A Survey of Cultural Influences in Japanese ELT

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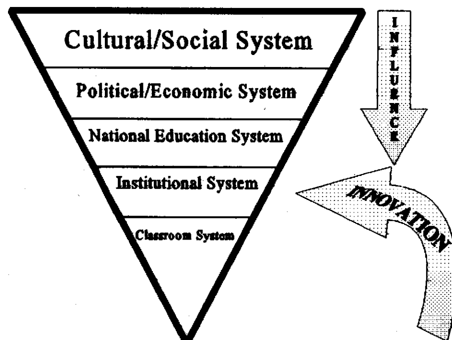
1.0 Introduction

The past few years have seen remarkable changes in Japanese English language teaching (ELT). In 1991, the Japanese Ministry of Education (*monbusho*) abolished the general education requirements for colleges and universities. Three years later, the Ministry called for more communicative high school English classes.[1] And while there are questions as to what shape it might take, plans are underway to introduce ELT to primary schools in the future.[2]

One major justification for these changes is the need for the continued internationalization (*kokusaika*) of Japanese society.[3] Internationalization is seen by some as a key factor in exposing Japan to new ideas, which in will turn stimulate renewed international economic success and enlightened social reforms. Included in this is the potential for Japanese educational reform, as seen most recently in the increase of schools considering change in their foreign language departments.[4]

But problems have surfaced in the drive for internationalization through language curriculum reform. There appears to be little understanding as to how current innovations in language curricula and internationalization interact with the established cultural values outside of the institutional



or national educational system. Traditional elements in the Japanese establishment, by the very nature of the traditions and beliefs they uphold, frustrate the plans of those sincerely working for positive change. White says that if those outside the educational institution (see Figure One) perceive ELT innovations as incompatible with their cultural framework, innovations will be resisted or reduced to the level superfluous anomalies.[5] This may account for why some innovators sense that their efforts at stimulating local and national improvement in Japan's second language curriculum are passively resisted. White explains that if innovators take the beliefs, values and history of the surrounding culture into deeper consideration, the positive innovations they propose usually stand a better chance for long-term acceptance.[6]

1.1 Purpose

This paper highlights a number of traditional cultural aspects in Japanese educational and social thought which have contributed to the unique nature of Japanese ELT. We will begin by considering the historical development of Chinese Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, with special attention given to its influence on Japanese pedagogic theory and ELT. The second part of this paper utilizes Tollefson's sociolinguistic framework for language curriculum development as an aid for interpreting Japan's current ELT climate.

2.0 Confucianism

Confucius(551-479 BC), taught that life's problems resulted from people abandoning their stations in life, and rulers leaving the path of virtue. He developed a socio-political philosophy which emphasized knowing one's place, being satisfied with it, working hard, and studying hard. The key to restoring social and political harmony was through proper outward conduct (*li*), and humane benevolence by rulers (*jen*). When *jen* and *li* were in perfect symmetry, children loved their parents (*hsiao*), citizens obeyed their rulers (*chung*), and friends or business

partners treated each other with mutual trust and respect (*yi*).[7]

According to Confucius, this was attained through educational discipline. If one learned to love his or her parents, maintain honest relationships with friends, practice justice with benevolence (*jen*) to those below him, and respect to those above him, he might become a *chün-tsu*, (lit. "son of a prince"), usually translated in English as a "superior man." The superior man, (women were ignored by Chinese philosophers), by virtue of being a scholarly, ethical individual established in the *tao* (lit. "the way"), and had the moral fiat to teach others the proper way to live.[8]

Confucius maintained that Heaven had mandated five relationships (*wu-lun*), which must not be forsaken:

> The relationships are those between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and between friends.[9]

The parent-child relationship had precedence over even one's obligation to the ruler. By prioritizing this relationship, harmony in all relationships could be maintained. Upholding *jen* and proper behavior (*li*) however, were more important than maintaining relationships with people who were not following the *tao* of Heaven: "It is better to value jen than to passively follow your teacher."[10] This was emphasized again 200 years later in the teachings of Mencius (Meng-tzu, 371-289 BC), who wrote that emperors had the right to rule only as long as they followed the *tao* of Heaven. Otherwise, they could be deposed by force.[11]

2.1 Neo-Confucianism

Mencius was not the only one to further develop Confucius' ideas. Another scholar, Chu Hsi (1130-1200), felt that many aspects of popular Confucianism during his day had fallen into a state of disrepair.[12] Chu Hsi and his disciples set about collecting

and codifying the extant writings of Confucius, Mencius and other Chinese classics.

The Chu Hsi school built upon the teachings of Confucius and Mencius by greatly emphasizing outward form and rituals (*li*), and by mixing *li* with elements of Taoism.[13] Through strict discipline, Chu Hsi taught that a man could refine his heart by conforming to various social and religious rituals. When external refinement was adhered to, a virtuous life would ultimately be manifested:

> ...Refinement is substance; substance is refinement! When the hair is taken off the hide of a tiger or leopard, it looks the same as the hide of a dog or sheep.[14]

While Chu Hsi's system had something to say about virtually every aspect of life, the core of his teaching can be found in Confucius' book, *The Great Learning* (*Ta Hsüeh*), which admonishes those in power to study hard, live a moral life, and lead by example:

> When things are investigated, knowledge is extended.
> When knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere.
> When the will is sincere, the mind is correct.
> When the mind is correct, the self is cultivated.
> When the self is cultivated, the clan is harmonized.
> When the clan is harmonized, the country is well-governed.
> When the country is well-governed, there will be peace throughout the land.[15]

Chinese Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism eventually found their way to Japan. Although over the years both systems of thought were uniquely Japanized, the basic principles of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism have had profound effects upon Japanese culture.[16]

2.2 Beginnings of Japanese Shushigaku

Confucianism entered Japan as early as fourth century, the effects of which can be seen in many ancient political writings of the time. By the seventh century, the main tenets of Confucianism had influenced the Japanese educated classes, although it was sometimes questionable if the philosophical meaning of *jen* and *li* were clearly understood. Very little Coufucianism reached the lower classes, except for vague ideas that one's position in life was decided, one should always love his parents, and that propriety should be maintained in worshiping one's ancestral spirits (*ujigami*).

The Neo-Confucianism of Chu Hsi (Japanese: *shushigaku*) was introduced to Japan by Zen priests in the late 12th century. *Shushigaku* was taught in monasteries or schools such as in Mito, where the Tokugawa clan ruled. Over the Next 400 years, Japanese Neo-Confucian scholars (*jusha*) redefined the Chinese concepts of sacrificial love for one's parents (*oyako-ko*) and "the right way" (*to, do* or *michi* in Japanese).[17]

The parent-child relationship in Japanese *shushigaku* differed significantly from Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, Devotion to one's lord, teacher or other superior was taught to be essentially the same as love for one's parents. One was expected to yield to the will of the higher parents over the wishes of one's biological parents.[18] This contributed to an emphasis on a top-down hierarchy based on age, social status, and scholastic knowledge, and the formation of an interconnected family-like society based on mutual interdependence (*amae kozo*).[19]

Japanese scholars' increased emphasis upon ritualism (*rei*) inspired mystic discipline in several pre-existing Japanese art forms, religious practices and codes of behavior: *bushido* (the way of the warrior), *shodo* (the way of writing), *kado* (the way of flower arranging), *sado* (the way of tea), *shinto* (the way of the gods), and so on.[20] Admittedly, it was still with the intelligencia that *shushigaku* had its greatest hold. Anesaki notes that for a long time in Japan's history, the world view of the Japanese

elite was basically Neo-Confucian, and that of the lower classes remained traditionally Buddhist.[21] But in the realm of education and administration, this was destined to change with the rise of the Tokugawa Shogunate.

2.4 Further Development of National Ideology

To harmonize regional clans after years of civil war and retrain samurai for service as bureaucrats, the Tokugawa government closed the borders to non-Japanese and reordered the nation along Japanized Neo-Confucian lines. A major ally in this effort was the Mito school, which created over the next two hundred years a unique synthesis of Neo-Confucian concepts, Japanese mythology and Shintoism.[22]

Mito *shushigaku* taught that a natural top-down hierarchy could be observed in nature. The emperor, as the descendant of the sun goddess, was at the top of this hierarchy. Others in this hierarchy, in order of status, were the *samurai*, farmers, craftspeople, and merchants. Foreigners, besides threatening the established order with unsanctioned ideas such as Christianity, had no place in this natural hierarchy. Earlier interpretations of the parent-child relationship evolved to the point where the Emperor was believed to be the supreme spiritual parent of all Japanese. Senior government officials, teachers and samurai were seen as elder brothers serving under Emperor to take care the national family (*kazoku kokka*). The common people were taught to maintain the natural harmony by staying in their place, and by obeying their overseers. The samurai and teachers were upheld as superior men by which all could learn the right way to live.[23]

Earlier changes in the idea of *li* (Japanese: *rei*) aided the government's justification for the formation of rules on the proper way to act, think, dress and speak according to one's status in life. These were strictly enforced to ensure social harmony. These teachings were bolstered among the common people through small government-sanctioned private schools

(*juku*). Teachers at these schools taught selected passages of Confucius and other subjects from the abacus (*soroban*) to calligraphy. Tomikura comments on this popular expansion of *shushigaku*:

> All this took place, however, within the framework of a partitioned society and with the aim of fitting people for work in their particular social position. Thus the Confucianism that reached the masses was in the last analysis an establishment doctrine. Whether people received instruction as a pastime or as a means of education and moral improvement, they were taught, in effect, to stay in their place and find satisfaction in it.[24]

All mention in Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts about the deposing of corrupt and evil rulers was discreetly ignored.[25] Nevertheless, it was the gradual shift of one's ultimate loyalty from the local *daimyo* to the emperor as supreme father that contributed to the fall of the *samurai* class by the beginning of the Meiji Era.

From the Meiji era until the end of the Second War, Japan saw another era of change and instability. Threatened by the technological superiority of America and imperialist European nations, Japanese society inaugurated a number of sweeping changes aimed at catching up with the West as quickly as possible. A major part of reaching this goal involved the intensive study of foreign languages.[26] But this had little effect on the established cultural ideas developed during the past 250 years, which continued to develop. The class system was officially abolished, but a top-down, parent-child hierarchy continued to color every relationship. The role of the emperor as the parental *kami* over the family of Japan became more pronounced. By the beginning of this century, the people of Japan, as children of the emperor, were taught that they were a special race because of their spiritual connection to the Emperor. *Bushido*, the

Confucian code of the *samurai*, began to be taught in public schools as the moral code for every citizen following the Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905. The family of Japan was often called upon to work together and develop the country for the goal of her greater unity and harmony. Teachers were assigned a great responsibility in assuring that Japanese morality and education complemented these national goals.[27]

Before moving on to the Confucian/Neo-Confucian influence in Japanese education and ELT, let us sum up some significant social features of Japanese society up to the end of the Second World War: 1) A hierarchical world view applied not only to nature, but also to human relationships, 2) A symbolic parental god at the top of this hierarchy, practically administrated by big brother figures, 3) Total loyalty, trust and dependance on one's teachers and superiors, 4) A focus on status, form and ritual, 5) The uniqueness of the Japanese race as a special family working together for a common purpose, and 6) A distrust of foreigners and foreign ideas unless able to further the drive for Japanese success.

3.0 Influence on Japanese Education and ELT

Confucius emphasized education. He felt that one's ability was developed through hard work, not by fate.[28] Confucian education consisted of intensive study of the ancient classics, the memorization of Chinese characters, and the observance of certain rituals.[29] Students listened quietly to the words of the teacher as a way of learning proper conduct and respect for superiors. In time, students could learn the right way to read, write and interpret Chinese literature. Several hundred years later, to insure that knowledge would be extended, wills sincere and minds corrected, Chinese scholar-bureaucrats formed schools to teach reading, writing, moral education, and the rote memorization of the Confucian classics. Social advancement and government positions were available for anyone who passed a series of civil service examinations, which measured how hard one had persevered

in memorizing the writings of Confucius and other classics. This was essentially the same system brought to Japan in the fourth century, and soon became the educational standard for Japan's upper classes.

Except for Chinese, foreign languages were prohibited from being taught in juku before the Meiji period.[30] During this time, only a few scholars ever received permission to study a Western language. One reason lies in the Japanese concept of *kotodama*, an idea similar to German Romanticism because it teaches that spirit of the culture is hidden within the language.[31] It was thought that learners who mastered a foreign language might end up emanating qualities of the "national character" (*kokuminsei*) from which the language came. Preventing the study of foreign language kept the Japanese soul pure from foreign influence. Even though a few scholars did receive permission to study English (*eigogaku*), during this period in world history the emphasis was naturally upon Dutch and Portuguese.[32] Western languages were studied essentially in the same manner as Chinese: Through a method of written translation of sample texts (Japanese: *yaku-doku*).

Following the Meiji restoration in 1867, the Imperial government enacted several policies designed to model Japan after European countries.[33] This included the creation of a national compulsory school system. Disenfranchised, but well educated, many from the *samurai* class became teachers in these new schools. According to Fujita, it was through their efforts that a national education system based upon elements of *shushigaku* was formed:

> School education became an institutional nexus among family, community and polity, and in turn served to diffuse various formal doctrines, promoting diligence at work and in school, advocating the virtues of loyalty and filial piety, and strengthening the Confucian moral order and the emperor system.[34]

Further support for this educational theory came in the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890, which reaffirmed the five relations of Confucianism and the importance of their inclusion into every aspect of Japanese education.[35] This contributed to the creation of an education system which valued teacher-student relationships patterned after the parent-child model. Entrance into universities focused on written examinations, which promoted diligence and memorization. Examinations were designed to advance harmony by diminishing classroom competition and downplaying any differences in ability that some students might have.[36] Knowledge was valued over creativity. An important function of schools was to instill Confucian values, and teach the proper conduct for living in Japanese society.

Foreign language study, once banned, now became an important tool in the drive to improve the nation economically and technologically. During this time popular interpretations of *kotodama* led some in education to believe that foreign language study could encourage learners to acquire the positive cultural characteristics attributed to the West. English was taught at prestigious universities starting in the Meiji era by foreign experts from well-known Western universities. They taught English through the Grammar-Translation method, which complemented the yaku-doku method of language study in the Edo period. Grammar-Translation, a technique based upon an earlier European tradition of Scholastic Hermeneutics, easily became the most practical way to study English in the late 19th century.[37] But once this tradition was firmly established, later efforts by Palmer and Ogden to made ELT in Japan more conversational failed.[38] And by the late 1930's, the concept of *kotodama* was again used, this time by ultra-nationalists, to discourage the study of most Western foreign languages. Except for German, which was thought to stimulate intelligence, memory and scientific prowess, ultra-nationalists were concerned that foreign language study would encourage non-Japanese

thinking, and risk undermining national solidarity. Sadly, during World War Two, it once again became illegal to study English in Japan.[39]

To summarize this section, up until the end of the Second World War, the Japanese national curriculum upheld some of the following concepts: 1) A Confucian Ethic of hard work and memorization, 2) Written examinations designed to insure conformity, equality and diligence, 3) An emphasis on the right way and proper form (grammar-translation), 4) An emphasis on knowledge of the classics over innovative analysis and 5) A belief that language study could infuse one with characteristics of the culture from which it came.

4.0 Reform and Tradition: 1945 to 1985

The tenets of Japan's national ideology and educational theory were largely called into question by the close of the war. The American occupation made great efforts at transforming Japanese society after a western model. Occupation administrators dismantled much of the emperor system, and attempted to replace Japan's national ideology by encouraging a rationalistic world view, further democratization of the government, urbanization, industrialization, social reform and educational reform. The resulting changes were momentous: Women received the right to vote, workers and teachers formed unions to protect themselves from the domination of their superiors, the educational system was changed to extol Western thought. In order to participate more fully in the *Pax Americana*, English now became a compulsory subject in public middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities.

While these and other changes in Japanese society cannot be minimized, the efforts of the American occupation to erase the influence of Japan's prewar cultural ideology can be likened to a gardener pulling an unsightly weed, but leaving its 1,500 years of roots behind. There were too many changes, too soon. The vestiges of the old system which remained began to grow

again, discreetly. Horio writes:

> ...it has not been easy for us to implant these [Western] ideas in Japanese society. As many of the totalitarian aspects of prewar educational thought were revived and reworked within the context of the modern welfare state, the prospects for a genuine educational renaissance in Japan have gradually been eroded, and the proud hopes of those who wanted to transform Japan into a democratic society have been confounded again and again.[40]

Karl van Wolferen has observed that Japanese economic, political and educational institutions still implicitly uphold prewar structural models. The following features can be found in most Japanese organizations: 1) A top-down family-like hierarchy consisting of an older, emperor-like individual, who stands as a living symbol of the organization, 2) Various administrators serving under the symbolic leader who, besides wielding the real power and authority, also take care of and accept responsibility for their subordinates, 3) Submission and cooperation on the part of the subordinates in order to assure the success of the organization, 4) Slogans, rituals, meetings and songs emphasizing unified action, form, harmony and the special status which comes from belonging to the organization.[41]

While both van Wolferen and Horio imply that something sinister is involved in the formation of these events, we must remember that it is only natural that educators would find it difficult to simply discard over a millennium of Confucian practices, traditions and teaching styles. Schools continued to value a meritocratic system of testing for students, and a system of scholastic achievements for their teachers.[42] The role of the teacher as scholar-parent was still intact, and encouraged by the Ministry of Education.[43] Japanese teachers of English and approved textbook publishers continued to support the Grammar-Translation tradition. Students continued to be quiet and take

notes. Historic Confucian ideals of rote memorization, hard work, and written examinations continued to be the established norm for high school and university ELT.

4.1 Internationalization Through ELT

The immediacy of mass communication as well as increased opportunities for international travel and commerce created the need for better spoken English skills. This compelled many in Japan to rethink their nation's ELT policies. Criticism from international observers, parents, students and Japanese educators grew over the years. As a response to calls for the further internationalization of Japan through ELT, the Ministry of Education created the JET Program in the mid 1980's. While this program has changed and grown since its inception, it continues to provide opportunities for young English-speaking college graduates to teach spoken English as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japanese junior high and high schools. At about the same time the JET Program came into existence, there was a sudden increase in the number of expatriate teachers at national and private universities. Since 1985, the number of foreign professors has doubled, created an affluent, well-educated lobby that has increasing called for the further internationalization of Japanese society through educational reforms.[44]

5.0 The Current ELT Situation

The resulting past few years have seen both progress and conflict in Japanese ELT. Innovators continue to work for a transition away from traditional language teaching approaches toward newer theories that emphasize experiential learning and spoken communication skills. At the same time, conservative elements wish to slow the process

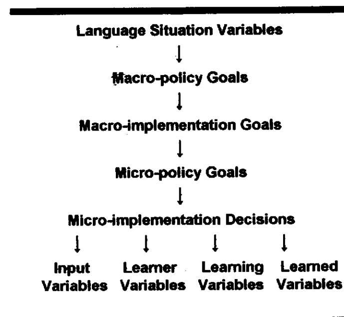


Figure Two Tollefson's Framework for the Role of Language Planning in ELT.

of change.

Tollefson's model provides a useful diagram for understanding the dynamics involved in national language planning.[45] While this chart (see Figure Two) is usually applied to a country's general language situation, we will use Tollefson's framework to review the current role of ELT in Japan.

5.1 Language Situation

Tollefson says that language situation refers to "...who speaks what language varieties to whom for what purposes."[46]

Lg	NL	SL	AL	IL	FL	H	W	R	E	M	L	I	S
Jpn	✦					✦	✦	✦	✦	✦	✦	✦	✦
Eng			✧	✦	✦				✦	✧		✧	

Table 1 Kennedy's Domains for Language Roles and Functions. Key: First column = the languages (Japanese and English); NL/SL/AL/IL/FL = The role of the language; remaining columns = domains - Home, Work, Education, Media, Law, Institutional, Social. "✦" denotes major use, "✧" denotes minor use.

Apart from limited contact native English speakers, very few Japanese use English in their everyday life. Kennedy's procedure for studying sociolinguistic language roles and domains (see Table One), reveals that, despite many years of intensive English study, Japan remains a monolingual society.[47] Japanese is the native language (NL) for work, home, religion, law, and social life. English has a limited, almost interlingual use in the Japanese media and advertising (M). In the spirit of internationalization, most government brochures or public notices are written in English, but the majority of workers in government offices would find it difficult to communicate in spoken English if the need arose (I). English's main domain in Japan is in education. The primary use of English is as a foreign language subject in the national curriculum (FL). Outside of this, for a few in specialized jobs, English serves as an international language (IL). English is not truly a second language (SL) in Japan, since it is rarely used successfully as a medium of communication between immigrants and Japanese nationals. My experience with international students, South American immigrants

of Japanese ancestry, and permanent residents of various nationalities leads me to believe that they try to assimilate as soon as possible by mastering Japanese, not English. English might be considered an additional language (AL) in some instances as a means of communication between speakers of different languages living in Japan, such as between European and American teachers at a university or college. But more often than not, Japanese is used as just as much as English.

5.2 Macro-policy Goals and Implementation

Macro-policy goals, according to Tollefson, "...refers to the aims and formulated by authorities with responsibility for the national community, "[48] The Ministry of Education says their suggested changes for high school curricula will help students communicate their ideas more clearly in English through debate and role play. This emphasis on international and comm unicative skills is planned to compel teachers to put away the Grammar-Translation approach.[49] For this reason, the Ministry actively encourages these goals on the high school level by sending more and more ALTs to traditional, rural schools. But while the Ministry encourages spoken English in the classroom, it has not changed any of the original written English requirements for high school and college entrance examinations. Doyle writes, "At the core they [the Ministry of Education] are adding new teaching methods to old ones."[50]

On the other hand, the Ministry's policies for universities seem to be making more visible progress toward the goal of internationalization. With the Ministry's repeal of foreign language requirements for colleges and universities, general education was placed entirely in the hands of each college and university. Schools can now decide whether or not to continue with the old system before 1991, make necessary changes, do away with general education, and/or transfer any courses deemed necessary to other departments.

5.3 Micro-policy Goals and Implementation

Micro-policy goals refer to how local administration and teachers respond to macro-policy goals and implementation. Knight found that a key problem in implementing the new Ministry of Education guidelines for High School ELT was the lack of concrete instructions on how to foster debate, role play and spontaneous conversation.[51] Goold *et al*. sum up the opinion of many high school teachers on this new "communicative" approach:

> With the exception of discussion, the classroom activities recommended by the guidelines to OCC (Oral Communication "C") appear to be a bizarre choice, if a move away from memorization, translation and multiple choice exercises is desired. It is difficult to imagine how these guidelines can result in anything more than a cosmetic change in the senior high school English classroom.[52]

This suggests that, despite promising signs, presently most high schools in Japan continue to be small, closed societies committed to egalitarianism, an upholding of the "way", insularism and meritocracy measured by examinations. Because of this, Fujita states that Japanese high schools have remained relatively unchanged in function and purpose since their creation in the Meiji era.[53]

According to Mackay, high school teachers and administrators often must quietly "counter-plan" the language curriculum for the level of their students.[54] Since teachers must finish the required textbooks by the end of the year, and at the same time teach crowded rooms of thirty to forty-five students, most opt to continue with modified forms of Grammar-Translation. It is easier for the teacher, who is usually overworked and lacks both the time and energy required to learn a new teaching style, and justifiable because most prestigious college entrance exams support the approach. On the days when the ALT

comes, it becomes a "communicative class "— i. e., language games day. These "one-shot" English classes are thankfully becoming a thing of the past, but now most ALTs are being stationed for two or three years at one school, thereby opening the door for new challenges. Without discounting the many reports of positive experiences, the fact that young, untrained language teachers (who are often not much older than the students they teach) are being sent to traditional institutions as "human black ships" has been the cause of many bittersweet experiences for teachers on both sides of the cross-cultural fence.[55] Howard reports that many Japanese high school English teachers see the addition of ALTs as unwelcome outsiders who distract students from the school's main goal of preparing students for the university entrance examinations.[56]

In contrast, some university curricula have become more progressive since 1991. Most Japanese universities have kept English as a subject, and some prominent Japanese universities, such as Keio University and Asia University, have instituted changes which have made their English curriculum more dynamic and conversational. National universities, such as Niigata University, are taking Keio and Asia University's lead and are looking to make similar changes in their curriculum within the next few years.[57] Nevertheless, across the country, most Japanese colleges and universities are locked in quiet turmoil. Behind the closed doors of curriculum planning committee meetings, conservative and progressive factions are, like vast *sumo* wrestlers, struggling to push the other out of the circle of influence, while vying for the power to decide the future of their university's language curriculum. The next few years will reveal if the majority of Japanese universities are flexible enough to make the break from traditional ELT approaches in favor of new methods based on current theories and research.

But as long as written tests remain the standard for succeeding on college entrance examinations, many macro-policy goals of the Ministry of Education will not be successful in

Japanese middle and senior high schools. Moreover, the continued influence of traditional educational standards in junior and senior high schools will limit student willingness to participate with educational reforms on the university level, thus making the successful application of university micro-policies not impossible, but difficult.

5.4 Input Variables

The term input variable refers to the language that learners are exposed to either in or out of the classroom.[58] As stated earlier, except for at schools and universities, some Japanese might use English as a work skill, but these types of positions are typically scarce. Opportunities to speak English are even rarer.

A recent study on the reasons Japanese college students study English reveals that most see English as important for business, becoming "international" and/or to experience non-Japanese thinking.[59] And yet, another survey of international companies in Japan shows that most English communication in the workplace in essentially the same as it was during the Meiji Era: Through the written word, namely through letter (and these days, faxes and e-mail).[60] Most Japanese find their only opportunity to speak English is with native speakers in an English conversation class. This is usually for passing an examination, preparing for a short vacation overseas, or for making friends with other class members, all of which speak Japanese as their native language. It is especially this last reason which has debilitative effects on the motivation of many to acquire the language on more than a cursory level.[61]

5.5 Learner Variables

Kennedy defines learner variables as their generalizable characteristics.[62] Much has been said about the nature of Japanese students. For example, in her book, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, Lebra identifies three domains that determine appropriate behavior

for Japanese: Anomic, Intimate and Ritual.[63]

Anomic situations refer to when a person is socially distant from another person, and sees no reason to care about their opinions (for example, riding with several people on a local train). Intimate refers to the open and warm communication that happens between family and co-workers after office hours. Ritual alludes to when social distance must be maintained. One is judged by how correctly the ceremony or function is performed. Those acquainted with Japanese ritual know that silence and reticence are typically required. Our study of the history of Japanese education shows that the traditional Japanese classroom experience fits within the domain of ritual. This may explain not only why normally boisterous students maintain silence in EFL classes, but why some seem to resist the efforts of foreign teachers to get them talking: One side wishes to dwell in the domain of ritual while the other attempts to operate (by the standards of some Japanese) in the domain of intimacy.

5.6 Learning Variables

Learning variables refer to the strategies one selects to learn something. The learning strategy most selected in Japan consists of repetition and rote learning. Students are trained in this method as early as preschool. Peak observed that the same technique was used with young students regardless of the skill being taught:

- Calculated arousal of learner motivation to acquire a specific skill and become a member of its social setting.
- Repeated practice of precisely defined component routines until they become automatic.
- Development of self-monitoring of learning performance.[64]

I have personally observed identical teaching practices in classes taught by Japanese English teachers, and have been impressed by how well students respond. Peak says this learning

style is considered necessary by parents and teachers alike. Curriculum concerns will not be addressed until it is clear that all students have completely adjusted themselves to these learning variables.[65]

5.7 Learned Variables

Currently in many high schools and universities, Japanese learners encounter three sets of learned variables: The traditional Grammar-Translation variables from the Japanese English teachers, "international" items (debating skills, role play, situational conversations, etc.) from the Ministry of Education, and a hodgepodge of "communicative" items from their foreign language teachers. In most situations, motivated students are pragmatic enough to get the most out of whatever situation they are placed in. Shimizu found in her research that most students expect to get the necessary grammar items and real-life exams preparation from their Japanese teachers, and to enjoy themselves while working toward verbal fluency, listening proficiency and overcoming their affective barriers with the native English teachers.[66] In getting the best from both worlds, most students seem to feel they are becoming more international.

7.0 Conclusion

While this paper's assessment of traditional approaches to ELT in Japan has been less then positive, it would be unfortunate if this were interpreted as implying that Japanese culture is somehow flawed. Law's observation is that a number of Japanese educational approaches have worked for centuries, and continue to work well in a number of other disciplines.[67] This paper does not consider whether or not the cultural assumptions behind traditional Japanese ELT are inherently "good" or "bad", only whether or not their aims are appropriate for our immediate and pragmatic needs as modern language teachers. The risk of highlighting traditional educational practices against an implicit preference for progressive solutions is that a "them-us" mentality

can surface. And yet while Western ELT innovations are often perceived to be at odds with the goals of Japanese educational institutions, there is a wealth of material explaining how Western educational approaches can work within Japanese cultural expectations and communication patterns.[68]

When one considers the ELT climate in Japan only fifty years ago, the educational changes that we have seen thusfar on the national and local level are momentous. While it is certain that we will continue to see progress in Japanese ELT, conservative countries with long historic traditions such as Japan generally take longer to acclimate themselves to the winds of change. But this paper points out that when reformation does take place in Japanese institutions, it results in what Darwinists call *punctuated equilibria*, that is, periods of inactivity interrupted by brief seasons of radical change. The current process of reform may not be fast enough for some innovators in ELT, but we most keep in mind that past changes in Japanese ELT, while sometimes positive, have not always satisfied the expectations of the international community.

It is hoped that this brief review of the traditional elements in Japanese educational thought helps to explain why the move towards further improvement in the local and national language curriculum is often slow by Western standards. With these changes come the potential for uncertain educational and social change. Inconsistencies in the stated macro-policy goals and actual micro-policy implementation of language policy on a variety of levels reveal that many in Japan are skeptical as to where *kokusaika* through the medium of English will actually take them as a nation. Moreover, Japanese Neo-Confucian educational and social ethics, while certainly not as strong as they once were, still exert great influence over sectors of the society both inside and outside the schools.

This study does not attempt to offer an overly-simplistic review of the historic factors affecting Japanese ELT, since a myriad of other influences have had their part in its development

as well. Neo-Confucianism is, at best, only one strand in a measureless cultural fabric. By using the sociolinguistic framework provided by Tollefson, this research has sought to raise the awareness of readers to the complex dynamics currently at work in Japanese EFL. Innovative teachers are encouraged to begin their own research on other features of Japanese cultural influence in ELT. Research on such issues are important to all language teachers in Japan, for it is through such cross-cultural discovery that we gain deeper insight into the aspects which can support - or subvert - the struggle for innovation and language curriculum reform in Japan.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Dr. Tokiyuki Nobuhara of Keiwa College, and Dr. Takakuni Hirano, Professor Emeritus of Niigata University, for allowing access to their research libraries. Also thanks to Professors Yukio Yamazaki and Kazuo Fukuda, whose discussions of *shushigaku* over lunch inspired much of this research.

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