however, lie within the scope of the present project might involve seeking to explore the cultural gap between Japan and the cultures of native-speakers of English. The intention would be to remain on Asian territory by examining how Japan is perceived, and often perhaps misconceived, by “Anglo” cultures. Through the comparison of cultural and social norms we would thus expect to be able to help students to understand better the ways in which their own cultural identity is different

from that of the countries in which the *lingua franca* originated.

4. A Textbook for Teachers

One of the most tangible gains to emerge from the Asian English argument is that it ought, for Japanese teachers, to lead to the fostering of greater confidence in the linguistic model which they are able to provide for their students.

Japanese learners of English probably tend too often to believe that they are unable to speak English well because their pronunciation and intonation deviates too much from the ideal of the native speaker model. It is in part because of assumptions like these that University students of English in Japan are reluctant to speak the language in the classroom.

It is also probably often the case that Japanese teachers of English are beset by similar feelings of inadequacy. The shift in mentality needed has to do with understanding that the local, regional variety of English can serve as a model in the classroom. This does not mean that the native speaker model becomes redundant. Native standards of pronunciation ought probably to remain as a crucial point of reference. It is simply, as Kirkpatrick observes, that one should regard the native model as 'external' to the regional variety. In consequence, striving for perfect emulation of the native accent ceases to be the most basic requirement of language proficiency. And so, one hopes, Japanese learners might avoid what is often a demoralizing sense of their own inability to achieve the unrealistic and unnecessary goal of an 'authentic' pronunciation.

One very fundamental way in which a textbook might encourage the Japanese teacher to use English in the classroom is by locating the language learning task in the context of the local culture, as opposed to the less familiar "Anglo" culture.

Another crucial feature of the course will be that of discouraging more traditional teaching methods based on translation into Japanese. The guiding principle will be rather to create communicative exercises to be conducted wholly in English. The aim, in general, will be to help the teacher to avoid using Japanese in the classroom as much as possible.

5. Level of Difficulty

The general level of competence of students in Shindai in English should also be taken into account. While the knowledge acquired by most students should be adequate to comprehend texts of an intermediate level, a teacher could expect to find that students might be discouraged by degrees of difficulty much higher than this. More specifically, it is proposed that the project should pay close attention to the levels of the texts currently being used by teachers of English in the Centre for General Education, and that these

should provide a benchmark by which to establish an upper limit with regard to difficulty of grammar and vocabulary. A further frame of reference in this respect might be found in the Teacher's Guide supplied by Cambridge University Press to accompany their series of graded readers. This manual helpfully tabulates the Press's coursebooks against the grammatical structures used in each of the six levels of reader. As a number of English conversation teachers use Cambridge coursebooks in their classes, it seems likely that the Teacher's Guide might thus provide a convenient means of obtaining an overview of the structures and extent of vocabulary with which the students are able to cope.

6. Presentation

The standards of presentation (i.e. layout, illustrations, graphics) now exhibited by many English language textbooks are extremely high. And there is obviously a crucial relation between the visual impression made by the page and the motivation of the student to engage with the material. The current project should therefore strive, within the limitations of budget and technology, to achieve as high a quality as possible in the visual attractiveness of the text.