

The History of English Education in Japan: Focusing on Its Dawn

Masako Nishikawa-Van Eester, Nishogakusha University, Japan

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Abstract

This is a report on the history of English education in Japan, particularly regarding its very early stages in the nineteenth century. How did the English education start in Japan actually? A strong need to foster human resources to handle situations in the English language (instead of Dutch) arose from “the *Nagasaki* Harbour Incident” of HMS Phaeton in 1808. Facing a foreign power, the Japanese saw that a simple fact - nobody understood English - might have led Japan to a major crisis of extinction. The government at that time (*Tokugawa* Shogunate) suddenly realized this urgent task, and it launched a national project of retraining their Dutch translators/interpreters, *Oranda-tsuji*, into English ones. Fortunately, Japan managed to find a native English speaker as teacher for the *Oranda-tsuji*, which determined the nation’s destiny in the second half of the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Through the observation and exploration of this early phase to the establishment of the public system of English education, we can reflect on our current chaotic status, and try to predict the future. The 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo are just around the corner, and the present government is proclaiming the need of English-speaking Japanese.

Keywords: English education, Japanese with English abilities, history, native English speaking teacher, Dutch

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Introduction

Japan is a country which has eagerly attempted to acquire new knowledge, science and technologies from outside Japan and absorbed foreign customs and cultures throughout its long history (Nishikawa-Van Eester, 2014, p. 33; Shimizu, 2010, pp. 1 - 4; Montgomery, 2000, p. 202). In order to realize this, Japan needed foreign languages as a medium. By learning, reading and translating them, the Japanese have obtained the necessary information in each stage of the time. As Montgomery referred to (2000, pp. 189 - 190), the acceptance, adaptation and improvement of science and culture in Japan took place almost entirely under strong foreign influences. This is an important point in the Japanese history.

In this article, we first go through a simple overview of the historical background of foreign language education in Japan. That enables us to regard English as one of the influential foreign languages that have affected Japan and to situate it in the whole picture. Other languages are to be explained as well in the series of the events in the relation with English. Then we examine when the English language arrived in Japan, how it was learned (and also taught) and by whom. Subsequently, we discuss the significance of English education in the Japanese society from the historical and pedagogical perspective.

Historical Background

Because of its geographical uniqueness, Japan has enjoyed its own language and culture without any invasion to threaten it (Seargent, 2011). At the same time, however, this means that Japan has had no way to receive external information without making conscious efforts to use (a) foreign language(s) as a tool for information gathering. Baker (2001) and Shimizu (2010) both pointed out that Japan has been accepting and learning various foreign languages and cultures.

As far as we can recognize in some historical records, the language that arrived in the earliest stage in the Japanese history was Chinese. It is reported that the Chinese writing system and literature works had been conveyed to Japan by fourth - fifth century already via the Korean Peninsula (Shimizu, pp. 1 - 2). Since then, the Chinese language (Chinese classics, or, *Kanbun*) has been one of the major and influential foreign languages to be taught throughout the Japanese history. Having been penetrating the axis of the education and culture, Chinese is undoubtedly the major language in Japan. In the description of Gottlieb (2005), “the educated” historically meant the upper class such as aristocrats and *samurai* who got drilled in classical Chinese (Chinese classics, *Kanbun*). Together with Chinese, Korean was also brought to Japan meanwhile (Shimizu, pp. 1 - 2).

Among the languages from the West, Portuguese was the very first that the Japanese encountered. In 1543, a Portuguese shipwreck in *Tanegashima* Island, *Kyushu*, brought Japan Christianity (Catholic Missionaries) and trading with the Western world (Baker, p. 486; Shimizu, p. 3). A great number of Portuguese words were brought, as the result, into the Japanese vocabulary, which are simply believed to be Japanese ones by now. Although Portuguese gave a great influence upon the Japanese society and culture, it became obsolete by Japan facing a totally new phase in its history. Together with Portuguese, Spanish was also brought to Japan (Yamashita, p.

58), but it did not have as much influence on the Japanese culture as Portuguese did. By the new policy of nearly complete isolation of the nation (1633 - 1639), the government decided to “protect” Japan from the rest of the world. Fearing the spread of Christianity, the shogunate, or the government, prohibited Portuguese ships (Seargeant, p. 69). Consequently, the cultural stream flowing into Japan from Portugal was halted, and Japan had to wait for another opportunity to receive new knowledge and information from the world.

After this series of actions in order to isolate the whole country, the shogunate ordered to create an artificial island in *Nagasaki Harbor (Dejima, or Deshima)*, where all Portuguese residents were moved. But, after all, in 1639, the shogunate decided to expel them all (Seargeant, p. 69). Then the Dutch arrived. Actually, they had come before the isolation policy became in effect. In Yamashita’s description (p. 58), we observe that the situation of Japan in those days.

The Dutch arrived at the end of the *Azuchi-Momoyama* period (1573 - 1603), when the Spanish and Portuguese had already established strong relationships with Japan. However, at the beginning of the Edo era (period) (1603 - 1868), the Spanish and Portuguese were banned from the country, because of their inextricable ties with the Christian mission, regarded by the central government as a liability to their rule. Japan was gradually closed off from the outside world and a self-imposed period of isolation began.

The Netherlands became more powerful globally after the independence from Spain, and in Japan, it became the only European power that was allowed to trade with the Japanese government during the isolation policy of the nation. According to Montgomery (p. 227), a great amount of Western science such as Copernican theory, Newtonian physics and the astronomy of Laplace reached Japan between 1770 and 1850, via the Dutch language. Although Dutch was not the language of origin for most of this sort of knowledge, it was the merely means to access the information sources and the Japanese society received tremendous influence by Dutch. Dutch studies (also known as “Dutch learning”), therefore, did not simply mean to study the Dutch language; instead it meant absorbing the cutting-edge technologies, fresh knowledge and cultural phenomena from the outside through studying Dutch.

Dutch studies started to bud during the reign of the eighth Shogun, *Tokugawa Yoshimune*, who showed his great interest in products from overseas. In 1720, he relaxed the Book Ban Order to allow the import of non-Christian books and encouraged to learn Dutch. In Van Sant’s explanatory notes, we can read that, from 1639 to the 1850s, the employees of the Dutch East India Company were the only Westerners allowed to enter Japan, and that through them, the most advanced information and knowledge was transmitted from the European world to Japan. This tendency made a major stream later, in the nineteenth century, that Japan tried to learn almost all the knowledge that they urgently needed, from the West, in order to establish the strong, modern Japan in the entirely new political frame. This learning system was called *Yogaku*, meaning Western studies, or, learning.

Hence, the shogunate kept promoting the Dutch education. Montgomery reported that,

by 1760s, some books on medicine and science had been imported together with some scientific instruments such as telescopes, which gave an enormous impact on the scientific progress in Japan (pp. 203 - 203). By teaching Dutch, the government produced the new intelligent generation. (Traditionally, the well-educated learned *Kanbun*, classic Chinese.)

Oranda-tsuji

As mentioned earlier, the central government encouraged the Dutch education, and there were two types of people who learned Dutch at that time. One is called *Rangakusha* (Dutch scholars) and the other, *Oranda-tsuji* (Dutch interpreters/translators). A number of *Rangakusha* were produced during the second half of the *Edo* period to lead the modern Japanese society in the nineteenth century, however, in this article, we focus on the latter group, namely, *Oranda-tsuji*, who played a more crucial role in our story of the English language education.

How did, then, the shogunate foster *Oranda-tsuji* men? In order to answer this question, we need to know what kind of group this was and how they used to work in the system of those days. According to Kimura (2012, p. 2), they were a group of professional men who were officially employed by the government. This profession was hereditary (there were several renowned families in this business) and the government used to employ a ranking system. They were responsible for all the administrative work related to import and export, actual negotiation with the traders, keeping all the records of the entire work. As described by Katagiri (2004, p. 21), they were a group of highly skillful and intelligent warriors who had to continuously face tough negotiations with their counterparts from overseas.

The Very First English Man in Japan

Regarding the English language, we need to examine when and how the Japanese had their first contact with a person from England. Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education states that the first English man that arrived in Japan was Ailliam Adams, who was an English sailor on the Dutch ship, *De Liefde*. This ship drifted ashore in *Bungo* (*Oita* Prefecture now) in 1600, and the first *Shogun*, *Tokugawa Iyeyasu*, summoned him. Adams worked for this *shogun* and got a Japanese name from him, *Miura Anjin*. *Miura* was a place where he landed and *Anjin* meant a “pilot of a ship.” It is reported that *Miura Anjin* worked for *Tokugawa*, however, there is no record left that he taught English to the Japanese.

Phaeton Incident (1808)

In the end of the eighteenth century, French, Russian, British and American vessels started visiting Japan. They all wanted to negotiate for trading with Japan. During the Napoleonic War, the Dutch could not send their vessels to *Nagasaki* due to the conflict with Britain (Yamashita, p. 71). In 1808, the English warship, *Phaeton*, intruded in *Nagasaki* Harbor. Disguised as a Dutch ship, the English attacked the local government and demanded food, taking hostages. This incident shocked the *Edo* regime and the government realized that nobody understood the English language (Cullen, pp. 149 - 150).

Facing this reality, The government immediately ordered several *Oranda-tsuji* to start learning English a year after the incident (Cullen, p. 150). Thus, this incident is considered to have been a marked trigger for the beginning of the English education in Japan.

Ranald MacDonald (1824 -1894)

As described earlier, the *Oranda-tsuji* were ordered, by the government, to learn English. It was part of their professional elements that, upon request, they had to master a new target language for a specific purpose. It is well imaginable that they had a relatively straightforward strategy to learn the syntax and lexicon. They had enough experience by learning Dutch. However, there is not much we can imagine about how they learned to orally communicate in English.

Kimura gave an answer to this question. He stated that a sudden, unanticipated arrival of a young American man changed the situation of *Oranda-tsuji* dramatically. Ranald MacDonald, who landed as an illegal entrant in June, 1848, in Hokkaido (Kimura, p. 67; Schodt, p. 185), was sent to *Nagasaki* in October of the same year (Schodt, p. 254; pp. 262 - 263; p. 273) to teach English to the *Oranda-tsuji*. He is the first native-speaking English teacher in the history of the English education in Japan.

It is remarkable that, despite such a limited period of time, MacDonald taught his students “spoken English,” and as the result, some *Oranda-tsuji* such as *Einosuke Moriyama*, became English interpreters/translators, who were ready for the negotiation, when the special envoy, Matthew Perry, arrived from the United States, in 1854. In this sense, Japan was “just in time” to save itself.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is interesting to see that Japan needed English to be able to isolate itself. In order to be comfortably isolated from the rest of the world, Japan had to be able to “explain” nicely to the rest of the world that it wanted to be left alone. Foreign language education was (and is) necessary to protect the country. As examined in Phaeton Incident, you “lose” without proper language tools and arms.

On the other hand, Japan needed foreign language education in order to keep propelling its power in many ways as an independent country. It also needed foreign languages in order to improve its society and cultural level. It is inevitable for any modern country to know what is going on globally. In this century, we all need to keep up with the world in order to survive.

It is ironical to see, when Phaeton attacked *Nagasaki*, the government suddenly realized that there was a strong and urgent need to “foster the Japanese with English abilities,” which is the title of an action plan that the MEXT (Ministry of Education) of Japan launched in *Heisei* 14, or 2002. It is amazing that the situation has not changed very much since the time of Phaeton incident in 1808. Will Japan change? If so, what would be a trigger to make Japan change? It might be, again, a strong power or incident to force Japan to change. After *Heisei*, we are now about to enter the era of *Reiwa*. Japan is going to host G 20 Osaka in 2019, and after that, the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020. It will be interesting to witness how Japan might change, or might not change in the coming decade.

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Contact email: masako.nishikawa@gol.com