

REGRESSING FORWARD

Resurrecting Upper Secondary AOC Courses in Japan

Robert Juppé Jr.

“The new times, the new people, the new vistas need a new tongue.”
- Walt Whitman

INTRODUCTION

“Have you ever broken a bone?” the instructor asked during the lesson. There were no respondents. “Yuho, how about you?” A long silence followed. “*Mo ikai!*” she snapped back, holding up her index finger to help the non-Japanese instructor follow her command.

“Have you ever broken a bone?” he repeated.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “*Honto ni, taihen deshita!.....*” This response was followed by a good 30 seconds of charged discourse... in Japanese. It is indicative of a chronic problem faced in the aural/oral communication classes. English might be used during parts of the class, but for actual communication, students often resort to Japanese.

Two days later, a homework assignment is submitted by Yuho’s classmate. Full of complex, well-written sentences, completely in English, there is a note scribbled at the bottom for the same instructor: 先生見てください。 “English” is merely the subject; it is not viewed as a legitimate medium of communication for the class, but as a subject to work on.

When the Ministry of Education put out its guidelines for the AOC (Aural Oral Communication) courses in 1993, they were met with both exhilaration and fear: Teachers were not certain whether they would be able to teach these new courses, yet the idea of a revolution in language teaching seemed to excite them. Now, five years after their implementation, the guidelines seemed to have a less than powerful impact on foreign language education. Students and teachers alike still view aural/oral communication classes as “*kaiwa*”(conversation) classes. According to one scholar, teachers spend 90% of the English lesson speaking in Japanese (Ellis, 1997, p. 43). Some secondary teachers have opted to teach AOC “D”: In other words, they are “paper teachers” of Aural Oral Communication. The necessary texts are distributed to students, but the teachers use the AOC lesson as an extension of the conventional English classes. In other words, they use this additional lesson period to teach more grammar-oriented (READ: academic) English. Such teachers often confess that the texts can be used for independent study, and that the additional time will allow them to prepare students for entrance examinations. This explanation is highly

illogical, however; the texts are geared toward in-class aural-oral skill development, and are not particularly well suited to independent study. It is akin to giving a student a tennis racket, telling him to practice, and withholding the balls. Practice as such would be fairly pointless.

The latest Course of Study from the Ministry of Education reveals a “restructuring” of the AOC courses from A, B, C to AOC 1 and 2. A cynic might guess that Aural Oral Communication courses are slowly being done away with. Or he might want to ask why AOC received such emphasis. Why could it not have been made part of the conventional curriculum? Why, in fact, does aural/oral communication have to remain separate from “academic” English?

South Korea has responded to the ostensible need for improved foreign language communication skills by lowering the starting school age for English. According to a 1996 article, the successful initiation of English at the elementary school level should lead to the removal of English as an entrance examination subject, allowing students to learn more practical and functional English (Fouser, 1996). The writer postulates that Japan aims to relax standards in English while Korea aims to intensify (both countries have since reformed their language policies to accommodate elementary school instruction).

There are certainly obstacles that prevent the Ministry’s communicative initiatives from being realized. Some may be grounded in historical practices and traditions; some may involve teacher training; some speculate that the differing nature of communication from culture to culture causes difficulty in teaching foreign languages communicatively (in other words, Western style communication is incompatible with Japanese modes of interaction.) Some scholars speculate that there is a lack of vision in Japanese education, others claim teachers’ abilities and zeal for research are lacking.

Perhaps the reasons are too complex to separate. Or maybe, given its aims and needs, foreign language has not been a failure. There may be a need to diversify, but such needs could be said to plague virtually any discipline. The Ministry of Education guidelines are admittedly vague or lacking regarding implementation; this should not be viewed as entirely inimical. There is a decided lack of eclecticism in teaching here; with some rectification and *perestroika* in university/in-service techniques, an ensuing generation might be able to create a more communicative mood in foreign language education in Japan.

One problem with creating a more diverse array of approaches toward teaching communicatively may lie in attitudes toward progress. Teachers today hunger for computer-related media, much the way instructors in the 1950s expected that the television and tape recorders would solve their problems. There seems to be an irrational, collective view that solutions inherently lie in technology, and teachers gravitate to seminars/workshops/books as if under the spell of a sorcerer.

The answers to diversifying foreign language education may lie all around us. No two classrooms reflect identical realities; variables differ on many planes. It is up to teachers to draw connections between the teaching of languages as systems and the teaching of them as communication, not to dwell on one and merely expect that abilities to perform the other will occur automatically. They should then seek out elements from academic work/literature that suit the

particular set of variables by which they work. Rod Ellis once postulated that experimental research was not “good research” because it did not aspire to standards of validity and reliability (Ellis, 1997, p. 42). To the contrary, teachers now need examples of experimental research, and they need them in far greater numbers. “Japan needs to change the way it teaches English,” emphasizes Shigeyuki Shimoda of the Ministry of Education’s High School Division (Talbot, p. 11). In fact, they need to reach for both forms of research (“good” and experimental). A great bulk of work lies little tapped. Foreign language teaching in Japan was largely fossilized in terms of its recent past, a past which now prevents it from using the aural oral communication mandate to “communicanize” its foreign language education. Teachers may need to regress to move ahead.

MONBUSHO'S GREAT GLASNOST

There is a story (apocryphal, perhaps) that is attributed to the Japanese writer/Zen Buddhist priest of the late Tokugawa period, Yamamoto Eizo, or Ryokan, as he is more commonly known. A professor came from far away to see the famous poet, and upon arriving, Ryokan apologized that he had no suitable refreshments for the visiting scholar. So Ryokan asked his guest to wait, and he raced out the door to fetch some *sake*.

After several hours, Ryokan still had not returned, and the professor grew uneasy. He stepped outside the door to begin his search for the missing priest, and there, just outside the door, seated on a log, was Ryokan, staring at the moon. The professor called out to his host, who glanced up and said, “Look at the moon! Isn’t it beautiful?” Whereupon the professor glanced up at the sky and replied, “Well, yes, it is, but what happened to the *sake*?” “Oh, yes, the *sake*,” answered Ryokan. “I’d quite forgotten about it.” (Iyer, 1991)

This parable aims ostensibly to illustrate the ultimate power of nature over the trivial; our material wants in life are dwarfed by the magnificence and static nature of our surroundings. Regardless of its meaning, it serves as a useful parable for the introduction of aural/oral communication and teachers of English in Japan. In 1993, it almost seemed that the Ministry of Education was staring at the moon, and that the teachers of English were going to have to go out and buy their own *sake*. Like Ryokan’s guest, they had been “quite forgotten”.

Establishing the guidelines for the AOC courses was doubtless a progressive stroke, but as for achieving its objectives, teachers were expected to create syllabi around a new issue of texts. The Ministry was not going to dictate how courses were to be taught, an aspect of the courses that would seem to be, curiously, of great appeal to a teacher. Following decades and decades of examination-oriented instruction, however, many teachers, who lacked both formal training and experience in communicative teaching, suddenly found themselves burdened with carrying out an enormous reform: They were going to have to start teaching communicatively in accordance with the newly revised Course of Study. A leap would be required... unless the teachers opted to stay with the traditional examination-oriented course or paid mere lip service to the new guidelines, both of which were ostensibly easier than forging a new path.

The Ministry, one could argue, did expect a great deal from the teachers regarding AOC

courses. The mandate to incorporate communicative approaches may have been too abrupt for some teachers. Thomas Rohlen asserts that in Japanese high schools, tradition emphasizes the lecture format rather than a discussion format. Information loading- not the development of critical thinking- is the central goal of instruction (Rohlen, 1983, p. 245). In its latest Curriculum Council report, however, it was stated that by 2003, teachers would be expected to change their methods of instruction to become more experience and activity-based (judging by the reaction- or lack of a reaction- to the 1993 reforms, one wonders whether the upcoming directive will meet with much success).

STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES: OF EXAMINATIONS AND HISTORY

“Imagine a serious society that accepts raising scores as a stand-in for national goals and then uses normed tests designed to make all kids fall on a curve as a way to measure progress.” (Rose, 1996) This quotation by a renowned U.S. educator refers to an American lack of educational goals at the national level, but a similar logic applies to language teaching here: Imagine teachers structuring classes so that students could succeed on entrance examinations to institutions, imagine mechanisms which test students’ arbitrary command of grammar rules and vocabulary items. This concept is referred to commonly as the “backwash effect” (Beauchamp, 1987, p. 315). In other words, examinations or a set of tests dictate to a large extent how and what will be taught. Rohlen recognized this as a “dark engine powering the entire school system” (Beauchamp). A teacher’s success is judged largely by student performance on such examinations, a spurious measurement of learning (or substitute for learning) indeed. What keeps this obstacle in place? Confucian legacy, vested interests, and sorting may explain this phenomenon to some extent, but regardless, the effect on teaching is obvious. Even short-term residents such as ALTs are quick to recognize that communicative teaching’s objectives run counter to this powerful hurdle. Tsutomu Ogino, an English teacher at Fujimori High School in Tokyo, says: “To be communicative is one thing. To solve the listening comprehension test {on the entrance examination} is another.” (Talbot, p. 12)

Neo-Confucian teaching seemingly underlies present-day perspectives, in fact: an emphasis on vertical relationships, repetition, rote learning as a means of academic mastery, etc. This harks back to *yakudoku*, developed as a vehicle for assimilating Confucian ideas and technologies from China (a millennium later, during the Meiji period, the concept still prevailed, but with a slightly different twist: The major aim of foreign language education became extracting information to “catch up” to the West.) In other words, Japan has a deeply established and long entrenched past from which it needs to disengage itself. Throughout its recent history, Japan’s pendulum has swung from foreign to native influences; the ideologies behind foreign language education are important in understanding the obstacles to facilitating communicative language teaching in Japanese language instruction (Sabatini et al, 1997, p. 45).

From history on up to present day, English has been viewed in dual and opposing forms: Academic English (by which students develop abilities to analyze foreign language text and build

up reading skills), the subject, and “*kaiwa*”, or conversational English, which could also be viewed cynically as *English Lite* in pejorative consumerist jargon (largely because much of it is consumer-oriented; your quality of life will improve, you will be cool, you will be exciting, if you learn how to converse with outsiders **in English**). This attitude may also have historical roots in the Japanese obsession with a *rettokan* view of the West (inferiority complex); hence the view that speaking to an outsider in Japanese rather than English reinforces inferiority, or conjures up images of a “loser”.

Others speculate that Japan’s diligent efforts to understand the West through literature fossilized foreign language learning as tradition. This practice therefore resulted in English being taught in a manner unfavorable for developing necessary skills to communicate in English (Koseki, 1998). Koseki argues that few teachers opt to teach practical (READ: conversational) English at school; grammar and reading comprehension are still stressed, as if teachers were attempting to train a classroom of scholars. Eisuke Sakakibara of Keio University (formerly a high ranking official in the Ministry of Finance) adds: “Japan’s highly developed translation culture is to blame for the failure to teach spoken English.” (Talbot, p. 12) Given the backwash effect, is it not a Jackson Pollock-like attempt to heave paint on a canvas, in the hope that some will catch? Koseki may have uncovered a natural penchant for security. He argues that teachers need to start teaching in Japanese English, they need to have confidence to motivate students to learn the language as that: a language rather than a subject.

Teacher training may only serve to reinforce old securities. Pre-service training is far less emphasized than in-service training for Japanese English teachers (Yonesaka, 1999). Additionally, there is considerably greater focus on handling such contemporary crises as bullying, deviant behavior, and school avoidance (again, a traditional emphasis on education as a moral force or socialization process rather than an effort to cultivate specific skills). In most cases, prospective English teachers are not required to take any additional courses in second language acquisition theory, ESL methodology, or testing. Hence the following observation by a senior high English teacher following a two-day communicative teaching seminar: “We never learned communicative teaching at university. We focused on such topics as child development and language theory.” (Juppe, 1999).

Teachers do have a two-week training period, which constitutes the bulk of their practicum. The linchpin of this two-week period is acculturation under the guidance of a “senpai” (mentor) who may or may not allow the student instructor to take the reins, so to speak. By the end of the two-week period, the student teacher will be responsible for teaching an observation lesson at which he/she will be evaluated. Since it is unlikely that student teachers will be encouraged to pursue a communicative agenda, pre-service training tends to plant seeds for traditional approaches if indoctrination has not already been accomplished. If teachers are busy or fail to pursue in-service training to any great extent, this may constitute the bulk of their practical training. It might not necessarily turn them away from communicative language teaching; it may help ensure, however, that exposure to options is minimal or non-existent.

ABSENCE OF A DIVERSE SYLLABUS?

Peter Robinson argues that teachers are tethered to a synthetic syllabus (Robinson, 1998, p. 8). They develop syllabi for their courses that focus on specific elements of a language system (usually developed in accordance with their presentation in the chosen text). There is, Robinson fails to point out, a rationale other than lack of creativity at work. The texts are developed with entrance examinations in mind; in a sense, there is a *wash-in effect* at work here. Texts serve to guide students and teachers toward examination study so that they can *backwash* together. The reluctance of textbook companies to break from tradition is strong; this results in a *whirlpool effect*. Change from the conventional text formula (READ: ultimately a teacher's complete syllabus) spells a break from neo-Confucian traditions, and may signal a yet greater danger: Loss of market share. Teachers, however, seem fairly comfortable with adopting the textbook as the course syllabus.

Robinson offers a futuristic syllabus as a solution in four distinct tiers, to be taught (in no evident order): 1. Language specific skills. 2. Notions and functions. 3. Process approaches (drafting essays, evaluating, etc.). 4. Processing demands. Essentially, Robinson offers an amoebic formula for cobbling together objectives found in various scholarly syllabus structures. Otherwise, there is a danger that students will break language down into discrete items, into structures and functions. As if putting together puzzles, students analyze and operate restricted to a sentence level. (Robinson, p. 10) Communicative approaches are at ostensible odds with such syllabi.

Essentially, with such complex syllabi, scholars seem to be aiming at competency-based instruction, a rather popular movement in the United States of late. Educational goals are expressed in terms of precise measurable descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and behavior students should possess upon completion of the said course. Nunan defined it far more simply: At the end of a lesson, a student should be able to do something he or she could not do before (Nunan, 1999, p. 29).

DIFFERING COMMUNICATION FROM CULTURE TO CULTURE

Classroom researcher Fred Anderson said that Japanese students are unlikely to initiate discussion, bring up new topics, challenge the instructor, ask questions for clarification, or volunteer answers in the aural/oral communication class (Miller, 1995, p. 32). Japanese tradition has emphasized the lecture format, as pointed out earlier; the discussion format may still be a somewhat alien format. It is precisely this aspect of AOC that is difficult; norms of interaction are both culture-specific and largely unconscious processes. The term "communication" therefore is culturally-biased because ways of communication vary so markedly across cultures (Miller, p. 34).

In a comparative study with U.S. students, Miller found the following differences to significantly affect students' interactive behavior: 1. The private self should be exposed in interactive encounters (high in the U.S., extremely low in Japan). Recall the 1576 interpretation of a Portuguese priest, Joao Rodriquez: "The Japanese have three hearts: a false one in their mouths

for all to see, another within their breasts for only their friends, and the third in the depths of their heart, reserved for themselves alone.” (Smith, 1997). 2. While individuality is promoted heavily in the U.S., group consciousness remains important in Japan. 3. Autonomous decision-making is cultivated in mainstream America while in Japan, consensus ranks high. 4. Attentive feedback is expected in the U.S., while in Japan, restraint is demonstrated. In fact, it is said that the Eastern listener bears a Confucian responsibility for interpreting, while the Western listener is more apt to follow an Aristotelian approach: what is said is the responsibility of the speaker.

Miller cites an interesting volleyball/bowling analogy to group dynamics: In the U.S., a message is akin to a volleyball. The nearest player rushes to hit it, just as the person who feels prepared to respond will do so. In Japan, as with bowling, restraint is practiced. Each player waits his/her turn; this is analogous in group communication. It is a systematic process. Nobody wants to bowl out of turn. “You can’t get them to speak,” says JoAnn Briscoe, an American who taught for a year at a high school in Tokyo. This is indicative of another obstacle described as cultural: the reluctance to speak out and a fear of making mistakes (Talbot, p. 12).

Student comments solicited from Miller proved both predictable and insightful. Students enjoy conferring before responding to questions, and they prefer listening to others’ opinions prior to offering their own. They respect harmony and hope not to upend it. This corresponds to the notion that Japanese think of “harmony” as existing, while Americans seem to think that harmony needs to be constructed. Hence, the idea that conflict should be avoided in discussion in Japan for fear of breaking harmony, while in the West, it is welcomed as one step toward building it (Juppe, 1998, p. 5).

HORIZON DEVOID OF HOPE?

There seems to be little chance that texts will gamble with change to help teachers reform. Students may lack the Western-style communicative skills (if such a distinction can be made) appropriate to suit communication in English, from a sociolinguistic viewpoint. Structural factors such as entrance examinations may seem insurmountable, and therefore, prevent teachers from adopting communicative syllabi. Pre-service training does not seem to have changed radically to accommodate the new ministry directives. The sole solution for change lies in grass-roots reform. The teachers will have to initiate reform in order to shift the present emphasis to communicative approaches. “Any educational approach that considers language learning alone and ignores the learning of subject matter is inadequate to the needs of these learners..... What is needed is an integrative approach which relates language learning and content learning, considers language as a medium of learning, and acknowledges the role of context in communication.” (Maher, 1985). This would seem tantamount to a call for eclecticism.

TIME TO REGRESS?

Consider the following passages from two Ministry of Education Courses of Study. As an

intellectual exercise, try to guess when they were written:

1. "It is important to remember that local situations are subject to constant change and that curriculum development is therefore of necessity a continuous process.... In order to reap the best possible results among the students, a teacher must acquire an understanding of the nature of student growth in general and the individual characteristics of students.... In developing the English language curriculum, teachers should not depend solely on local resources..... the proper time for any serious beginning in what may be termed loosely "daily conversation" might be the 3rd grade of junior high school..... in schools with several English teachers, they should organize an English curriculum committee for a continual study of curriculum development.... Teachers should make a study of (student) interests and needs at the beginning of each grade."
2. "To develop students' basic abilities to understand a foreign language and express themselves in it, to foster a positive attitude toward communicating in it, and to deepen interest in language and culture, cultivating basic international understanding."

The first passage focuses on evaluating each individual student for ability; it involves evaluating student pace. The teachers are to consider input, then move on to output considerations. The document also focuses on learner considerations and instructional considerations; consider Jack Richards' overview of trends and directions in contemporary language teaching (1987), and this corresponds in form precisely... except for the fact that it was written over 30 years earlier, in the early 1950s.

The second passage would be easily recognizable to most teachers as the most recent Course of Study...except that most teachers do not actually read the Course of Study. In a summer poll conducted among private and public high school teachers, it was found that of 156 respondents, just 4 had read the Course of Study (22 more confessed that they had read "parts" of it, though it was not specified what was meant by this). In essence, this means that upward of 80% are sailing without any sort of maps; Aural Oral Communication courses are being taught by teachers who have not read the course objectives! (Juppe, 1999).

The most salient aspect, perhaps, of the second passage is its general (or vague) nature. Regrettably, many teachers seem to use the "vague" definition as an excuse for not having read the document; in fact, they should **rejoice** that the document is stated in general terms. It essentially permits teachers to organize courses as they deem necessary, it allows them considerable leeway and freedom in structuring AOC courses. This might appear to be a positive aspect of the Course of Study, but if one considers the uniformity of the standards established following the Occupation Period (1952), teachers would seem to be particularly well-versed at developing course syllabi/contents.

SEEKING ELEMENTS FOR A SOLUTION

Teachers often ask where they can find an established set of guidelines and an accompanying

text for teaching Aural Oral Communication (not perhaps realizing that the Course of Study IS essentially the set of guidelines. In other words, teachers are actually looking for a completely prepared course, an easy way out of preparing their own syllabi.) They also look to new developments such as technology, a practice reminiscent of the 1950s, when teachers thought that the language laboratory, cassette player, and television set would solve their classroom woes. “Countries are always trying to find new scientific recipes, new ideologies, new control systems, new institutions,” said Czech president Vaclav Havel with respect to education (Postman, 1996, p. 23). The computer has been one medium toward which teachers longingly gaze in hopes of answers to a communicative curriculum (an odd place to seek a solution for “communication”, one would think). Ministry of Education official Shigeyuki Shimoda stated: “With the development of digital and information technology, any nation with poor ability in English will be left behind.” This curious statement illogically links English and the computer; if Japan is in fact lagging badly, then why is it number two in the world for Internet web sites? Steven Jobs, founder of Apple Computers and an altruistic donor of computer equipment/software to schools, put the role of the computer in a realistic perspective: “What’s wrong with education cannot be fixed by technology. You’re not going to solve problems by putting all knowledge on CD-Roms. We can put a web site in every school- none of this is bad. It’s bad only if it makes us think we’re doing something to solve our problems with education.” Likewise, is it correct to look to computers to solve what is wrong with language education? (Oppenheimer, 1997, p. 52)

Noam Chomsky, the imminent linguist, sees language and ordinary interchange as creative, undetermined, and unbounded expression. Language is a reflexive process, with innate principles, that constitutes a species faculty. Semantically, all languages are similar; as systems, they do not change. (Chomsky, 1998) Nunan adds (somewhat obviously) that it is necessary to put words together in combinations that enable us to convey meaning. Daily events, conversational skills, explaining functions; all of these need to find their way into a communication-oriented classroom (Nunan, 1999, p. 29). It is therefore a major challenge to move learners from reproductive tasks to creative language tasks (in a foreign language). Hence, to achieve this level of creative mastery, responsive tasks are certainly necessary to give students form, meaning, and function (in looking back at the Course of Study from the 1950s, provisions are made for responsive task learning during the first two years of study). Eventually, learners have to move to non-specifically cued language (identified as “conversational English” in the Course of Study from the 1950s).

It would therefore seem that the ideological “solution” to the AOC problem has existed all along...in a Ministry of Education document that is now over 40 years old. Hence, in looking back to past work for solutions and hints, debunked theories and approaches should not be overlooked for clues as to how a syllabus should be developed for aural/oral communication. Linguistic theory, too, may hold some clues as to how language could be taught as communication; again, this may represent a potential set of maps for drifting AOC teachers.

WIDDOWSON'S CONTRASTING SET

In the late 1970s, linguist Henry Widdowson defined a set of contrasting concepts to distinguish between teaching language as a formal system and teaching language as communication. Widdowson remarked that sometimes language education had to run ahead of linguistic theory. Practical needs sometimes spur the applied linguist. He cannot wait for the linguist to give him something to apply. He “might follow his own path towards pedagogic application once the theorist has given a hint about the general direction. He may, on his own, discover a direction or two.” (Widdowson, 1978)

It would seem that the theorists (Chomsky, Nunan, Richards, the officials who drafted the Course of Study in the 1950s, etc.) have given not only hints, but blueprints as well. Perhaps Widdowson himself offered the best admonition: “The dangers of not allowing a communicative approach to evolve more gradually at all levels is obvious.”

Contrary to Rod Ellis' curious remarks on experimentation in the classroom, teachers will need to employ **both** experimental research and look back into theory to revive an ailing and desiccating AOC. Aside from obvious and far-fetched solutions (i.e., get rid of entrance examinations, lower the starting age of English study to 5, force a curriculum on teachers, radically dictate procedures for teacher training), teachers are going to need to develop their own syllabi. (I should qualify the previous statement; the suggestions listed are not necessarily unattainable, but are referred to as far-fetched in that they require considerable reform and application of imagination by a bureaucratic institution, and are therefore unlikely to occur.)

As Widdowson suggested, a look back at bygone theories may provide some useful hints in structuring new courses. By mining past research and academic work, we may find considerably much in the way of gems.

EXAMPLE ONE: THE AUDIO-LINGUAL METHOD

Originally called the “aural oral method” (sound familiar?), this approach aimed at using the language laboratory and repetition to teach large numbers of students language. Here already lies a key to AOC instruction: large numbers of students (certainly the case in Japanese classrooms) and repetition (constant speaking practice, albeit of a reproductive task-orientation). There is also a positive orientation to its very nature: “If we are serious about making diversity a central narrative in the schooling of the young, it is necessary for us to learn to speak another language fluently.” (Postman, 1996, p. 149) English as a global language might serve an even more vital role in this society compared with diversity (a trend) in the United States, in contrast to Neil Postman's wildly egoistic call to foreign language reform in the United States. In some Navajo schools, the native language and English are dually emphasized to stress both heritage and practical skills. In other words, preserve pride in the identity of the past while cultivating pragmatism for the future (Rose, 1996, p. 404). Again, clues may exist in this study for Japan; discussion still occurs over the qualitative advantages/disadvantages of adding elementary school foreign language education

while removing other elements.

The audio-lingual method aimed at separating skills, then focusing on listening and speaking. It aimed at using dialogues (naturally spoken language) to introduce material. Mimicry, memorization, and pattern drills were emphasized. A strong intellectual aptitude was not necessary for mastery, advocates claimed. Given the “boom” in foreign language study and the opening of universities to “the masses” following the Second World War, this method held great appeal to teachers fearing inundation by hordes of students. Reference to the mother tongue would be minimal, and the emphasis would remain on language learning; cross-cultural emphasis would be downplayed. Furthermore, little analysis would be involved. “Conditioning” was the key concept (hence, its supposed connection to Behaviorism and the work of Skinner.) It appeared to be the ultimate democratic approach.

Wilga Rivers, then Noam Chomsky, then virtually all of the linguistic community picked apart the audio-lingual method. Rivers criticized the assumption that foreign language learning is a mechanical process; she felt that the process was less concerned with outward behavior and more so with the inner thoughts and feelings of the learner. Audio-lingual advocates also urged (in Skinnerian terms) that foreign language habits are reinforced by giving correct responses. If interpreted too narrowly, however, Rivers argued that such an approach could limit learners. As to the assertion that language skills are learned more effectively if items of the foreign language are presented first in spoken form (as opposed to written), Rivers countered by saying that there was little to no support for this renunciation of the written word. Finally, Rivers pointed out that “language communication involves a relationship between individuals and not merely the memorization and repetition of phrases and the practicing of structures.” (Rivers, 1964, pp. 47-50)

It is this aspect of audio-lingual practice that is worth exploring. Rivers framed the proper rationale for practicing aural/oral exchange; it is therefore up to the instructor to figure out how the LL can be used toward this end. Rivers did argue in later work that early foreign language learning was particularly suited to the audio-lingual approaches (i.e., the reproductive tasks). Rivers had essentially concluded that the audio-lingual theory had oversimplified the underlying psychology of language learning. A more cognitive approach would be needed to help balance it. In fact, of all the conceptualizations she had reviewed, she came to the conclusion that an eclectic approach to language teaching was needed to respond to the diverse needs of language learners (Rivers, p. 58).

Audio-lingualism fell prey not only to a faulty ideological base, but to criticisms of its applications: Limited techniques, boredom engendered in students, etc. (Stern, 1983). It did, however, attempt to make language learning available to large numbers of students, and it did focus on syntactical progression, still an area in which development is needed in AOC courses. This egalitarianism, focus on accuracy, and use of multi-media tools should all hold appeal for Japanese teachers of English; its positive elements (both in class and in the language laboratory) bear potential merit in application.

EXAMPLE TWO: THE COGNITIVE THEORY

It is said that this approach is a descendent of the direct method. Rather than demand immediate productive command of its concepts, it relies instead on an intellectual understanding by the learner. It is more important for the learner to understand the language as a system, to understand the structure of the language rather than become immediately proficient in using it. Since language is rule-governed and creative, the learner will make sense of the language. Afterwards, knowing the language as a system is thought to facilitate using the language for communication.

Perhaps most difficult with this approach is its assumption that all learners will grasp concepts of a language equally quickly. Also, in order to provide effective lessons that aim to develop an understanding of language as a system, this method serves as an ideological basis for many FLES, FLEX, and immersion programs for young learners (Curtain and Pesola, 1994). In such programs, teachers take advantage of its target language emphasis. But a criticism frequently levied against the approach is the need for extensive preparation. Also, while it may function well initially, maintaining a syllabus for a large class becomes problematic when differences in development start to appear (particularly if the aim of the course is total immersion in the target language).

How does this method tie in to AOC? In addition to being a cognitive process, language learning is an integrative process. Efforts to “immerse” a class to some extent encourage the same strategies used to acquire the mother tongue. Krashen, too, speculated that task-based approaches are grounded in understanding and transmitting messages, the more important objective over accuracy (Williams, 1998, p. 6). This relates to Koseki’s insistence that Japanese teachers use, to whatever extent possible, their “Japanese English” in the class to help learners function with messages and to immerse them in the target language, even at a level devoid of complete accuracy (Koseki, 1998).

Other linguists provide theoretical reasoning for employing the cognitive method. Halliday asserts that the construction of meaning on the part of the learner takes place in social interaction. There is no way it can take place except in these contexts. The cognitive method would provide for an easing of the learner into these contexts, with the constructing of meaning being an overall imperative (which Vygotsky might then cite as an important role in stimulating development). Hence, young learners may not be aware that they are learning language as a system, when in fact, immersion ensures that they are unconsciously working toward this end. Here we see a Widdowsonian link between language as a system and language as communication: Chomsky asserted that language is a vehicle, not an end, for processing thoughts and employing mental faculties. A young learner does not distinguish between the specific languages, but rather uses the system referred to in general as language to construct meaning.

The cognitive method in AOC courses would then try to apply this concept as an objective, and exercise ongoing construction of meaning as a vehicle toward comprehending this system (the foreign language). It would not mean that the instructor would rely exclusively on a presentation format in the target language (with the students responding in Japanese). It would be one method

in an eclectic array of approaches and methods used to help the learner make sense of the language as both a system and as a vehicle for constructing meaning. It would ensure that students were, at long last, to the delight of Ellis and Koseki, doing English in English.

CONCLUSION

Interaction should be made meaningful and purposeful. The Ministry of Education mandate to incorporate communicative approaches into the foreign language curriculum **was** a bold and positive stroke. Walt Whitman was right about young people and their language; metaphorically speaking, their language is always changing because their world is in a constant state of transformation. The foreign language that this generation will need may differ given increased global mobility. Efforts by Harold Palmer from 1922-1936 to break the Meiji-originated fate of English as nothing more than an examination subject proved a failure, but now, more than one hundred years later, real change has been set in motion. The main goal of English is no longer to master reading/translation and catch up to the West. Times have certainly changed.

There could be many reasons for teachers' failure to follow the ministry cue for change. Regardless, it is up to teachers to share research and innovative approaches, and it is up to educators to look to the past for answers regarding the future. Reams of superb academic work have been produced over the past five decades. Given Japan's penchant for iconoclastic and eclectic borrowing, the adoption of successful elements and ensuing cobbling together should not prove very difficult. Teachers need not (nor should they) select the audio-lingual method or the cognitive method in doing so, but they should study such methods to gain an understanding of the benefits they brought foreign language teaching. They have at their disposal theoretical work as well as pragmatic approaches tested in classrooms.

As teachers progress through regression, it may be time for the Ministry (as a linguist following a teacher) to start incorporating the communicative goals into the conventional English courses. Dividing AOC courses from English I and II sends a potentially harmful and traditional message to learners: Conventional English and practical English are different. One will help you in your future (i.e., on the entrance examination); the other is fun, but not very practical for you now. For teachers, this choice is equally perilous: One is wise for you to follow (it will reflect on you and your students); the other requires reams of creative thought and work, and may be viewed as frivolous (your reputation is at stake). Perhaps pursuing English from an elementary school level will ensure that student attitudes change. Or, as is being discussed, test speaking as a skill on entrance examinations.

Statistical evidence supporting English as a global tongue is strong. Second language learners are estimated at 150-350 million. The British Council estimates that one billion people are learning English. 80% of current Internet use is in English (compare this to the late 1980s, when 85% of all international telephone calls were made in English). English has a special administrative status in over 70 countries (e.g., Ghana, Nigeria, Singapore) (Crystal, 1997, p. 10-11). One thing is clear: English is a widespread language.

As George Wood points out in his illuminating work “A Time to Learn”, just as the basketball coach doesn’t teach about basketball, but rather, how to play, the teacher needs to teach how to do. We need to send our students out into the world with specific skills (Wood, 1998, p. 116). Imagine a physical education teacher who merely showed students videos of people exercising rather than have them engage in sport themselves; imagine a science teacher who only lectured and never allowed the students to engage in experimentation; imagine an English teacher who diagrammed and analyzed sentences, and taught about English, but did not actually teach how to use it.... wait, is this starting to sound familiar?

Secondary school teachers have a responsibility for developing AOC courses. The time for eclecticism was five years ago...for the many who have not yet begun, they might as well start now.

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