

## Some Implications For Native English-Speaking Teachers In A Japanese ELT Context.

Yue, Sorrell

Division for General Education, Center for Research and Advancement in Higher Education,  
Kyushu University : Associate Professor : Teaching method of English

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## Some Implications for Native English-Speaking Teachers in a Japanese ELT Context.

Sorrell Yue

### Introduction

The number of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) working in Japanese high schools increases annually, with many of those recruited having little or no teaching education or experience, and even less knowledge of the cultural implications of teaching in Japan. The idea that NESTs should take what was successful in their home country and attempt to implement it in Japanese high schools seems not only questionable, but also displays a lack of awareness of the cultural differences that need to be acknowledged and addressed. There are those who claim that NESTs are the obvious choice for an English teacher in Japan, yet being a native speaker of English is not enough to qualify anyone to teach the language. In fact, Phillipson (1992:194) poses the challenging question, “Why should the native speaker be intrinsically better qualified than the non-native?”

This paper looks at the professional and cultural implications of NESTs working in Japanese high schools. Ways in which trained NESTs can contribute to the teaching of English are investigated, and it is maintained that working alongside, rather than apart from, non-native English speaking teachers (non-NESTs) is a prerequisite. (It should be noted that since this paper is discussing Japanese high schools, the references to non-NESTs indicate Japanese teachers of English, unless otherwise stated.)

In addition to the need for better understanding of the present Japanese educational system, it is suggested that NESTs acquaint themselves with the cultural context, in the bounds of which they are working. This paper further recommends that NESTs in Japan study the language of their students. As Dunnett et al (1986:148) claim, all teachers “must possess certain basic understandings about language and culture” in order to present “intercultural” opinions in their classrooms.

In order to ascertain a consumer’s view about NESTs and non-NESTs, a survey was distributed to a group of learners, and the results were assessed in relation to what the findings mean for high school English classes in Japan.

### Defining “culture”

While Lado (1957:110) defines “culture” as the equivalent of “the ways of the people,” Nelson (1995:6) believes it “refers to what is *common* to members of a group ... concern (ing) similarities, not differences” (my italics). Harris (1983:45, discussed in Martin and Nakayama 1997) claims, “Culture is the learned, socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting.” Similarly, Kaihara (1974:160) depicts the term as “the configuration of learned behavior and results of behavior whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society.”

Hinkel’s definition (1999:1) is more comprehensive: “The term culture has diverse and disparate definitions that deal with forms of speech acts, rhetorical structure of text, social organizations, and knowledge constructs. Culture is sometimes identified with notions of personal space, appropriate gestures, time and so forth.”

### Professional and cultural implications of working as a NEST in a Japanese high school

To understand the implications for NESTs in a Japanese high school, the following factors are examined:

- (i) English education in present-day Japanese high schools
- (ii) Attitudes to learning
- (iii) The role of the student
- (iv) The role of the teacher

#### (i) English education in present-day Japanese high schools

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 94.4% of students entered senior high school in 2004 (MEXT 2005). This statistic has remained very similar for the last thirty years (Reischauer 1977; Koyama 1992).

Most Japanese high school students have a minimum of four English lessons a week. The largest amount of teaching time is devoted to English education in Japanese high schools, mainly focusing on training learners how to enter university, with minimal emphasis on the listening and speaking components of English. Consequently, the overall level of ability in English of the students, particularly those who have not attended *kagai* (extra curricular classes) or *juku* (cram schools), has long been considered “poor” (Ota 1994:201).

In 2003, in an attempt to bring about positive changes, MEXT formulated “an action plan to cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” (2003:1). This plan stipulated the need to improve English education in Japan by various means. Five of the points relevant to this paper are given below:

- (a) Discouraging the concept of “teacher-centred” classes based on grammar and translation in favour of Communicative Language Teaching, with English as the medium of classroom teaching (MEXT 2003:3).
- (b) Promoting the number of schools in the “Super English Language High School Program” (SELHi) to one hundred by 2005 (ibid:4). As of April 2006, there were one hundred and one SELHi schools in Japan. (It must be remembered that out of a total of 3719 senior high schools in Japan, only 2.7% of these are SELHi.)
- (c) Actively involving Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in the English education programme (ibid:3).
- (d) Encouraging junior and senior high schools to have a NEST attend classes more than once a week (ibid:5).
- (e) Proposing the implementation of a listening test to the University Centre Examination. This was instigated in February 2006 (ibid:9).

There are some Japanese teachers of English in Japan who desire to see teaching methods for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) improve, yet the vast majority instruct in the same way they were taught themselves, contributing to a cycle which results in little progress. The most common teaching method is grammar-translation or “*chokuyaku* (word-for-word translation)” (Thompson 1987:223), with very little emphasis on the development of communication skills. Conceivably due to a lack of confidence among teachers to move away from the security of traditional *monbukagakusho* (MEXT produced) textbooks, grammar-translation continues to be the focus of almost all English lessons. This is because of the requirements of the university entrance examinations. Hence, the solution is far more complex than changing course materials.

## (ii) Attitudes to learning

While the Communicative Approach has been advocated by many NESTs as the most effective way of teaching English, there are still those who explain why caution is needed in its delivery in Japan. Medgyes (1994:21) points out how NESTs “should not ignore students’ frequent objections to pairwork, groupwork, games, role plays, simulations, projects and other trendy activities. Simultaneously, pleas for more grammar, more L1 (*in this case, Japanese*) explanations, more drills, more translation exercises and more error-correction should be taken seriously” (italics mine). Medgyes (1994:40) cites one reason for students’ reluctance to participate in communicative activities may be “a fear of identity crisis.” Asking learners to talk about themselves, rather than doing role plays, is often more appealing and better suited to the Japanese culture (Swan 1985b:85). Furthermore, teachers need to remember to be sensitive when asking learners of different cultures from their own, to carry out activities in class (Swan 1985a:6). NESTs, new to Japan, often make the mistake of singling out high school students to answer questions or asking pairs to perform role plays in front of the class. This has to be done with caution, and is best attempted when a relationship between the NEST and the learners has been

established.

### (iii) The role of the student

Many NESTs unfamiliar with Japanese culture remark on an apparent “lack (of) initiative” (Koyama 1992:123) shown by high school learners in class. In the same way, Scollon (1999:27) states how “Western teachers unaccustomed to a classroom full of Asian students all too frequently feel that their words are going to waste because they do not get the feedback they are accustomed to not only in terms of comments and questions but in head movement and facial expression.” While it has been said that these are signs demonstrating nothing more than reluctance on the part of the students “to intrude into their teachers’ teaching space” (Koyama 1992:123), this cannot be given as the sole reason for such conduct. Matsumoto (1994:210) contends that some learners’ ways of behaving are “negative”, quite apart from the culture. Therefore, NESTs who enter Japanese high schools under the illusion that discipline will not be a problem because the students are “passive” learners, may be in for a surprise. An additional challenge which faces the teachers is the apparent “tension associated in Japan with language learning” (Thompson 1987:221). This can be demonstrated through a lack of initiative, silence or negative behaviour patterns.

### (iv) The role of the teacher

Japan’s educational style is a classic example of a “teacher-centred approach” since it unconditionally designates “the pride of place to the teacher” (Medgyes 1994:21). Japanese teachers also play a strong “mentor” role and are often consulted by the students about academic or personal difficulties, more than parents. As a rule, learners place “confidence not only in the teacher’s ability but also in his or her strength of character” (Koyama 1992:123).

Unlike non-NESTs, NESTs in Japan are seldom seen in the same light. They are rarely conferred with, even when an academic or personal issue directly relates to them. Levine and Adelman (1982:178) explain that misunderstandings happen “when cultural conflicts do arise, ... be(ing) perceived as personal rather than cultural.” To avoid misunderstanding, it is essential that the NEST acknowledges the role played by the non-NEST is far more than “just a teacher in the classroom.” In light of the different cultural background of Asian learners, Ellis (1996:217-218) states that “the ideal type of relationship the Western teacher can hope to achieve is that of cultural mediator ... It is not enough to operate purely in a theoretical mode, clinging to a single concept of good teaching”.

MEXT (2003:6) considers native speakers an essential part of Japanese learners’ English education, providing “a valuable opportunity for students to learn living English and familiarise themselves with foreign languages and cultures” while also increasing “students’ joy and motivation for English learning.” While this sounds acceptable in theory, as

Mahoney (2004) points out, reality can be different. He suggests that NESTs working on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme as Assistant English Teachers (AETs) may be initially considered “culturally foreign, then as English-speaking teachers” by non-NESTs and learners (Mahoney 2004:299).

Scollon (1999:20) says, “the role of a teacher is to communicate with students”, although for the NEST working in Japan who is unable to express herself in Japanese, communication with most students is very limited. Oxford and Anderson (1995:202) emphasise the importance of acknowledging how “activities and cultural influences cannot be separated from what is learned” in the L2 (second language) classroom.

### Survey

An anonymous survey, consisting of eight statements, was drawn up to investigate learners’ attitudes towards NESTs and non-NESTs. The survey was distributed to forty-six female students in a Japanese SELHi school.

### Participants

The students who answered the survey were aged sixteen and seventeen and at the end of their first semester of their second year in Japanese senior high school. All the participants were members of a special English homeroom and, at the time of the survey, being taught by both NESTs and non-NESTs. Of their total nine English classes per week, six are taught by a non-NEST. Both NEST and non-NEST classes are primarily taught in the L2. Although the non-NEST classes are for the combined homeroom classes, the NEST lessons are divided into two groups, according to the previous semester’s grades. The higher group of students are taught by a non Japanese-speaking NEST, and the lower level learners have a Japanese-speaking NEST. In addition to their English lessons, all the participants have their daily homeroom times conducted in English.

Sixty percent of the students desire to study English, or another foreign language at a university overseas. All the participants had taken a TOEFL test six months prior to the survey in which the scores had ranged from 320 to 490, with a mean score of 390. Therefore, in order to make the survey more comprehensible for the students with less confidence in their English ability, and to obtain more conclusive results, the questions were translated into Japanese to help avoid unnecessary confusion and try to minimise linguistic misunderstanding.

### Aims of the survey

There were three main aims of the survey:

- (i) To ascertain the level of desired NEST involvement and the amount of English spoken in the classroom.
- (ii) To investigate whether the participants consider the roles of non-NESTs and

NESTs to be different. For example Question 4 and Question 8 (See Appendix 1).

- (iii) To identify the level of importance attached by the students to the L2 ability (in this case, Japanese) of the NEST.

### Limitations of the survey

Since only one SELHi class of students was assessed, it would be unrealistic to suggest that the results are conclusive. More research is required with learners in non-SELHi English classes, in order to ascertain if there are any fundamental differences. Furthermore, even though the participants in this study are divided into two groups for their NEST classes, the questionnaire did not require the students to write whether they are in the higher or lower NEST class. Therefore, it is impossible to determine whether having a Japanese-speaking NEST affected the responses of the participants.

### Results of the survey (see Appendices 1 and 2)

- (i) Level of desired NEST involvement and amount of English spoken in the classroom

When asked if they would like to have Japanese-speaking NESTs for all their classes (Statement 1), seventy-five percent of the class were either neutral or opposed. The responses to Statement 5 (*It is best if I have a NEST and a Japanese teacher of English to teach me English classes in junior and senior high school*), however, demonstrated the participants' overall desire for NEST involvement in their English education. These results signify the students' recognition of the need for a balance of non-NESTs and NESTs, and it can therefore be surmised that the students perceive the roles of the non-NESTs and NESTs to be different.

Most participants (over sixty-five percent) expressed their belief that a NEST is the best "introduction" to learning English (Statement 6). Incorrect teaching of pronunciation at the onset of learning English can prove to be detrimental to the learner in later years.

Given that these learners had opted to study in an English homeroom and were theoretically more enthusiastic than regular high school students about English, the results of Statement 3 (*We should be taught English "in English" in senior high school*) were somewhat surprising. Only forty-five percent of students circled 1 or 2 for the statement, indicating their desire for English classes to be taught in the target language.

- (ii) Roles of teachers' as perceived by the learners

Statement 4 (*A Japanese teacher of English can help me improve my grammar better than a Japanese-speaking NEST*) and Statement 8 (*A NEST can teach me how to communicate in English better than a Japanese teacher of English*) illustrate different focal points of English classes: grammar and communication. With over sixty percent of the participants agreeing with Statement 4, greater concern was demonstrated than had been

anticipated. Many high school learners appear reluctant to ask a Japanese-speaking NEST a grammatical question, presupposing they do not know the answer. However, if trained, NESTs should be able to expand on more complex areas of English grammar. The results for Statement 8 were unsurprising, with sixty-five percent of the students expressing a belief that NESTs are more proficient at teaching English communication skills.

(iii) The importance of the L2 (Japanese) ability of the NEST

The responses to Statements 2 and 7 (*It is important that my English teacher can speak Japanese; In high schools, it is good if my NEST cannot speak or understand Japanese*) demonstrate the participants' belief that the NEST should have a reasonable comprehension of the students' L1 (native tongue). Nine participants disagreed with Statement 2 and only six students agreed with Statement 7. These results infer that the NEST cannot succeed by only using her mother tongue in a high school. More research is needed in this area, not least, amongst more proficient speakers of English in Japanese high schools.

#### Ways in which NESTs can contribute to teaching English in Japanese high schools

While "the primary advantage attributed to NESTs lies in their superior English-language competence" (Arva and Medgyes 2000:6), there are five important pointers for NESTs considering a career in high school teaching in Japan.

(i) Need for more experienced and qualified NESTs

Widdowson's (1992) concern over the lack of hesitation to employ untrained NESTs, merely because they are native speakers, is echoed by Cook (1999). For several years, Japan has seen many completely untrained and inexperienced NESTs take jobs in high schools. As a result, in present-day Japan, it is difficult for the trained and experienced NESTs to gain credibility in high schools. There has been a great reluctance on the part of Japanese high school teachers of English to involve NESTs with "real English teaching". Most NESTs teach courses which are not assessed with the same rigour as those taught by Japanese teachers, and often their lesson content and pedagogical knowledge are considered "second rate" by students and teachers alike in comparison with non-NESTs'. Rather than being negative or divisive, it is suggested that these opinions derive from a lack of professionalism amongst NESTs in Japan. This has resulted in suspicion amongst the non-NESTs of the viability of employing "*gaikoku no sensei*" (foreign teachers). Just as Carless (2006:2) highlights, it is clear that unless more NESTs gain adequate training and experience before entering Japanese high schools, this situation will remain unchanged, leaving the teaching of English to persist in the same way it has for the last fifty years. While MEXT's Action Plan promotes the effective "use of native speakers of English ...with excellent experience" (MEXT 2003:7), it fails to mention the need for *qualified* NESTs (italics mine).



## (ii) Need to study English grammar

Barratt and Kontra's research (2000:20-21) states that NESTs are less perceptive in presenting grammar and less conscientious about correcting errors than their host colleagues. Similarly, Arva and Medgyes' research (2000:7) concluded that a lack of grammatical knowledge was listed as the weakest area of the NESTs' teaching. This illustrates the need for NESTs to continue the study of their native grammar in order to become more effective high school instructors.

## (iii) Study the L1 (Japanese) of the learners

"The rationale used to justify English only in the classroom is neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound" (Auerbach 1993:15), yet some NESTs in Japan use this as an excuse for not learning Japanese or using the L2 with their students. This can easily be interpreted as laziness and superiority by non-NEST colleagues. Yamamoto-Wilson (1997:8) proposes that if NESTs "make meaningful connections between the target language and the mother tongue" we may have more competent Japanese learners of English. Both Medgyes (1992) and Widdowson (1992) advocate that better language learners often make better teachers. In Arva and Medgyes' research (2000:8), the NESTs lack of ability to speak the learners' L1 was considered a serious drawback. Several research projects have surmised that an adequate knowledge of the learners' L1 is a prerequisite to more effective EFL teaching (Carless 2006; Barratt and Kontra 2000; Cook 1999). Therefore, if NESTs want to make a positive impact in Japanese high school English classes, they need to study the language of their learners.

## (iv) Need to study more about the culture of the learners

Studying a foreign language and the culture of that nation, often go hand in hand. While NESTs are noted for being rich in cultural resources regarding their native countries, Cook (1999) and Tajino & Tajino (2000) emphasise the need to become more familiar with cultural aspects of the L2 learners. In addition, NESTs need to have respect for culturally well-established classroom practices (Carless 2006:10), rather than assuming their own methodology is superior.

## (v) Need for more cooperation between non-NESTs and NESTs.

Finally, as expressed through the students' questionnaires, a balance of non-NESTs and NESTs is the students' ideal, but for this to be achieved, there needs to be far more cooperation and respect shown on both sides of the fence.

## Conclusion

It is important to realise how an "awareness of one's disadvantage is absolutely necessary for any teacher to improve" (Murahata 2006:6). For the NEST in Japan, it is essential to recognise the different roles of teachers and students within Japanese culture. Likewise, it is imperative for NESTs to be appropriately trained for the work of teaching

in high schools. As stated by Medgyes (1994:78), “the *ideal* NEST” is someone who has both a reasonable level of proficiency in the learners’ L1 and an understanding of English grammar. At the same time, it is important to remember that while the NEST has distinct functions in Japan, “different does not imply better or worse” (Arva and Medgyes 2000:4).

## Appendix 1

## Questionnaire on NESTs and non-NESTS

Please read the following statements and circle your answers. 下の質問を読んで、あなたの意見に○をつけてください。

1 = STRONGLY agree ... 5 = STRONGLY disagree

1 = (まったくそう思う) ... 5 = (まったくそう思わない)

NEST = Native English-Speaking Teacher (ネイティブスピーカー)

- (1) It is best if I have a Japanese-speaking NEST for all my English classes.  
日本語を話せるネイティブスピーカーの先生がすべての英語の授業をできれば一番よいと思う。  
1      2      3      4      5
- (2) It is important that my English teacher can speak Japanese.  
英語の教師が日本語を話すことは大切である。  
1      2      3      4      5
- (3) We should be taught English “in English” in senior high school.  
高校では、英語は「英語で」教えられるべきだと思う。  
1      2      3      4      5
- (4) A Japanese teacher of English can help me improve my grammar better than a Japanese-speaking NEST.  
日本人の英語教師は、日本語が話せるネイティブスピーカーの先生より、上手に文法を教えられると思う。  
1      2      3      4      5
- (5) It is best if I have a NEST and a Japanese teacher of English to teach my English classes in junior and senior high school.  
中学・高校の英語の授業は、日本人とネイティブスピーカーの両方の先生が教えてくれる方が一番よいと思う。  
1      2      3      4      5
- (6) It is important for students to have a NEST when they first start learning English.  
初めて英語を学習するとき、ネイティブスピーカーの先生に習うのは大切だと思う。  
1      2      3      4      5
- (7) In high school, it is good if my NEST cannot speak or understand Japanese.  
高校では、ネイティブスピーカーの先生が日本語を話せなかったり、理解できないことは良いことだと思う。  
1      2      3      4      5
- (8) A NEST can teach me how to communicate in English, better than a Japanese teacher of English.  
ネイティブスピーカーの先生は、日本人の先生より、英語のコミュニケーションの仕方をよりよく教えてくれる。  
1      2      3      4      5

**Appendix 2**

**Results of Survey on Attitudes towards NESTs and non-NESTs**

**Table 1 No. of participants (46) per score per statement (St)**

	1	2	3	4	5
St 1	7	4	14	11	10
St 2	17	8	12	8	1
St 3	8	13	13	9	3
St 4	18	10	7	9	2
St 5	27	6	6	4	3
St 6	21	9	7	6	3
St 7	4	2	10	13	17
St 8	20	10	9	1	6

**Table 2 % of participants per score per statement**

	1	2	3	4	5
St 1	15	9	30	24	22
St 2	37	18	26	17	2
St 3	17	28	28	20	7
St 4	39	22	15	20	4
St 5	59	13	13	9	6
St 6	46	20	15	13	6
St 7	9	4	22	28	37
St 8	43	22	20	2	13

**Table 3 Average score per statement**

St 1	3.29
St 2	2.31
St 3	2.67
St 4	2.29
St 5	1.91
St 6	2.16
St 7	3.80
St 8	2.18

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