

# Ideologies of English in Japan: the perspective of policy and pedagogy

Philip Seargeant

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**Abstract** This paper examines the ideologies of language which underpin mainstream applied linguistic research and educational policy generation for English language teaching in Japan. Over the last 30 years a burgeoning literature has devoted itself to the task of researching and directing English language education in Japan, but has, by its own admission, had little success in effecting much change in what it perceives as a system incompatible with effective language learning. By surveying prominent academic studies on this topic and analysing these with reference to the policy reforms to which they interact, the paper makes explicit the linguistic and socio-political assumptions upon which this work is based and suggests that a critical awareness of these ideologies can assist in the production of sustainable language regulation.

**Keywords** English language teaching (ELT) · Communicative ability · Foreign language policy · Ideology · Internationalisation · Japan · Pedagogy

## Abbreviations

CLT	Communicative language teaching
ELT	English language teaching
JALT	Japan Association of Language Teachers
JET	Japanese Exchange and Teaching Program
MEXT	Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology
TESOL	Teaching English as a second or foreign language
TEFL	Teaching English as a foreign language
TOEFL	Test of English as a foreign language
TOEIC	Test of English as an international language

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P. Seargeant (✉)

Centre for Language and Communication, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AL, UK  
e-mail: p.seargeant@open.ac.uk

## Introduction

A concise account of the state and status of English language teaching (ELT) in Japan today, based upon a reading of leading commentaries that engage with the topic, may well proceed as follows: *It has long been a received truth that ELT in Japan is a problematic issue, and that student achievement has failed to match educational investment. While a great deal of research has been carried out in this area, the difficulty in effecting positive change in an education system which is often characterised as being incompatible with contemporary theories of language learning remains a constant theme in most any examination of the subject. In the past few years the issue has become an explicit priority in many of the policy reforms enacted by the government, as English language education is increasingly being associated with wider social changes, especially those relating to Japan's international relations and its role and status within the global community.*

Implicit in this statement are a number of premises, the nature of which have real-world implications for the regulation of the language in Japan. Rather than being simply a summary of the factual state of affairs concerning English language education in Japan, the argument above constructs a particular attitude towards its subject, and is reflective of mainstream trends of thought that animate both academic research in this area as well as the policy debates and commitments which complement them. In the current social climate (the era of globalisation), to ask why someone (or indeed why a whole nation) should wish to learn English may seem a mostly pointless exertion of energy—the answer would appear to many to be self-evident. Yet, an exact answer to this question, tailored to the circumstances and beliefs of the individual (or to those of the nation as a whole), is able to provide insights into both the cultural and social belief systems of that individual, as well as the role that English plays within that society and, by inductive extension, the world today. To this extent, the question is one that transcends the narrow confines of TESOL research and involves also the socio-cultural context in which the language is being taught and used. The reason why someone wants to learn the language relates, of course, to how they perceive the language: what they think its nature, function, and affordances are. And while this response is in part personal construction (the product of the historically-situated individual biography), it is also framed by public discourse about the language. Thus it is that through an analysis of how the English language is conceptualised in pedagogic and policy documents in and relating to Japan we are able to gain an initial reading of the way in which the language operates as a determining cultural force within Japanese society. Insights from this can shed light on the stance that Japanese cultural policy is taking towards globalising trends in the international community, while also providing an important first step in the analysis of how educational policy transfers into curriculum and classroom practice, and why it is that ELT in Japan exists in the state that it does.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the way in which the English language is framed within the debate about language education in Japan, and in so doing, to identify and analyse the ideologies of the language that structure both mainstream applied linguistics research in this area and its complementary thread in educational policy. The contention is that these ideologies create a particular shape

for the debate, and thus their identification and subsequent analysis allows us to reflect critically upon the assumptions that provide the epistemic matrix within which discussion of this topic is conducted.

Before moving ahead with this analysis it is worth making explicit two points about the parameters of the examination. The analysis here constitutes one particular perspective on the way in which the language is conceptualised within Japanese society. Despite the fact that the academic accounts examined below draw upon empirical research in their surveys of the situation, and that policy is partly motivated by this as well as other research, the perspective presented here is one that views the situation from above: it is the discourse of institutional regulators of the education system rather than that of its participants or of collateral sections of society (see Seargeant 2005a, b for discussions of the ways in which English is conceptualised within the wider cultural landscape). Furthermore, although it is context-specific in that it is responding to the particulars of the Japanese situation, it exists also as a part of the wider international discourse of general applied linguistic theory, sharing a theoretical history and language with scholars working in very different contexts. There is, then, a sense in which this is the 'official' version of events—it is how the twin poles of institutional regulation (legislation and academia) characterise the situation—and thus provides the basic architecture around which discussion of the topic is most often framed in general public discourse.

## Methodology

The method of this paper is to engage in a critical survey of a number of key studies within the applied linguistics literature on English in Japan, and discern from these the ways in which the language is most prominently conceptualised. The paper reviews a selection of the academic literature that has studied ELT debates relating to Japan, and examines the ways in which the subject has, over the years, been presented. It discusses the nature and provenance of the issues most often identified, and cross-references these with an examination of the policy reforms that have been proposed and enacted by the Japanese government in recent years. Consideration is also given to the way in which these twin spheres of academic research and education policy influence and interact with one another, and how the nature of this relationship, whether productive or antagonistic, contributes to a wider discourse of the English language within Japan. The intention throughout is not simply to summarise the genealogy and objectives of any of these texts, but to draw out the ideologies of the language around which they structure their critiques and recommendations.

This examination works from the premise that assumptions about the English language upon which research and debate are built can be expressed in both implicit and explicit terms, and yet there is a coherence to them within and across texts, reflecting the fact that they are both systemic and habitual (Verschueren 1995). Using the working definition of an ideology as being any entrenched system of

beliefs which structures social behaviour,<sup>1</sup> the analysis is dedicated to identifying the ideologies of English which create a meaningful context for the discourse of ELT in Japan. These are conceptualisations which have become normalised, which are ‘taken for granted’, and thus the survey is looking for premises upon which arguments are based or for connections between concepts which need not be expressed in explicit terms because the discourse community to which they are addressed is already conversant with the significance of their citation or juxtaposition. Of importance is the fact that these assumptions should occur in what Verschueren has termed “patterns of recurrence” (p. 143), and the analysis is thus committed to mapping such recurrence as a means of exposing the implicit structure of the debate. In reading the policy documents and the research-based articles and critiques of ELT in Japan, this methodology can be usefully adopted to build a picture of the way in which the language is being framed in this debate.

The selection of policy documents as the focus for the study is straight-forward, as these are the key statements by successive governments on how the English language should be regulated within society. The choice of applied linguistics research and debate requires more in the way of qualification. An initial point of note is that the studies surveyed here are written in the English language itself (though by scholars from a variety of national backgrounds), and as such are but one strand in a far wider field of academic discussion on the topic. One motivating factor behind this choice is the common perception that, as Block (1996, p. 66) notes, “[t]he applied linguistics centre is above all in North America and the UK”, and the journals often perceived as being the most prestigious vehicles for the presentation of such research are published in the English language. A similar point is made by Makoni and Meinhof (2003) in their review of applied linguistics in Africa. There are, of course, several other places where the production and reproduction of knowledge for ELT specialists in Japan is based (in publications, conferences, professional associations, and government organised ad hoc committees, for instance) all of which operate in Japanese. The UK and North American context does not, therefore, necessarily operate as the primary influence on English language educationalists in Japan. It is, however, still *perceived* as the ‘centre’ in much of the discourse. Holliday (2005, p. 6), for example, notes that there is “an established belief that ‘native-speaker’ teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology”. Thus, while a study of articles published solely in English cannot be taken as a complete picture of the ideologies present in Japanese educational policy and practice,<sup>2</sup> it still offers a compelling opportunity to analyse the way in which ELT in Japan is discursively represented in one important and influential domain.

<sup>1</sup> The definition of ideology is an area which attracts a certain amount of controversy (Blommaert 2005). I am here using an adapted version of Silverstein’s (1979, p. 193) definition that “ideologies about language, or linguistic ideologies, are any sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure or use”.

<sup>2</sup> For an incisive discussion of ideologies of the English language within the mainstream Japanese media see Kubota (1998).

The studies that have been chosen, then, are those published in key international journals, and those most frequently cited in the development of the English-language discourse of ELT in Japan. A project of this sort is necessarily selective, yet the method used is looking more for emergent trends in belief than towards some imaginary complete (definitive) overview. Ideologies are, of course, never fixed, but always in a process of flux, dispute, and gradual shift, and as such this study needs to be seen as a single reading at one stage and from one distinct, albeit influential, perspective in the historical development of the debate. The importance of a study of this sort is to make explicit the underlying beliefs which structure research, recommendation, and policy in this area, so that these can be analysed in terms both of their practical application according to linguistic concerns, and also to their relation to the socio-cultural context of actual language-related social behaviour, that is to say, to the “sociolinguistic realities” (Kachru 1991, p. 12) of those people experiencing and using the language in an everyday context.

### Identifying the issues

In 1978 the editor of *The Teaching of English in Japan* outlined the purpose of his book and summarised the state of foreign language education in Japan at that time in the following terms:

In general, reading comprehension skills are fostered, while hearing and speaking skills are less stressed. This can be partially explained by the history of Japan’s relative isolation from English-speaking peoples... English usage within Japan was largely limited to the translation and critical study of foreign works. Even today, because university entrance examinations require English reading comprehension, high schools often neglect the development of hearing and speaking skills. Recently, however, there has been growing concern that Japan must actively exchange ideas and culture with other nations through international communication... Japanese teachers of English especially recognise their lack of communication with teachers, linguists and school administrators of other nations. This communication gap stems partially from the dearth of English publications that deal with English teaching trends inside Japan... It is in order to help correct this shortcoming that this present collection of criticism and scholastic analysis of TEFL in Japan by Japanese and foreign contributors is being published (Koike 1978, pp. iv–v).

This 917 page volume, comprising 82 essays on subjects ranging from history and culture to methodology and linguistics and with contributors from universities in Japan, the USA and England, was the first substantial survey in English of the general state of ELT in Japan. In the 30 years since its appearance there have been countless English language publications which have revisited this area, and there exists now a very considerable body of literature written in English examining the many issues that comprise ELT theory and practice in Japan. Journals such as *World Englishes* (Kachru and Smith 1995; Sakai 2005) and *Language, Culture and Curriculum* (Lessard-Clouston 1998) have devoted whole issues to the subject,

while specialist titles, such as those published by JALT (Japan Association of Language Teachers),<sup>3</sup> now exist for the sole purpose of promoting such research. Where 30 years ago Koike might have found the subject badly underrepresented in English language publications, today the situation is much changed.

What Koike (1978) has to say about the methods and effects of ELT in the late 1970s however, does not appear so very different from similar appraisals of the state of language education in the country at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and this thematic continuity provides one form of structure for the development of the debate. Articles on the subject still comment on the priority given in the education system to reading comprehension and the grammar-translation method, and on the neglect of listening and speaking skills, while the need for a more communicative-based approach has been a constant refrain over the last three decades. For example, Honna (1995, p. 57) appraises the situation thus:

People have not developed proficiency in English as a language for international communication... The late Edwin O. Reischauer, former US ambassador to Japan, seriously listed Japan's miserable performance in English teaching as one of the seven wonders of the world. Many government, industrial, and educational leaders expressed concern and proposed reforms. However, no significant change has been witnessed. What is wrong?

According to this prominent strand in the discourse, the hope expressed by Koike that his edited book might have a direct impact on ELT in Japan and promote a different educational model appears not to have transpired. Many papers on the subject in fact take as their main thesis the intransigence of the education system and its perceived failure to produce communicative competence in its students. Reading the emergent literature in this field one can easily be led to conclude that although those 30 years have seen an ever-increasing interest in language learning in Japan, as well as an increase in research dedicated to the monitoring and guiding of this expansion, there are certain fundamental issues that seemingly remain almost completely unaffected by the times or changes in society.

The result of viewing the situation from this perspective is the installation of what we might term the 'problem frame' for the debate. Through Reischauer's comments in *The Japanese* (1977), studies such as Koike (1978) and Honna (1995), right up until the present day with Aspinall's examination of "policy failure in the case of foreign language education in Japan" (2006, p. 255), discussions of the subject foreground the presence of a 'problem' within the current system and this becomes, in effect, the default position from which arguments are built, a generic convention for addressing the issue of ELT in Japan. Echoes of this can also be found in the wording of policy documents themselves: "Today's Japanese are lacking... basic skills. Their English-language abilities as measured by their TOEFL scores in 1998 were the lowest in Asia. The Japanese themselves are painfully aware of the inadequacy of their communication skills" (CJGTC 2000a, p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> The history of JALT dates back to much the same time as the publication of *The Teaching of English in Japan*, as it was in 1975 that the organisation, originally called the Kansai Association of Language Teachers, began. In 1977 it changed its name to JALT and became a TESOL affiliate.

And while this is not an ideology of the English language itself, it is of significant importance as being the matrix by which discussions of the teaching and learning of the language in Japan traditionally need to be plotted.

### Creating an historical context

Strategies for explaining and providing a solution to this ‘problem’ take various forms. Many of the earlier studies of ELT in Japan are satisfied simply to recount to their English-reading audience how language education is organised in Japan, without the need for any explicit critical evaluation. The essay “Teaching English in Japan” by Kitao and Kitao (1995 [originally written 1985]), is a good example of this. The abstract states that, “In this paper, we have discussed some reasons why Japanese people study English, a brief history of English education in Japan, and the state of English education in elementary schools, secondary schools, universities, English language schools, and companies” (p. 5). And this, without recourse to critical commentary or contextualisation, is precisely what they do. Even as late as 1998 Lessard-Clouston introduces the special edition of *Language, Culture and Curriculum* by saying that, “To many Westerners, Japan, along with the Japanese language and Japanese society in general, appears to remain something of a mystery” (1998, p. 1), and thus it is that the specific details of the system and its unfamiliarity for a Western audience are considered substance enough for many introductory essays. Again, this is representative less of an ideology of the language itself than an implicit belief in universal strategies of language pedagogy which necessitate access to the ‘centre’ of applied linguistics thought. There is a suggestion that segregation from such a centre will result in a form of intellectual isolation which will be detrimental to teaching practice in Japan. The corollary of this, then, becomes that the pedagogic strategies developed in the “applied linguistics centre” (Block 1996, p. 66) are sought out as a solution to a local problem.

Often a review of key dates in the history of English language teaching in Japan over the last 400 years is also considered a necessary context within which to view the current situation (e.g. Morrow 1987). Again the volume edited by Koike (1978) sets the precedent for this by following its introductory section with two essays glossing the chronology of English education in Japan from the early nineteenth century (from the ‘Phaeton Incident’, in which a British warship arrived in the port of Nagasaki prompting the Tokugawa government to start training Dutch interpreters in the English language), up until the 1970s and the formation of the several regional English Language Education Associations that were established to improve teaching within the country (Hoshiyama 1978; Omura 1978).

The most commonly cited paper on this subject is Ike (1995), which begins its chronology with the first recorded contact between the Japanese and the English language when, in 1600, the Englishman William Adams, was washed up on the shores of Kyushu. Despite the two and a half centuries of self-imposed isolation that the Tokugawa government embarked upon soon after this (the *sakoku* period), Ike records a small number of disparate incidents which can loosely be related to ELT during this period, before moving to the main section of his essay and a detailed

exposition of the two major transitional periods in modern Japanese history which came with the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and the American occupation after the Second World War, both of which had important ramifications for the teaching of English in Japan. It is in this discussion that the development of the grammar-translation method (*yakudoku*) and the importance of the exam system in Japanese education policy is introduced, both of which are constant features in the all future debates about ELT and its effectiveness in Japan.

Though Ike's final sentence, in which he hopes that "a greater emphasis on communication and on cultural sensitivity in English education will contribute to a deeper understanding, and in turn will eventually help Japanese to learn English" (p. 10), does prescribe the type of policy developments he would like to see (and which will be discussed below), his essay has as its primary purpose the chronicling of the history of English education in Japan. In the same issue of *World Englishes*, Koike and Tanaka (1995) also employ a historical review of ELT (again revisiting the Meiji Restoration and the implementation of a new education system based on foreign models), and they are even more explicit in linking historical precedents to issues in current practice: "By examining this brief history, we could say that the purposes of teaching foreign languages in those early days [of the Meiji period] were practical and cultural... What has been described so far is very important if one is to grasp the unique characteristics of foreign language education in Japan, as well as their impact on Japanese society" (p. 16). These ideas then form the conceptual foundation for their discussion of contemporary foreign language education policy, and the challenges with which late twentieth century educational reforms are faced.<sup>4</sup>

One of the main effects of this repeated use of a historical context is thus to link the English language with key incidents in the chronology of Japanese international relations, creating a narrative that tracks the pattern of contact between Japan and the West. This narrative is itself a particular history of the nation, which begins as an entirely insular province and then, in incremental steps, is opened up to the wider international community. While the English language is not cast as being directly responsible for this political history, it is presented in such a way that its status becomes an index of Japan-international relations, with each significant incident of language contact or educational innovation being associated directly with a major political landmark.

A further product of this approach is to give a particular explanation for the type of language teaching that is so prevalent in the Japanese school system. The grammar-translation method is explained in functional terms within this historical narrative as an enabler of the modernisation process that followed the Meiji Restoration, as it allowed for the importing and deciphering of Western technology and expertise in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. In a sense, then, this attitude towards the language (as a code that needed to be mastered to unlock the

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<sup>4</sup> We can find a similar historical framework being utilised as background context for many other studies. Honna and Takeshita (2002) and Torikai (2005), for example, both gloss some general historical background as context for their detailed analyses of recent educational policy reforms.



knowledge of the West) plays a valued role in the development of modern Japan, and thus has a significance beyond that of pragmatic language pedagogy.

Another consequence of this discursive approach to the subject is that it positions the language as being something brought from outside. This may appear a self-evident point—English has never been a native language of Japan—but the fact that it is reiterated in several of the accounts creates a very particular meaning for the language in current political thinking. For while English may now be the language of the world (‘owned’ by all who use it), in the history of Japan—a history which is here being presented as an ‘explanation’ of the current ‘problem’ in ELT practice—it is associated at every stage with a very specific chronology of foreign contact, political coercion, and even invasion. As will be discussed later, this foreign/Japanese distinction is repeated in language education policy and acts as a meaningful contribution to the discourse of the national language (*kokugo*).

### The communicative approach

While a truncated history of international relations may figure as a key framing device in much of the discourse, the most prevalent ideology is that of English as a means of international communication. This is, of course, *the* mainstream language ideology in applied linguistics of the last 30 years, and has promoted the exchange of ideational meaning between parties as the chief purpose of language education in a great deal of policy and practice recommendations. To an extent, studies of the Japanese situation are simply rehearsing these arguments, but what is of particular interest for our context-specific investigation are the particularities of the juxtapositions that occur in the debate: that is, how the idea of English as a means of communication is framed by associated or conflicting notions in the discourse.

In the traditional chronology of the subject (outlined in Ike 1995), the reforms to the education system which were first proposed during Yasuhiro Nakasone’s premiership in the mid-1980s are considered to be the third major transitional period for ELT in Japan (after the Meiji Restoration and the American occupation). These have been introduced over the last two decades, most noticeably in the *Course of Study* documents which lay out the national curriculum for primary and secondary education as prescribed by the Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*).<sup>5</sup> Issued at intervals of about a decade since first being introduced in 1947, it is the Reform Acts of 1989 and 2002 that are considered to contain the most important innovations for English language education. Coinciding with the rise in importance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the wider TESOL environment (Brumfit and Johnson 1979; Littlewood 1981), *Monbusho* begins in these documents to stress the need for communicative language practices, and in doing so there is here a perceived break with the grammar-translation method favoured by the mainstream

<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*) was renamed as part of a reorganisation of government agencies in January 2001, and is now known as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbu Kagakusho* in Japanese, though most often referred to by the acronym MEXT). Subsequent references will refer to *Monbusho* for the pre-2001 ministry, and MEXT for the post-January 2001 ministry, as this is the most common pattern of usage in the literature.

system for the previous 100 years. The juxtaposition of this ‘traditional’ method with the innovations which are in keeping with the new global orthodoxy is the dynamic for much of the research work in this area, which has as its expressed aim an assessment of the success of the transition to a more communication-based language curriculum.

Browne and Wada (1998), for example, conduct a survey of Japanese English-language teachers to record their attitudes to the new regulations. They examine how factors such as pre-service and in-service training, textbook development, and the effect of the JET Program (Japan Exchange and Teaching Program) have influenced the state of ELT in Japanese high schools. They present their findings as pointing to an intransigent and highly centralised system where the rhetoric of the new guidelines is rendered close to meaningless by the deeply entrenched practices of the system:

When one considers that the vast majority of English teachers in Japan receive no formal teacher training... and that every Mombusho-approved textbook comes with a teacher’s manual that has detailed lesson plans emphasising translation and drill-focused teaching techniques, it is not surprising that a wide gap exists between the communicative goals of the guidelines and actual classroom practice (p. 105).

Implicit in this, of course, is the idea that past and present systems are incompatible, that it is an either/or choice for practice and, more tellingly, that government policy in this area is a true index of educational intention. Language ideologies are, of course, never about language *in vacuo*, but also a complex of other social factors (Woolard 1998). Yet for the most part these other social factors are not addressed. Browne and Wada do later display a moment of scepticism about whether the focus of their study is entirely valid when they speculate as to whether, “Monbusho truly believes that the new Course of Study Guidelines’ emphasis on developing a student’s communicative ability is an important goal” (1989, p. 109), yet otherwise they take the government rhetoric at face value and posit this policy-practice conflict as the major issue for ELT in contemporary Japan.

Several other studies have explored similar ground. Gorsuch (2001) canvasses high school teachers to assess the current state of Japanese EFL education “during a period of time in which sweeping, nationally applied policies have been instituted,” and her conclusion is very similar, with her findings giving “empirical evidence suggesting that teachers mildly approve of communicative activities, yet the data also suggested there are potent impediments working against teachers actually using such activities in their classrooms”. Sakui describes the ramifications of implementing this new policy as resulting in “a dichotomous curriculum realisation” (2004, p. 158). LoCastro (1996) likewise comments that, although the reforms are seemingly of great importance for Japan’s fuller participation in the global community while also being in line with recent thinking on curriculum design around the world, on closer examination there is “a gross mismatch between the supposed aims and the sociocultural context” (p. 45). She considers that there are three major impediments to change: (1) other aspects of the education system which have not been reformed are in conflict with these new guidelines (most noticeably

the system of entrance exams); (2) the fact that the teachers and students who are being affected by the changes have not been consulted with regard to the reforms; and (3) that the language of *Monbusho* documents is likely to be affected by sociocultural variables, and that concepts imported from abroad may have a very different meaning in Japanese culture.

Certain of these impediments are presented as being extremely deep-rooted. The exam system, considered incompatible with practices normally associated with CLT, is central to the education system in general, and plays an important structuring role in society in enabling the reproduction of hierarchies in university and company status. Indeed, Honna and Takeshita (2002) suggest that although by the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been an apparent shift from exam-oriented teaching to more communication-based skills, in practice this has simply meant that certain universities and companies no longer require the traditional university entrance exam qualification but instead are willing to accept TOEIC or TOEFL<sup>6</sup> qualifications instead. This is meant to signify a loosening up of the traditional system, but as anyone who is familiar with the TOEIC exam knows, despite the fact that it has the word ‘communication’ in its title, it is still very much an exercise in orthodox grammatical knowledge. As such, the forecast for a successful transition to more effective communicative language teaching practices in the Japanese education system is repeatedly presented as being distinctly bleak.

LoCastro, however, also voices slight doubts which match the sentiments expressed by Browne and Wada (1998) over the validity of this debate, when she says that, “these problems do raise questions, both concerning the likely success of the recent innovations and about the extent to which change is really desired” (LoCastro 1996, p. 45). Again this is not developed to any great extent in her paper, suggesting that mainstream ideologies of policy as an educational blueprint for practice, and of traditional methods as the converse of modern innovations, still acts as the implicit structure for her argument despite this one anomaly. She also, however, introduces another influential line of argument by questioning the way that certain key terms employed by the *Course of Study* guidelines should be read. Thus, for example, she notes how “‘communication’ itself may not be a universally shared concept; that is, it may have different meanings in different cultures” (p. 45). She further reflects on the fact that the hierarchical way in which Japanese society, and its language, is structured means that interpersonal relationships dictate the way in which the concept of communication operates within the society, and ensures that it is something qualitatively different from the concepts of communication of the “avowedly more egalitarian Anglo-American societies” (p. 45). The ramifications of such an idea are considerable. The idea that the concept of ‘communication’, which is at the very centre of the debate about the current state of ELT in Japan and is a key tenet in recent language education policy (see below), is being misinterpreted—and that it is being misinterpreted by the academic community

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<sup>6</sup> The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are administered by ETS (Educational Testing Service) in the USA. The former is intended to measure competency in English for everyday use in a business environment, and the latter for ‘academic’ English. The TOEIC was developed following a request from Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry, and is a very popular qualification in Japan.

researching and working within the field—would suggest the presence of a major fault line lying just beneath the surface of this well-established debate. Communication is often an unproblematised notion within the debate, and the implicit understanding is that its meaning is considered self-evident, that is has universally applicable value, unless statements to the contrary are foregrounded. This view has further parallels, of course, in the strand of discourse which looks to the ‘native speaker’ countries as the oracle for orthodox English teaching practice, thus promoting a particular culturally-determined practice as universal.

### Internationalism and the ethnocentric debate

The fact that at the beginning of the twenty-first century the same issues to which Koike (1978) was directing attention are still high on the agenda and seemingly unresolved suggests that there are others concerns that need to be taken into account. Back in 1979 Hayes wrote that:

The inward nature of the Japanese, the periods of ethnocentricity, ultranationalism and xenophobia all augur against the teaching of English. It may very well be that the Japanese do not want to learn English or, for that matter, any foreign language, as the bilingual and those having spent any time abroad are ‘deviant’ in the Japanese eye, not to be entirely trusted... [they] may be ‘contaminated’ and no longer ‘pure’ Japanese (1979, p. 372).

In the following decade Reischauer and Jansen (1988, p. 392) also raised this as a possibility: “Ridiculous though this may seem, there appears to be a genuine reluctance to have English very well known by many Japanese. Knowing a foreign language too well, it is feared, would erode the uniqueness of the Japanese people”.

This kind of cultural stereotyping does not figure so overtly in more recent accounts, and yet it is a theme that can still be perceived on both sides of the debate, and that is used to explain or justify certain aspects of the status quo. The idea of Japanese ethnocentrism, and its possible consequences for English language education, is closely connected to *kokusaika*, which has been a concept of great relevance for the perception of the English language in Japan over the last two decades. *Kokusaika* (literally translated as ‘internationalisation’) came to prominence in Japan in the 1980s and is often considered by social historians to have been a response by the government to foreign pressure for Japan to open up its markets. Official rhetoric publicised the importance of international communication for Japan’s status within the global community, yet, according to Itoh (1998, p. 12), “the primary goal of Japan’s internationalisation was to enhance its national economic interest, and thus the more Japan became internationalised, the more nationalistic it became. Although the two notions were antithetical to each other, they were inseparable in the Japanese case”.

This neonationalist agenda can also be perceived in education philosophy (Kubota 1999), and, according to Okano and Tsuchiya (1999, p. 216), the *Course of Study* curriculum of 1989 was meant “to enhance ‘national integration among people’ by nurturing belief that Japan is an influential state in the global community

and by cultivating an ‘ethnic identity’. It involved developing ‘self-awareness of being Japanese’”. The recently proposed changes to the ‘Fundamental Law of Education’ have brought these issues to the forefront of national debate once again, and indeed comments by the previous education minister Bunmei Ibuki in February 2007 about the ‘homogenous’ nature of Japan (*Japan Times* 2007a) are a direct echo of statements by former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone from 1986.

Itoh ascribes Japan’s unwillingness to open up to its two and a half century isolation from the rest of the world during the *sakoku* (‘closed country’) period that preceded the Meiji Restoration:

That combination of natural [island nation] and voluntary [sakoku] isolation created a uniquely homogenous culture and parochial mentality. The sakoku mentality still lingers and underlies the modern Japanese way of thinking and behaving. This mind-set is not only ubiquitous in the business sector but is also prevalent in Japan’s cultural, education, and societal systems (1998, p. 13).

A similar theme finds its way into the ELT debate. In his paper “Internationalisation—As If It Mattered,” Dougill (1995, p. 70) relates this particular political and psychological heritage to the education system: “The grammar-translation and memorisation methods so popular in Japan are further evidence of the tradition of insularity, for they reflect the one-way importation of knowledge and information which characterised Japan’s desire for modernisation while retaining its own identity”. His thesis is that a history of insularity undermines the talk of internationalisation within the country, and that the promotion of the English language is thus a specious and superficial act. This argument builds upon the aforementioned historicist ideology as well as what Dougill sees as a deeply ingrained form of cultural conditioning which means that the Japanese insist on their uniqueness and therefore have no interest in actually integrating with the international community. The continued patronage of the grammar-translation method by the exam system, the use of “decorative” English in advertising and popular culture, and the oft-voiced suggestion that English is too difficult for Japanese people to learn, is all taken as evidence to support this line of argument. McVeigh (2002) has also dealt with a similar range of themes, taking as his starting point the enigmatic suggestion from Befu (1983) that, “It is as if ineptitude of foreign language instruction and learning is maintained (though, needless to say, unconsciously) for the very purpose of convincing millions of Japanese of their separateness.” In this conception of the social politics of Japan, the English language itself is the divisive tool of a separatist nationalistic ideology.

Kawai (2007) also focuses on this as a determining cultural force in popular attitudes towards the language. She sees in Japanese social history a strong essentialist view of the national language; that is to say, for an ethnically-unified group the single language is viewed as intrinsic to the ‘nation’ and national identity. Within Japan this ideology was forged in the development of the modern state in the post-Meiji Restoration period, and then further and repeatedly articulated in the *nihonjinron* genre after World War Two.<sup>7</sup> This is a version of the common post-

<sup>7</sup> *Nihonjinron* is the genre of pamphlets and books dealing with the ‘uniqueness of the Japanese’ (Dale 1986; Kubota 1998).

Romantic ideology of the concept of a national language (Bauman and Briggs 2000), with the added embellishment that in this discourse English is directly juxtaposed to the national language (*kokugo*), and the values associated with the national language are transferred in negative form to the ‘foreign’ language (*gaikokugo*). Evidence of the prevalence of this belief can perhaps be read in the way that a key government policy recommendation document felt the need to explicitly challenge this view by stating that “It is a fundamental fallacy to believe that cherishing the Japanese language precludes studying other languages or that caring for Japanese culture requires rejecting foreign cultures” (CJGTC 2000b, p. 20).

One consequence of relating the concept of Japanese ethnocentrism to foreign language learning is that it prioritises the role of culture in ELT practice (Shimizu 1995; Duff and Uchida 1997; Stapleton 2000). The language becomes not so much a tool for international communication, but a living artefact belonging to a foreign culture. Likewise, native speaker teachers become specimens of that foreign culture, their role as instructors of specialised knowledge overshadowed by their status as foreign nationals, so that it is the emblematic presence of a foreign culture in the classroom that is the defining factor in their appointment in schools. As Hall (1998, pp. 105–106) writes in his study of what he terms “academic apartheid” in the higher education system in Japan, for many the term “internationalisation” merely means “having pure and unacclimated aliens on campus—the two-dimensional presence of the linguistically incapacitated, culture-shocked foreign newcomer as exotic ambience”. And though this is perhaps not as commonplace as it was two decades ago, a recent example of a language school in Kofu, Yamanashi Prefecture, whose recruitment poster advertised specifically for teachers with “blond hair, and blue or green eyes” (*Japan Times* 2007b), indicates that this strand of the discourse still has some currency. Such a view of the positioning of the language is not without a certain pessimism in the bleak picture it paints of the realpolitik of the *kokusaika* era, yet studies which analyse these discourses are attempting to expand the debate over ELT practice within Japan beyond the sheltered notions of ‘pure’ TESOL theory, and incorporate it within wider social dynamics.

## Practice and policy

Mostly, though, the literature on the subject of ELT dwells on issues of policy and practice and the chances of their productive convergence. The policy reforms that have been introduced over the last decade and have generated so much debate over the issue of “communication” are a result of initiatives first taken by the Nakasone administrations of the mid 1980s (Hood 2001). As prime minister, Nakasone is remembered for embodying many of the conflicting attitudes that structure the discourse of internationalism in Japan. It was during his administration that the rhetoric of *kokusaika* found official sanction and began to make regular appearances in the wording of policy, while practical initiatives in international cooperation and understanding such as the JET Program were also begun. Yet in positioning Japan as an ‘international’ power Nakasone was insistent on the need to promote and define

Japanese values, and his premiership was punctuated by highly publicised acts of nationalism, many of which were interpreted by the international community as being overtly racist.

He left power in 1987 shortly after the final report by the Ad Hoc Council on education that he had created was submitted. Two years later the new *Course of Study* was published, and the “Overall Objectives” of this document reflect the trends in political thought and the public rhetoric of this era. The curriculum is intended: “To develop students’ abilities to understand a foreign language and express themselves in it, to foster a positive attitude toward communicating in it, and to heighten interest in language and culture, deepening international understanding” (Monbusho 1989). The rhetoric of *kokusaika* and the recent innovations in applied linguistics theory are thus blended in a vision of the role that foreign language learning is to play in contemporary society.

In recent years there has been a growing literature that analyses English education policy (for example Gottlieb 2001; Hashimoto 2002; Honna and Takeshita 2002; Butler and Iino 2005; Kawai 2007). As well as the *Course of Study* documents, this has focused upon the *Action Plan* drawn up by the Ministry of Education in 2003 which was intended to cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” (MEXT 2003), and involved additional financial resources for teacher training and the promotion of schemes like the ‘Super English Language High Schools’. Another key document is the proposal commissioned by the Obuchi government in 2000 to explore the possibility of introducing English as a second official language in Japan, published under the title *The Frontier Within: Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium* (CJGTC 2000a).

Before looking at these documents in greater detail, it is worth first discussing the nature of them as cultural artifacts. ‘Policy’ in this paper is used to refer to the statements of intent issued by the administrative authority of a country concerning goal-orientated procedures of action. It is in contrast in this respect with ‘practice’, which is the way in which such proposals are enacted within the classroom. It is worth adding, however, that policy is an ongoing process, engaging with and contested by public opinion, and one that is open to interpretation and thus never an entirely stable blueprint for practice. Policies are in dialogic relation with educational practitioners as well as with media commentary and public opinion, and thus are addressed to multiple audiences. The interpretation of these texts can therefore also be multiple, and it would be foolish to suggest that a discourse analysis of them (uncovering the discursive nature of their construction) can show us what they are ‘really’ about. What is of interest, therefore, is the way in which concepts implicit in the structure of these documents find parallels in the other forms of public discourse which we have been examining, and how this can be read as the dynamic context within which the English language exists within Japanese society.

It is also worth adding that the policy documents referred to above are of three different types. The *Frontier Within* (CJGTC 2000a) was a government-commissioned proposal, but one which was never acted upon despite generating great public debate (Hashimoto 2002). The *Course of Study* (Monbusho 1989, MEXT 2002) is primarily a curriculum document, and its view of language policy is thus

mostly expressed through the arrangement of syllabus resources. The *Action Plan* (MEXT 2003) is the only one of the three which offers explicit explanation and comment of its rationale and aims, and in doing so provides a blueprint for language education policy (and specifically English language education) intended for implementation over a 5-year period. Viewed collectively, however, all three can offer an insightful reading of the (at times unstable) issues that underpin English language education in Japan at the present time.

As has been noted, the most remarked upon aspect of the reforms in language education policy is the stress put upon “communicative ability” in the curriculum. In practice this meant the introduction of a new subject at the Upper Secondary level entitled Oral Communication, in which the focus was upon the ‘use’ of English rather than ‘knowledge’ about the language, and though ‘use’ had been mentioned in previous *Courses of Study* this was the first time a specific subject had been devoted to it. The emphasis on the importance of communicative competence in the language teaching curriculum follows a general worldwide trend dating back to the beginning of the eighties and the work of scholars such as Breen and Candlin (1980). The wording of the 1989 *Course of Study* (and indeed the 2002 version), does not differ in any great respect from similar curriculum documents across the globe. However, as has been discussed above, certain commentators have registered occasional unease about Japan’s belated embracing of “concepts developed in the Anglo-American applied linguistic context” and whether these “can be adopted uncritically in [the] very different situation [of Japan]” (Coleman 1996, p. 19). As has also been noted, though, such qualms are the exception rather than the rule.

In their seminal paper on the essentials of a communicative curriculum Breen and Candlin (1980, p. 90) posit that: “The communicative curriculum defines language learning as learning how to communicate as a member of a particular socio-cultural group”. Immediately, such a statement raises problems for the possibilities of *inter-cultural* communication, and also implicitly seems to recognise that “communication” is not a single or universal concept, but one that depends for its exact definition on the socio-cultural group that is practicing it. They go on to state that:

the communicative curriculum seeks relationships between any specific target competence and relevant aspects of the learner’s own initial competence. We need to ask: What communicative knowledge—and its effective aspects—does the learner already possess and exploit? What communicative abilities—and the skills which manifest them—does the learner already activate and depend upon in using and selecting from his presently established repertoire? (p. 93).

Breen and Candlin are here careful to advise that a language syllabus based around communicative ability will necessarily need to build upon the type of communicative competence already practiced by the student. It is here that LoCastro’s suggestion that communication “may have different meanings in different cultures” (1996, p. 45) can be seen to be of great significance. Kerr (2001, p. 105), in his study of contemporary Japan, quotes a Japanese academic on the conflicts arising from the clash between two discrete ideologies of communication that exist within Japan today:



When people say ‘There’s no communication between parents and children,’ this is an American way of thinking. In Japan we didn’t need spoken communication between parents and children. A glance at the face, a glance at the back, and we understood enough. That was our way of thinking... It’s when we took as our model a culture relying on words that things went wrong. Although we live in a society replete with problems that words cannot ever solve, we think we can solve them with words, and this is where things go wrong.

Often, though, recognition of the different cultural norms that constitute ‘communication’, and their implications for the adoption of the CLT method in the English language classroom, are neither acknowledged nor addressed in the literature. One of the results of this can be to segregate the type of communication taught in the English language class from that practised in general Japanese society. It is in this context that the notable change in emphasis in the Overall Objectives for the foreign language curriculum in the 2002 *Course of Study* take on a particular significance. In the earlier document the aim was to “To develop students’ abilities to understand a foreign language... and foster a positive attitude toward communicating in it” (Monbusho 1989), but in its revision it has become “To develop students’ practical communication abilities... and foster a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages” (MEXT 2002), the rearrangement of the word-order thus promoting the concept of communication above that of knowledge of the language. Here we begin to get a gradual shift away from the concept of language as a general tool of communication to the idea that certain languages represent particular types of communication; and thus the communicative curriculum becomes not simply about learning a particular foreign language, but learning the specific values and ideologies of interpersonal interaction that are associated with that language. With English promoted as the global language, these culturally-specific values (that is to say, the pragmatic norms and interpersonal strategies associated with mainstream US or UK culture), though, are presented as universal, and subsumed under the single signifier ‘communication’. The logical conclusion of this uncritical embracing of a ‘communicative approach’ becomes that the deficit problem outlined by the TESOL community (Honna’s [1995] rhetorical interpellation of “What is wrong?”) now relates not merely to unsuccessful second language acquisition, but to a lack of proficiency in the fundamentals of human communication, according to a perceived world-standard.

We come to a point therefore where, perversely, the situation that Befu (1983) identified, whereby the learning of English in Japan is purposely hamstrung to assist a nationalist agenda, finds an inverted parallel in the way that parts of the academic community erect, albeit inadvertently, a barrier between their conception of the English language and a reading of present day Japanese society. In its anatomy of the state of ELT in Japan, much of this literature would seem to posit that the ‘problem’ lies in the history of Japanese society (a chronology of fractious international relations), in its current infrastructure and organisation (a hierarchical society with a language which explicitly encodes such social stratification in its politeness codes), and in the way it structures and enacts education (built around a

critically important exam system), all of which are incompatible with successful language teaching strategies. There is a danger that in pursuing this approach the suggestion becomes that English is something for which Japanese society itself will have to alter before it can be properly adopted and effectively taught.

A similar co-existence of mutually inconsistent ideologies also occurs in the formulation of the functional nature of language in policy documents. In the *Action Plan* (MEXT 2003), English is described as playing “a central role as the common international language in linking people who have different mother tongues”, while in the *Frontier Within* it is referred to as “not... simply a foreign language but as the international lingua franca” (CJGTC 2000b, p. 10). Elsewhere, however, English is regularly discussed within the context of ‘foreign’ language education (Monbusho 1989; MEXT 2002; even the continuation of the *Frontier Within* document reverts to this wording), a characterisation which corresponds with the traditional functional distinctions in TESOL theory, which categorise Japan as an EFL country.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between ‘foreign’ and ‘international’—of such importance in much of contemporary applied linguistics—would seem, on this evidence, not to have entered the consciousness of policy in Japan.

Not only, though, is this an imprecise use of terminology, it also reflects a confusion in the approach taken to the language. The *Frontier Within*, in which English is referred to as the “international lingua franca” is, of course, advocating the adoption of English as an official language in Japan, and thus has a vested interest in stressing the language’s purported freedom from specific affiliations. Yet both the old and new *Courses of Study* explicitly make the connection between language and culture, the 1989 version outlining its purpose as being “to instil an interest in language and culture, thus laying the foundation for international understanding” (Monbusho 1989); while the more recent version is intended “to deepen linguistic and cultural understanding through a foreign language” (MEXT 2002).<sup>9</sup> The implication here is not that English is simply a functional *lingua franca* for the exchange of ideational meaning between any members of the international community, but that it is also a heuristic tool through which to access ‘foreign’ (that is to say, ‘non-Japanese’) culture. The ambivalence of the wording here is possibly a throwback to twentieth century language policy which used the promotion of a standard Japanese as the ‘national language’ (*kokugo*) as a key tenet in the production and reproduction of an ethno-nationalist ideology (Coulmas 2002). Caught on the cusp between the modern and the global eras, therefore, in these

<sup>8</sup> In all these policy documents there is also evidence of the formula that English is *the* foreign language and that, as Butler and Iino (2005, p. 39) put it, there is “an assumption that Japanese–English bilingualism is the solution for communication problems in an increasingly multilingual society”.

<sup>9</sup> Torikai (2005) has a rather different interpretation of this trend based on the *Action Plan*. She notes that while the word ‘communication’ is used 41 times in the 15 pages document, the word ‘culture’ appears only 7 times. She takes this as evidence of a shift away from the ‘language = culture’ ideology, and writes that: “It is fair to conclude in summary that the government’s rationale for their decisions on the purpose and objectives of English language education is to accommodate globalisation” (p. 251). Kawai (2007), meanwhile, sees a clash between governmental discourse (in the *Frontier Within* document) and public reaction: according to her reading the former de-culturises the language and presents it as a functional tool of communication while the latter is more ready to associate language with ‘foreign culture’ and worry about its influence on Japanese culture and identity.

documents English is able to symbolise both an intersubjective and an objective international community; it is both the bridge connecting Japan to the rest of the world and the strait separating it from that world.

## Conclusion

Due to the highly centralised nature of the Japanese education system, the *Course of Study* policy documents affect the whole breadth of society. The framework detailed in these texts and other policy initiatives such as the *Action Plan* provides the basis for all school curricula in the country, and is mandatory in both public and private institutions. In combination with the choice of textbook—which again must be sanctioned by the Ministry of Education—this creates the context in which the vast majority of children in Japan from the age of 13 to 18 learn English.<sup>10</sup> Thus the conception of English education expressed within these recommendations has a great impact on the way the English language is viewed within the whole of society.

The prominence given to the concept of communication and the way this is debated and interpreted in both the policy documents and the academic literature highlights the way in which the English language operates as a site for ideological struggle. As policy reforms reflect changes and anxieties within Japanese society while also embracing the rhetoric of global politics, so too does the academic discourse reflect social issues specific to the academic community within Japan while also responding to trends within the global applied linguistic community. And it is in the disputed areas between these plural discourses that the cultural meaning of English in Japan is created. The ideologies identified here are those at the centre of the public and institutional discussion of the language. It should be noted, of course, that alternative views of ELT do exist and operate as part of the overall discussion. However, the majority of mainstream research in this area draws upon the shared assumptions and generic language of the ideologies discussed above in constructing its own contribution to the debate and thus, as we have seen, many issues recur with frequency and are implicitly positioned as fundamental to the topic in general. It is in this way that the generation of knowledge in relation to this subject is predicated around a few key coordinates.

One consequence of the dominance of these particular ideologies in the mainstream treatment of the topic is that, in effect, the predicate is included in the subject. That is to say, the way the discourse is normatively modelled around these ideologies creates an element of determinism in the generation of its research findings. By positing that there is a ‘problem’ in need of a solution—in using this as the narrative arc of the research presentation—the research needs to establish the existence of a problem before being able to move on to the possibility of a solution. The details of the solution can then be illuminating and instructive, and much important work has been carried out in this field, yet the debate is still argued within

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<sup>10</sup> Two qualifications need to be noted here. High school education in Japan is not compulsory, despite the fact that the majority of those graduating from junior high school do continue to the next stage of secondary education. In addition, the *Course of Study* refers to ‘foreign language’ education, not English alone. In practice, however, English is very much the predominant language.

the confines of this particular perspective. And one of the major consequences of this can become the suggestion that the uses to which English *is* currently put in Japan are illegitimate, and instead an instrumental orientation centred around ‘communication’ should be promoted as the norm. For a country in which a fascination for English results in a plurality of instrumental and other roles for the language—from its key position within the ever-important exam system, to its ornamental use across the visual landscape of society (Seargeant 2005a)—such a specific focusing of the debate is likely to mask the diverse effects of the processes of globalisation on language behaviour (Pennycook 2007), while also stigmatising many of the language practices that presently exist within Japan.

The ideologies discussed in this paper, then, are the guiding principles of thought for this subject and, given certain institutional conventions and coercions (the power of the journals to withhold publication, the power of the press to ignore ‘irrelevant’ critique), these are the constraints that form the shape of the debate. Making explicit these ideologies allows for a self-reflexive awareness of the epistemic matrix in which research and debate in this area is commonly conducted. And it is through an analysis of the rhetorical organisation and semantic assumptions that structure this discourse of English language education in Japan that we can read from language policy statements and the academic literature that attends to them the composite of educational *and* politico-cultural beliefs that determine the role projected for the English language within contemporary Japanese society.

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## Author Biography

**Philip Seargeant** is Lecturer in Applied Linguistics in the Centre for Language and Communication at the Open University, UK. He previously worked for a number of years in Japan. His research interests are in language ideology, and English as a Global Language, and he has been published in journals such as *World Englishes*, the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, and *Language and Literature*.