

Language Education in Japan: A Case for Bilingualism with Reference to Acquisition of English in India

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Holding a discussion on bilingualism in monolingual societies is never easy – the fears, apprehensions, reservations, nationalism issues, etc. all play a role in ensuring that at some point tempers run so high that there is a complete breakdown of communication; that is ironical in itself since being able to speak more than one languages is an issue which inherently deals with communication. While we are at it, let's go one step further and consider the case for multilingualism – for the purpose of this paper, the term *bilingualism* shall be interchangeably used with the term *multilingualism*. There are several controversies attached even to that assumption given that there is no longer any consensus in the academic circles on what constitutes being multilingual and whether one needs to be completely fluent in the language in question to qualify as a speaker of it. Several studies have found that people were able to consistently communicate in their respective languages without ever having achieved native-level ability in the listener's tongue. Jan and Ludger “argue in favour of native-like competence no longer being a sufficient prerequisite for adequate multilingual communication in many business and institutional settings. Consequently, this conception can or even should be replaced by a list of oral and written competencies which com-

prise (meta-) linguistic and intercultural understanding, action and institutional knowledge” (Thije and Zeevaert page 3). There are many interesting and groundbreaking theories being presented in this field but the space and time limitations of this project, don’t allow this writer to delve too deeply into those at this point in time. Therefore, without much further ado, let us first discuss the status of multilingualism in various countries but mainly focusing on India and Japan.

At the time this article was written, there were twenty-two major languages/ language groups in India, thus making it a multilingual country by default. “The Constitution of India today has 22 languages in its Eighth Schedule which are known as Scheduled languages which constitute 93 mother tongues. The rest 100 languages which are not in the Schedule are given nomenclature Non-scheduled languages. They subsume 141 mother tongues” (Mallikarjun 13). It is not as surprising as many people in the industrialised world feel. “For most countries outside of Europe and North America monolingualism is a somewhat unusual phenomenon. In many countries in Asia, South America or Africa several different mother tongues are spoken. For exogamic societies such as the Vaupés in South America multilingualism is inevitable. Marriages between members of the same speech community are prohibited, meaning that every child grows up in a bilingual environment (cf. Romaine 1994: 38). In countries like India or South Africa the use of four different languages with different family members and colleagues in everyday life is quite normal (cf. the depiction of Bhatia and Ritchie 2004: 796f., or Kamwangamalu 2004: 726f.), although a complete near native linguistic competence is not seen as a prerequisite for successful communication” (Thije and Zeevaert page 4). Apparently, in the ancient world, people were more accepting of alien languages and cultures. The multiplicity of languages never formed a significant barrier in either the movement of goods and people or the exchange of cultural ideas and even religious ideologies. Keeping that in mind, we shall now look at when and how the world first started to move towards monolingualism and English language emerged as the unchallenged

queen of languages.

The British were enterprising people; they went around the world conquering land after land sometimes by might other time by diplomacy. When the British first touched the shores of India, they were ostensibly there for business, lured to the sunny land by its legends of unimaginable wealth and prosperity; however, that ruse didn't last long and greed and hunger for power led to the enslavement of India for more than 200 years. Thomas Babington Macaulay – a British parliamentarian, who was also a historian and essayist – served as a member of the supreme council of the East India Company from 1834 to 1838, where he was given the responsibility to supervise major educational and legal reforms. He is famous or infamous – depending on whose perspective is in consideration – for his work “Minute on Indian Education” in which he made a case for instructing the locals in English instead of their native languages like Sanskrit or Arabic because “It will hardly be disputed, I suppose, that the department of literature in which the Eastern writers stand highest is poetry. And I certainly never met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic and Sanscrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded, and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England” (Speeches by Lord Macaulay: With his Minute on Indian education, 1935). This story and format was repeated in different versions all over the world and the scope was not minute either, it is said that the sun never set on the British empire and thus, across continents, indigenous races and people were encouraged to give up their culture and languages in favour of the English language as it was their only hope to find worthwhile employment and respectable status in society.

The colonial rule, while damaging to the Indian economy and psyche, left in its wake a tool for connecting people heretofore separated by the invisible boundaries of local languages. “Regarding the promotion of the English language as such, its teaching and use for administrative purposes were officially fostered in 1835 when Thomas Babington Macaulay’s controversial minute on education was signed by the governor general William Bentinck and became official policy. At independence in 1947, the English language was granted a 15 years grace period from the entry into force of the new constitution (January 26, 1950), after which Hindi should be used for all official purposes (Kachru 2005: 63). This provision was abandoned under the pressure of protests in areas with Dravidian-speaking majority (mostly in the state of Tamil Nadu), where English was considered to perform what Schiffman (2005) portrays as a prophylactic function against the domination of Hindi. As a result of this, English saw its status of associate official language of the country prolonged for an indefinite period of time” (Domange 534).

It is not a surprise then that English emerged as the lingua franca connecting not only Indians to people abroad but also fellow Indians. In fact, as per Viniti Vaish (2007) “The language patterns of the Indian community in Singapore have been extensively researched, both exclusively (Ramiah, 1991; Saravanan, 1993, 1995), and as part of larger studies that look at all three ethnic groups in Singapore (Saravanan, 1999, 2001). A strong counterpoint in all these studies is that Indians in Singapore are increasingly becoming English-speaking. Similarly, ethnographic case studies of language use in the Chinese community (Li et al., 1997) find rapid language shift from a dialect-speaking generation to a dialect/ Mandarin/English-speaking generation, where Mandarin is dominant, to finally an English/Mandarin-speaking younger generation, where English is dominant, with implications for lack of communication between grandparents and grandchildren (Gupta & Siew, 1995), as this shift has happened within three consecutive generations.” (Vaish 175) Regardless, the number of children study-

ing English after the British left India has only grown and that in itself is a proof of the language's acceptance in the country's culture and society at large. Going by a recent article, "Kachru (1984), for example, suggests 4% as a conservative estimate; Crystal (1997) presents a similar figure. This suggests there were a little more than 37 million L2 users in 1995" (Graddol, 2003). Graddol further insists that there were far more English speakers in India than the figures claimed referencing an article from a famous magazine in India, he stated "The magazine *India Today*, commissioned a survey in mid 1997 which claimed: 'contrary to the census myth that English is the language of a microscopic minority, the poll indicates that almost one in three Indians claims to understand English, although less than 20 percent are confident of speaking it.' (*India Today*, August 18, 1997)" (p. 160).

In contrast, Japan, a country with its own significant colonial past – albeit in reverse – has steadfastly refused to make English language a mainstream competitor of its native Japanese in the hearts of its people or companies' board-rooms. Educationists such as Nitobe, who advocated better English teaching for communication, were not popular with the government. Nitobe in particular held strong pacifist views, was highly critical of Japanese militarism, and advocated indigenous self-determination for conquered people. His most famous work "Bushido: Soul of Japan," written in English, was often criticized for depicting samurai culture as overly western (Friedman, 2015).

The Ministry of Education in Japan has been steadily trying to improve the standard of English education in Japan by encouraging so-called natural English, "but because techniques are rooted in Meiji era methodological foundations, students still have a difficult time achieving proficiency. Although English has been part of the national curriculum in Japan longer than any other nation in East Asia, according to scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), in 2002 Japan still had the worst English language communication skills in all of Asia (Okuno 2007: 136). In that same year the

Ministry of Education unveiled its “Strategic plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities.” Of this plan’s twenty five provisions designed to improve language education for practical usage, none address pedagogical methodologies or textbook content. In 2011, Japan still ranked at the bottom of Asian nations and only 39 out of 46 TOEIC taking nations overall (Educational Testing Service 2012: 5). Acknowledging the failure of the 2002 plan, in 2011 the Ministry of Education unveiled its “Five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communication.” This plan provided specific measure to reform testing procedures, teacher qualifications, and even required immersion environments in high school English classes. Once again, there were no reforms to textbook pedagogy or content. In concert with the 2011 plan, the Ministry’s 2013 overhaul of the junior and senior high school Official course of study (guidelines defining what must be covered in textbooks) noted that in order to ‘make classes into sites of real communication, classes are to be conducted in English.’ Similar to Meiji proponents of the direct method of instruction, the 2013 guidelines caution that if ‘instruction in English subjects is leaning toward explanation of grammar, the teacher should make an effort to revise these practices and to incorporate experiential language activities into class’” (Frederick, 2013). Nevertheless, teacher instruction is still rooted to its Meiji era origins and continues to rely heavily on pedagogy and readings in Ministry authorized textbooks. As Fullan (1991: 70) notes, “an approved textbook may easily become the curriculum in the classroom, yet fail to incorporate significant features of the policy or goals that it is supposed to address. Reliance on the textbook may distract attention from behaviors and educational beliefs crucial to the achievement of desired outcomes” (Friedman, 2015).

Interestingly, Japan has a robust parallel Eikaiwa (English conversation industry) which relies on the Japanese people’s inability to acquire the language in their six years of formal education in the subject starting in junior high school. Quite a few parents start sending their children to English language schools that

operate after hours or on holidays in order to supplement the children's education since they are not given lessons in English language until they reach junior high. This demonstrates the value of EFL in the people's minds. The children have to take lessons in the language in their free time and go on to reinforce them with additional lessons in cram schools as they grow older. The tragedy is that even this added advantage does not make much difference in their ultimate ability to use the language skillfully for reasons that will be made clear as this paper progresses.

Another example of the Japanese society's tragic love affair with English language is that, increasingly, many domestic companies like Rakuten and Softbank have made concentrated efforts to inculcate English in their daily work culture, thereby pushing their employees to become proficient in the language by granting them promotions if they are able to attain certain levels on language proficiency tests such as TOEIC or TOEFL. "The willingness of an old-style manufacturer like Bridgestone to follow the lead set by those unconventional billionaires and adopt 'Englishnization' (Rakuten's term for its language policy) should encourage other Japanese companies to take the leap. Tsedal Neeley is a Harvard Business School professor who has studied Rakuten's language transition. She argues that English is a competitiveness issue. As they compete around the world, she wrote in an article published last year, 'companies must overcome language barriers – and English will almost always be the common ground, at least for now'" (Einhorn, 2013). This strategy is probably very crucial in global competitiveness given the increasingly multilingual markets that these companies have to operate in. As noted by Kathpalia, S.S and Ong, K.K.W. "Bhatia and Ritchie (2006b), on the other hand, show that mixing English in global advertising has a positive effect on bilingual audiences due to the strong socio-psychological and literary features associated with English" (Kathpalia, & Wee Ong, 2015). These professionals who have probably already spent a major part of their lives studying the language are by now fearful and paranoid

believing that the language is some kind of unattainable Shangri-La, which in turn renders their goal ever farther out of reach. Most of these professionals end up taking lessons after work at language schools that provide customized lessons for just such a clientele. The average business person in Japan spends more than ten hours at work per day. Add to that family and social obligations and the free time they can spare shrinks drastically, especially when their companies at times refuse to allow them leave to attend the lessons the company itself is paying for. This in turn increases pressure on such employees, who are thus torn between their obligations to meet the immediate and changeable demands of their direct supervisors, and their longer-term goals of improving their language skills in the hopes of bettering themselves and more ably serving their companies into the future. The sum total of these collective pressures more often than not leads to lowered motivation and inevitable frustration when these individuals cannot retain information from their previous lessons in order to continue building upon their – in many cases – limited foundations. The saga is oft-repeated in different settings and success stories are few and far between despite excellent resources that are made available to these young, promising citizens of a heavily-industrialized country. Overall, the role of the concerned but ambitious parents is taken over by the Japanese employers who believe that paying for English lessons would make all the difference. The question remains why there is so little improvement in the quality of bilingual staff available to the companies in Japan. Certainly, cost of education is not a factor given that most students in Japan can afford to take extra lessons if need be. Apathy is not an issue either as is evident by the consistent demand for English teachers and schools in the country. What then is stopping the Japanese people from becoming bilingual in English and Japanese?

To answer that question, this paper discusses and analyzes the English education system in commonwealth countries, mainly India. As mentioned in the beginning, English language has acted as a connector amongst a people that

have been able to communicate using one language finally. Typically, children from middle class families in India start going to school when they are about three years old. At that time, they begin to learn a regional language and English at the same time. At home, parents mostly use the local language but enough English words have made their way into the daily lives of the people to make the children comfortable using two languages simultaneously. Families – being aware of the highly competitive environment their wards need to operate in – try to make sure that children learn nursery rhymes in both languages from an early age. Some feel this might put a lot of pressure on the children, i.e. having to learn two languages in addition to basics like numbers. Interestingly though, that is not the case; most children are able to deal with this educational style very easily although it might be so because they don't know of any other alternatives. There is a case to be made for starting bilingual education from pre-school. It definitely has been proven to work in India where many children go on to gain higher education and also retain a healthy affinity to their culture. As the children grow, most of the study is in English medium schools. The instruction is purely in English and all subjects are taught using the English languages. Children are able to switch languages mentally when they are in school and are free to speak in the local language outside. They tend to continue using at least a smattering of English words and phrases even while conversing in their local languages given that they spend so much time in school in a largely English language based environment. One might wonder what the effect on the local languages' popularity in the light of English gaining prominence in the society is. The interesting point to note here is that it seems that there is not only very little adverse effect on the local language's acceptance but it manages to compete healthily with English with neither being pushed out. Annie Montaut informs "If English was in 1992 the teaching medium of 13% of the high schools, 4% of the middle schools, 3,4% of the upper middle Schools, and 1,3% of the primary schools, the proportion is quickly increasing 14 – but how do we estimate the

ratio between alphabetisation and real ability to communicate at both oral and written levels? The diffusion of newspapers in English may be the most reliable criteria, and the evolution of English publications in this respect is interesting: on the 49 145 newspapers and periodicals published in 2002, 7125 were in English (19 685 in Hindi), whereas, according to Kachru (1986: 12sq.), the number of newspapers in English twenty years before was 3582: the proportion was slightly less than 19% at the beginning of the eighties, and about 17% in the first years of the twenty-first century. In the same period, the proportion of newspapers in Hindi increased considerably, since it has nowadays reached 40%” (Montaut, 2017). Another proof of local languages’ value in the society is the Indian film industry and TV. Bollywood – the Hindi film industry is based in Mumbai and popularly known as Bollywood in deference to Hollywood as the world leader in films – today is one of the biggest producer of films in the world. That is not the only film industry in India either – there are the Tamil film industry, Malyalam film industry, and Bengali film industry among many other segments of media producing content in local languages. Happily, the viewership is not limited to lower-income, uneducated, non-English speaking people. The majority feels quite fortunate to find at its disposal the choice of watching programs in multiple languages.

The case for bilingualism and study of the second language and creating an environment where the learners are immersed in the culture and language experience as far as possible is being made even in Japan nowadays. According to a recent article published in *The Japan Times*, “Over the past decade or so, some schools in Japan – most of them junior high and high schools – have been adopting programs in which students are ‘immersed’ in an English-speaking environment. The classes don’t apply just to English lessons, but to other subjects, including mathematics and science. All are held in English to help students acquire the language” (Maruko, 2017).

Of course there are protests and an underlying fear of English taking over

the regional languages but they have been largely proven to be unfounded and one of the secrets of competitiveness of the Indian labor force in the global job market is the ability of the majority of skilled Indian professionals to use and English with ease. In fact, the early exposure to multiple languages gives the workforce an added advantage over people who grow up in largely homogenous environments – India being a multicultural, multilingual country, adjusting in an alien culture is not very difficult for Indian, and they are well-respected for their propensity to integrate in the host culture. That is an indirect advantage of being bilingual and learning multiple language from an early age.

The Japanese are well known for their work ethics, a trait that helped Japan get out of the quagmire it was left in after the end of World War 2. The Japanese quality became world renowned largely due to its hardworking baby boomers that focused on putting in long hours and elbow grease at work. Luckily, globalization had not made an appearance at that point and Japan was able to do very well operating in its own bubble by exporting to other countries. Translators and interpreters were used as conduits to the outside world and so, the majority of the population continued to be staunchly monolingual with very little pressure to adjust to the changing world. The only pebble in these still waters was the occupation by the Americans that lasted almost 25 years – it has been a sore point for the Japanese and most people felt uncomfortable with their presence. Regardless, while American culture, goods, and fashion slowly seeped into the day-to-day lives of the people, English communication was not much improved by the same. This is interesting in itself since Japan's neighbors like South Korea and Philippines seemed to have benefited from the American influence as far as language learning goes just like India has. The average Japanese graduate is hardworking but usually lacks drive and self-confidence. They prefer to operate in their comfort zones and the challenge of communicating with foreigners is too much for most. Most employees don't have any motivation to learn additional languages and the ones who do give up quickly when faced with resistance from

the people around them and/or work pressure. Consequently, the employees are less competitive in the international job market and cannot expand their horizons by experiencing new cultures. This excerpt from a JETRO handbook warns us “Many Japanese do not have much confidence in their English speaking ability and therefore choose to remain silent. Even Japanese who are fairly good at English do not feel comfortable speaking incorrect English” (Gundling, 1999).

Thus, they remain stuck in this vicious cycle of limited opportunities and low drive. In addition, the companies have to hire translators and interpreters in order to communicate with the outside world; not being able to communicate and express their ideas directly, a lot is lost in translation. Contrastingly, non-native speakers of English hold a massive advantage over such businessmen even if they are accused of having strong accents and lower than ideal level of language ability. Also, if the Japanese salarymen find themselves in the unenviable position of being posted abroad, they run to language schools to quickly “upgrade” their language skills. How helpful that is depends on several factors but the stress is deadly and leads to many a breakdown. The expats once on a foreign land are in no better position; even if they were brave enough to venture out on their own, making friends using broken English is not only tedious but also embarrassing to most people. In office, they are expected to be part of the daily grind but dealing with team meetings and negotiations with clients in English is almost impossible for these uninitiated graduates of a well-meaning but faulty system of education.

The idea of education is to create knowledge. The point of formal education in schools and universities is to provide a workforce for the future that not only makes the nation proud but also takes it to new heights economically. Sadly, Japanese education has failed to achieve these goals by choosing rote learning over creativity and stagnant traditionalism over innovation. One practical approach to a solution or a mitigation of this dilemma is the teaching of EIL or de-Anglo-Americanized English as a means of expressing indigenous values in international communication. Although Japanese teachers of English have

not really gone beyond the World Englishes paradigm, which describes the Expanding Circle Englishes including Japanese English as basically exonormative, efforts have been underway in Japan to put the idea of EIL into practice. The teaching of EIL in place of Anglo-American English provides a chance of reconciliation between the use of internal and external language resources (Hino, 2009). It is evident that the future belongs to Asia. What is also clear is that the lingua franca is by default English given the current trends. Most businesses in Japan are in some way connected to non-native speakers of English. Thus, despite the diminishing importance of the western world in global economy, the value of English as the main tool for communication is untarnished. “Mark Shrobbree, the former vice-chair of the Foreign Language Center at Tokai University in Kanagawa, points out that, in business, education and travel, Japanese people are far more likely to encounter non-Western, non-native speakers. In his 2004 book “The Language Revolution,” British linguist David Crystal estimated that non-native speakers of English outnumber native speakers three to one” (Joe, 2010).

The onus lies on everyone involved in education in Japan to educate the next generation to become global citizens that can prove their competitiveness in the world. A teacher’s duty doesn’t end with giving grades and marks, rather education is imparting knowledge and language is a means to gaining that information – multilingualism is the only viable option in this era of internet and interconnectivity.

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