

## **The History of EFL From the Tokugawa Period Until 1945**

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### **Introduction**

This essay examines the status of the English language in Japanese society and education from the Tokugawa period until the end of World War II. After a brief historical introduction, the author introduces the historical personalities and socioeconomic factors that led to the growth of English language teaching in Japan during this period.

### **A Short History of Japan**

Until 1853, Japan remained a centralized, feudal society that shunned any contacts with the rest of the world. The Tokugawa rulers who had come into power in 1600 were afraid that Western ideas would undermine their authority. They persecuted the small Christian community that had developed earlier, they limited their trade with Europeans to the minimum possible, and they forbade Japanese living abroad to return to Japan. Instead, they established a centralized, hierarchical state that enforced a strict stratification of classes and severely restricted social mobility.

Although the policies of the Tokugawa rulers brought peace for over two hundred years, they also had a very negative effect. Because of the severely limited flow of information coming from the outside world, Japan stagnated and failed to participate in the revolutionary technological advances taking place in Western societies (Haiducek, 1991, p. 15).

All this came to an abrupt end in 1853 when the United States navy, commanded by Commodore Perry, used its advanced

military power to force the Japanese to open their ports to American tradesmen. The old political order lost its legitimacy because it had failed to protect the country from the foreigners. In 1868, dissatisfied members of the military class (Samurai) banded together and under the name of the Emperor they seized power.

The new political order was called the Meiji Restoration. Its motto was "rich country, strong military" and in order to achieve this, it embarked on an ambitious program of social and economic reform. The goal was to reach parity with Western powers as soon as possible. The new leaders decided that the best way to succeed was to imitate the social, economic, technological, and military advances of the Westerners (Reishauer, 1988, p.81).

Japan was very successful in its modernizing endeavor. By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was strong enough to defeat Russia in war and to start having imperialistic aspirations of its own. The effort to create an empire brought to power a militaristic regime that antagonized the Western powers for supremacy in Asia. Eventually Japanese expansionism led Japanese leaders to fight and lose World War II against the Western powers.

### **The Status of the English Language in the Tokugawa Period**

Before the Meiji Restoration, the influence of the English language was minimal in Japan. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, William Adams, an English adventurer and entrepreneur whose ship capsized off the Japanese coast, became a hostage adviser to the Tokugawa ruler Ieyasu and was never allowed to return home. Adams was instrumental in helping to

open a trading house in Japan in 1613 which did not survive long. The future did not bode well for cross-cultural communication. A few years later, in 1639, all contact with the outside world came to an end and only the Dutch were allowed to trade in two ports in Kyushu. Japan thus entered a period of self-imposed isolation that was to last over two hundred years.

During this period of isolation, English slowly became one of the foreign languages learned by Japanese interpreters. In 1809, when a British warship attacked the Dutch trading post in Nagasaki, the Japanese government ordered its interpreters to learn English in order to be able to communicate with this ascending power. A Dutch man, Jan Cock Bloomhoff, was asked by the Japanese authorities to teach English, which he did with the help of a few Dutch/English language books.

By 1811, *A Brief Guide to Learning English* (*Angeriya Kokujo Wage*) an English-Japanese phrase book based upon a similar Dutch one, was published by Shozaemon Motoki, one of Bloomhoff's students. Three years later, the same author managed to publish a 7,000 word English-Japanese dictionary in Nagasaki; and at the time, Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* was translated into Japanese (Fukuhara, 1963, pp. 94-95).

In addition to these first modest efforts to introduce the English language, a few adventurous individuals also contributed to its slow spread. Ranald MacDonald, an American sailor of Scottish-Indian background, arrived in Japan because he believed it was the ancient home of the American Indians. The Japanese authorities duly imprisoned him for seven months before letting him board another American ship. Nevertheless, during his incarceration, he was able to teach English to fourteen official

interpreters. A few years later, two of his students became Commodore Perry's interpreters.

Around the same time, Manjiro Nakahama, a Japanese sailor whose ship had capsized, was saved by an American vessel and ended up in America. He stayed there for ten years because he was afraid to return home where it was forbidden to associate with foreigners. When he finally returned, he brought along an English grammar book and a dictionary, and eventually in 1855 he published *A Short Cut to English Conversation (Eibei Taiwa Shokei)*. Ironically, Nakahama was not allowed to act as an interpreter to Commodore Perry. His long absence from his native land and his English language proficiency were seen as signs of untrustworthiness that could lead to treachery (Fukuhara, 1963, pp.94-95).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, increased contacts with foreigners and the steady rise of British and American powers in world affairs in general, and in the Pacific region in particular, necessitated the addition of the English language as a subject in the Tokugawa School of Western Studies. In addition to this, the Japanese government started sending the brightest students on overseas educational trips. At the same time, new English language books kept appearing on the market. In 1862, one of MacDonald's students published a very thick English/Japanese dictionary with 20,000 entries. Also during this time, the Tokugawa Government Bureau of Western Studies printed a thin English grammar book first published in London. A few years later in 1867, when the Tokugawa government was collapsing, an American missionary to Japan, James Hepburn (the person who invented the system for romanizing Japanese writing)

published in Shanghai, *A Japanese and English Dictionary*; with an English and Japanese Index (Dore, 1965, p. 167).

English was progressively recognized by the Tokugawa government as the language of choice to communicate with and learn from the ascending Western powers. The dramatic political and socioeconomic changes that followed the Meiji Restoration sped this process and firmly established English as the dominant foreign language.

### **EFL Teaching From the Meiji Restoration to the End of World War II**

One of the first moves of the Meiji authorities was to establish *Mombusho* (Ministry of Education) in 1871. The Japanese political rulers wanted to catch up with the Western powers as soon as possible. It was therefore necessary to learn the basics of Western science and technology and to introduce Western educational concepts to Japanese society. The Japanese who were most qualified for this job were the Occidentalists, people who were previously employed in the Bakufu School of Western Studies. During the first decade of the Meiji Restoration they were instrumental in translating many Western (especially American) educational policy books and textbooks. Their knowledge was invaluable to the new government and they actively assisted in educational policy-making and reform (Kobayashi, 1976, p. 24).

In addition to the Occidentalists, another group of Japanese brought Western ideas and languages to Japan. They were bright students of illustrious families who were sent abroad to study the Western civilization. Mori Arinori (1842-1889) was the most important of these well-traveled scholars.

He was born in Kagoshima Prefecture in the Satsuma region of southwestern Japan. When he was eighteen, he was sent to England together with four government officials and thirteen other students to study the British academic and economic system. When he returned to Japan in 1868, he went to work for the Foreign Ministry which sent him to Washington, D.C. He arrived there in 1871, a young twenty-three year old scholar eager to investigate the American educational system, and if possible, to introduce it to Japan. In his youthful enthusiasm, he proposed that the United States and Japan jointly set up many institutions of higher education in Japan and staff them with American teachers using English as the language of instruction. At that time, he was so impressed by the American political, economic and educational system that he suggested that Japan adopt English as its national language, a proposal that was not well received by his superiors.

On a more practical level, Mori actively investigated the state of technical, industrial and commercial education in America, in order to help his country open similar institutions and catch up with the Western powers.

Upon his return to Japan, Mori worked for the Ministry of Education as a commissioner and eventually he became the Minister of Education in 1886. During his tenure in *Mombusho*, he tried hard to create a modern Japanese educational system equal to Western standards (Haiducek, 1991, p. 19).

A third group of technical experts and foreign language educators hired by the Japanese government further familiarized the Japanese with the English language. The technical experts were necessary in order to introduce Western technology to

Japanese society, and this resulted in the spread of the English language. The foreign teachers' primary goal was to train a small number of Japanese to communicate with foreign experts and to translate foreign technological books. It was understood that once enough Japanese English language teachers were trained, the number of foreign educators would be greatly reduced. Foreign instructors and experts were very expensive and they accounted for fourteen percent of the *Mombusho* total educational budget. Some of these foreign advisors and language teachers were paid up to 600 yen a month while the salary of the president of *Tokyo Daigaku* was only 400 yen per month. (Beauchamp, 1976, p. 87).

As a result of all these social and educational reforms, English became the most important foreign language of the Japanese educational system. By the time Mori became Minister of Education in 1866, English was included as a subject in some elementary schools and was a required subject in all middle schools and their senior divisions (which later evolved into the modern day high-schools). It was rigorously studied for five to seven hours every week for a total duration of forty weeks per academic year.

There were five kinds of teachers available at that time: 1) The few Christian missionaries living in Japan; 2) The foreign language and technical experts hired by the Japanese government; 3) The Japanese who had traveled abroad; 4) The Japanese who had learned English in Japan under the guidance of foreign language experts; and lastly 5) Foreigners who came to Japan on their own accord without a contract and got a job once they landed. Although the above teachers did not systematically

employ any of the modern teaching methods, they were quite successful in transmitting their knowledge of English to an eager audience of students. The Meiji spirit gave the students a strong impetus to learn. The English language was seen as the main tool for socioeconomic advancement and national reconstruction and students were willing to diligently acquire the language no matter how good or bad the language instructors and their teaching techniques were (Brownell, 1965, p. 41).

The Meiji era came to an end in 1912 and by then English had become the indisputable foreign language of modern Japan. But there were some changes that affected the quality of English instruction. The Meiji era lasted forty-five years. During that time the Japanese had managed to master much of Western technology and they were thus able to greatly reduce the number of foreign experts and teachers. Also, most of the technical textbooks had already been translated into Japanese and technical instruction could be offered in Japanese as well. The need for the English language started to dwindle rapidly since it was not considered as important as in the beginning of the Meiji era. The government tried to counter this trend by increasing the number of English language teachers in Japanese middle and higher schools, so that in every school there were one or even two foreign teachers. Nevertheless, English lost its practical value among the general student population and eventually its institutionalization led to academic rigidity. As a required subject, it was taught in a more systematic way and the concentration shifted to syntax, grammar and vocabulary (Brownell, 1965, p. 42).

There were some efforts to bring new teaching ideas to English instruction but they were not very successful. In 1923, teachers of English in Japan founded the Institute for Research in English Teaching which enjoyed official status under the auspices of *Mombusho*. The institute tried to improve the teaching of instructors with new textbooks, applied research and the publication of a monthly bulletin. At the same time, Harold E. Palmer, a British linguist working at several Japanese universities, tried with the help of some Japanese innovative educators to expand the goals of the Japanese language program. He thought that teaching only writing and reading skills was not enough and that listening and speaking skills should also be included. But the time was not ripe for change. By the 1930's, Japan was an ascending Asian economic and military power set on a collision course against the already established European colonial powers in the region. Under the circumstances, an expansion of the English language program to include oral skills was not politically feasible.

The net result of this was that by the mid-thirties, English education in Japanese high-schools was reduced to rigid and rote memorization of grammar rules, syntactical structures and vocabulary lists. It was estimated by a foreign observer that up to seventy-percent of Japanese middle school graduates did not know any English, even though they had studied it for five years (Brownell, 1965, p. 42).

The situation for English teaching continued to deteriorate as the Second World War approached; and right before the beginning of the war, English teaching was forbidden by the government. Only after the defeat in 1945 and the American

occupation that followed would English become once more a required foreign language with high prestige.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of the English language in Japan rose dramatically right after the Meiji Restoration. While during the Tokugawa period English was seen as just another relatively unimportant Western language, the Meiji rulers considered the English language a useful tool in the modernization effort taking place all over Japan. By the end of the Meiji Restoration (1912), the success of the modernization effort lowered the importance of English. The teaching of English became institutionalized, tedious, and mechanical. Eventually Japan turned against the established colonial powers in Asia and English was completely removed from the educational curriculum right before the onset of World War II. However by 1945, it became an important language once again.

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