

Japanese Attitudes Towards Foreign Languages

Keiko Abe

Department of International Studies, Kyoritsu Women's University, Tokyo, Japan

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to clarify Japanese attitudes towards foreign languages based on the kinds and changes of TV and radio programs that aired on the Japanese national broadcasting station (NHK) between 1955 and 2000. Foreign language programs are classified into three groups according to their content: 1) cultivation, 2) education, or 3) communication. For Japanese people, foreign languages are the measures of intelligence and intellect. Studying a foreign language is considered a sign of intelligence whether or not it is used for actual communication. The number of foreign language programs has increased tremendously since 1965 in part because the global economy has brought many countries in such close contact. Since 1990, programs for the purpose of communication have increased because of the necessity to communicate with foreign people. Japanese attitudes towards studying foreign languages have been changing gradually from an intellectual purpose to a communication purpose.

Key words: *language attitudes, media, language contact*

Introduction

With the expansion of technology and transportation development, many Japanese have experienced the direct contact with foreign people and foreign cultures. People can communicate across oceans from their private rooms by Internet. Despite this situation, however, many Japanese have trouble communicating in Eng-

lish. Why are Japanese people such poor communicators in English?

Recent results of TOEFL scores show that average score of Japanese ranks in 18th among 21 Asian countries on written examinations and 21st among 22 Asian countries on computer-based examinations*.

* The average scores of 5 Asian countries on TOEFL written examinations and computer-based examinations are as follows. Numbers in the parentheses are the average scores on listening examinations. China 562(54), 211(20), Indonesia 545(56), 203(21), South Korea 535(51), 198(20), Thailand 512(50), 193(20), Taiwan 510(50), 194 (20), Japan 501(49), 188(19)¹.

Even though Japan was under American occupation for a while after WWII, there were not many good English speakers among ordinary people in those days except special people who had direct contact with the occupation personnel. One of the reasons for this is that the purpose of education was not for communication but for cultivation.

The U.S. has been the role model in various aspects for Japanese ever since the end of WWII. Japanese people have imitated the U.S. political system, and basic aspects of their social and daily lifestyles as well. People who could speak English had some advantages in the society. Having English ability is one of the strongest tools for rising up the social ladder since it is a very important language and thus many Japanese tried very hard to study and master it.

English is one of the compulsory subjects in school from junior high school. Hence, English is one of the main subjects on the entrance examinations for senior high schools and universities. Even during job interviews, many companies administer examinations which measure an applicant's English abilities. Even though students study the language for a minimum of 6 years in junior and senior high school before going to university, their English is still not strong enough to communicate comfortably.

The purpose of this study is to clarify changing Japanese attitudes towards English and foreign languages through the research of actual Japanese contact with foreign languages in daily life. TV and radio programs in foreign languages which aired on the Japanese national education broadcasting station NHK (Ni-

hon Hosokyo Kai, which means the Association of Japanese broadcasting in Japanese) between 1955 and 2000 have been used for this study. The kinds and content of programs and their changes are included in this investigation.

The reason why TV and radio programs are employed for the analysis of this study is that many Japanese enjoy studying foreign languages by viewing and listening to such programs. More than 3 million textbooks of English had been sold in 1998*. Since the TV and radio stations on NHK are owned by the government, they try to make programs which meet viewers and listeners' requests. They carry out questionnaires every year in order to seek the people's opinions and demands. The results are reported in their journals available to the public.

National Broadcasting Station of Japan (NHK)

What is the Japanese national broadcasting station? And how does it differ from regular commercial stations? The Japanese national broadcasting station, NHK, has two TV stations and two radio stations**: they are radio and TV stations for regular programs and education radio and TV stations for educational purposes. NHK is a national station that collects money from almost all Japanese who own TV sets. When this station was created in 1953, they used the BBC of Great Britain as a model.

The basic rules for making programs are fairness and equality for all people in Japan. When a producer makes programs, his/her purpose is to try to satisfy the average Japanese. Thus, the study of these

* About 650 thousand Chinese and Italian textbooks and 42 thousand French textbooks were sold in 1998².

** NHK regular radio broadcasts started in 1928, TV broadcasts in 1956 for regular programs. Japanese national education radio broadcasts started in 1945 and TV broadcasts in 1962, specifically for education purposes.

programs reflects the needs of the average Japanese.

There are several restrictions for making programs since the Japanese National Broadcasting Station is owned by Japanese government. Producers cannot make all the programs that they may want to. The fairness and the equality of NHK is maintained by following these basic tenets:

- a. They cannot easily quit the program once they start broadcasting it.
- b. They cannot make programs which might be employed for a temporary fad.
- c. New programs are made only when many people need them.
- d. When commercial stations make programs, they refer to audience rating.

Thus they make programs that reflect the fad phenomenon of the time. The programs of the commercial stations are unstable. When the National Broadcasting Station makes programs, they refer to the request of the majority of the Japanese. This indicates that the programs are stable.

Methodology of the Study

The number of TV and radio foreign language programs of NHK has been counted for each week in every five year period between 1955 to 2000 and investigated as follows:

- What kinds of languages are taught?
- What are the purposes of the programs?
- What are the contents of the programs?
- What are the titles of the programs?
- When does a new program start? And why?

Since 1970 the repeat programs have increased as technology developed. This is due to the fact that the number of programs was higher in 1965 than in 1970. The numbers represent the total number of all foreign language programs for both

TV and radio from one week of a year, excluding any repeated programs. This research is not concerned with quantities of the programs such as total amount of air time, but with qualities of the programs.

Results

Figure 1 shows the changes of the language' programs on NHK between 1955 and 2000. The figure above shows the changes in the kinds of language programs while the figure below shows the changes in three categories, 1) cultivation purposes, 2) education purposes, or 3) communication purposes of language programs. These numbers represent the total number of all foreign language programs for both TV and radio from one week of the year which excludes any repeated programs.

Characteristics and Changes of Foreign Language Programs

Numbers of foreign languages

The changes in the programs reflect the changing preferences of Japanese people and the changing relationships with those countries (Figure 1). The kinds of foreign languages and the number of programs are influenced by international affairs, including international events such as the Olympics and the number of the people who travel abroad².

There were four foreign language programs in 1955 and 3 in 1960. These numbers increased to 9 in 2000. The number of foreign language programs has tremendously increased since 1985 as globalization expanded rapidly. International exchanges among countries have substantially increased as well. The news programs in Portuguese were started in 1995 to satisfy the demand from the increasing number of immigrants who came from Brazil. They are not intended for Japanese viewers.

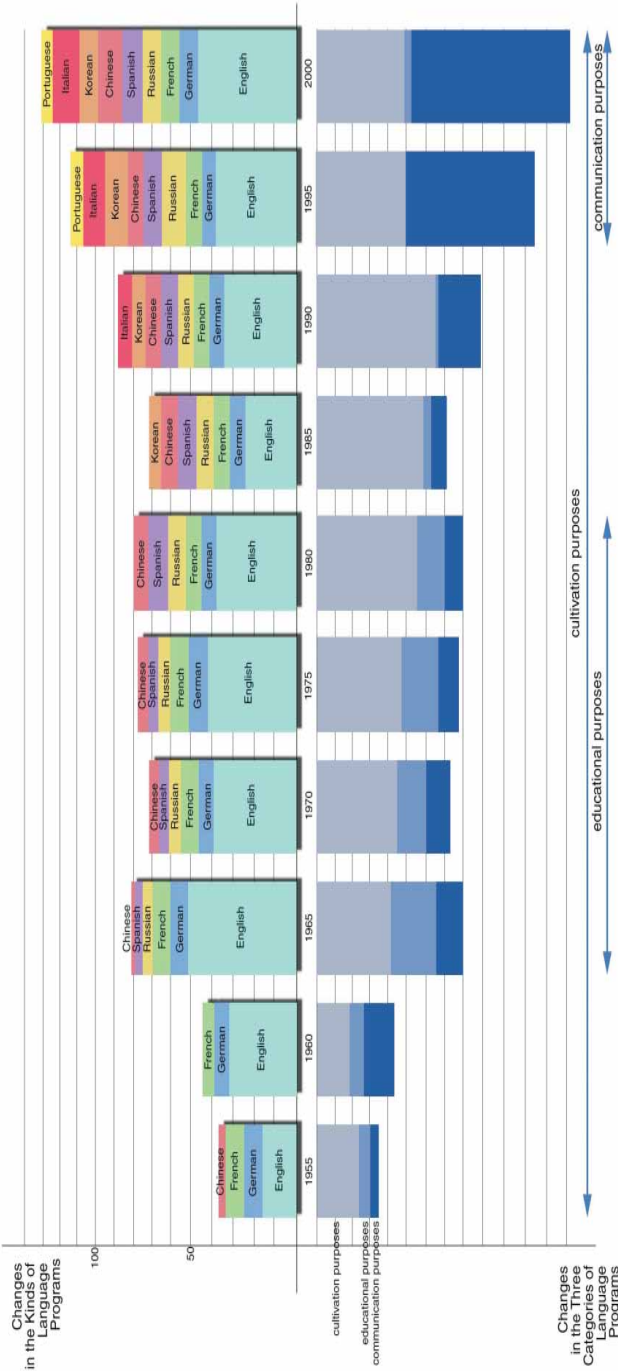


Fig. 1. Changes of the language programs of National Broadcasting Station. (These numbers represent the total number of all foreign language programs for both TV and radio from one week of the year which excludes any repeated programs. Since 1970 the repeat programs have increased as the technology has developed. This is due to the fact that the number of programs increased between the years 1965 than 1970. Since 1995, news programs have begun to be broadcast in Portuguese for the vast numbers of immigrants from Brazil.)

Changes according to each language

English

Most of the programs are for the study of English. They are classified into four kinds of programs: 1) grammar based programs, 2) for actual school classes, 3) preparation for entrance examinations, and 4) conversation focused programs.

- 1) Programs for grammar: They are »Basic English« and »Basic English II«. The instructors give lectures on the grammar of English sentences.
- 2) Programs for actual school classes: As there are relatively few native speakers of foreign language instructors in Japan, students can listen to the pronunciation of native speakers by viewing and listening to the programs in the classes.
- 3) Programs for entrance examinations: The instructors explain the questions and answers using the actual questions from the written exams.
- 4) Programs for Communication Purpose: Since 1990 more programs for practical communication have been made. They are »Simple English Conversation«, »Let's Try to Speak in English«, and »English for Three Months«.

Before 1985, the contents of the programs mainly focused on grammar, school classes and entrance examinations.

German, French and Russian

These three languages have been offered regularly between 1955 and 2000. German and French TV programs started in 1959 and Russian TV program started in 1973.

Chinese and Korean

Since 1985, these languages have become a focal point since the expansion of the economy in Asian countries. The Olympic was held in Seoul, South Korea in 1988. Chinese TV program started in 1973 and Korean TV program started in

1984. As Korea is Japan's neighboring country, it would seem that Korean language would be very popular among Japanese, but it is not. The division of Korea after WWII delayed the start of the Korean programs both on radio and TV.

Spanish

Before and after the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 many Japanese became interested in Spain. More people traveled to Spain than before the Olympics.

Italian

Italy is one of the favorite countries Japanese want to travel to. The Japanese National Broadcasting station NHK, makes programs at the request of many viewers for their future trips. They made a conversation program for people who want to travel. This is an exceptional trend that a conversation program has started from the beginning compared with other languages. Programs of German, French and other languages had started as grammar-focused programs then changed into communication-focused programs such as »German Conversation« and »French Conversation«.

As far as the figure is concerned foreign language programs are classified into three groups according to their content. They are: 1. cultivation purpose, 2. education purpose, or 3. communication purpose.

Cultivation purpose

To study foreign language for Japanese is not for the purpose of communication with native speakers but has been an intellectual hobby of sorts for a long time similarly to people in Europe studying Latin. Foreign language ability has been considered to be a measure of intelligence and indicator of social class. Having foreign language ability is an advantage similar to graduating from prestigious schools. When people study foreign lan-

guages, they are satisfied with their act of studying and not necessarily with the achievement of their efforts as they think that they are studying for something very special by themselves. Many of the programs are made for this purpose and the number of the programs in this category is high, up to 1990. The focus is on basic grammar, reading and writing. The instructors offer the lecture similar to the ones in school classrooms.

Education purpose

Many programs are made to help regular classes in junior and senior high schools. Students watch the programs during class time. These programs supplement the need for native speakers of foreign language instructors since there are not as many native speakers of foreign languages as are needed. Programs for English for entrance examination study for junior and senior high school students as well as university students. English is one of the three main subjects on entrance examinations*. These programs are made for test purposes.

Communication purpose

Since 1990, more communication purpose programs have increased as many Japanese started to travel abroad and number of people who come from foreign countries increased. The number of people who travel abroad was 160 thousand in 1965, 2470 thousand in 1975, 4950 thousand in 1985 and 15300 thousand in 1995. The number of foreign nationals arriving in Japan was 370 thousand in 1965, 810 thousand in 1975, 2330 thousand in 1985 and 3730 thousand in 1995³. Exchange rates of Dollar-Yen have also affected an increase in this area of need. As the increase number of language schools,

the varieties of learning tools and publications had influenced the change of the contents of the programs from cultivation and educational purpose to communication purpose².

Most of the titles of foreign languages' programs have changed from »Class« to »Conversation«, such as »French Class« to »French Conversation«, »German Class« to »German Conversation«, »Spanish Class« to »Spanish Conversation«. The kinds of program titles are varied. Some examples of titles are »Business English«, »English Conversation for Listening«, »Practical Business English«, »Conversation in 100 Words« »Singing in English«, » English for Middle Aged People« and »Listening in Drama«.

Characteristics of Japanese Attitudes Toward Foreign Language Contacts

Foreign Languages are the measures of intelligence and intellect for Japanese. Japanese people study foreign languages to show off their intelligence, not just for communication with native speakers. The history of Japanese contacts with foreign countries explains this attitude. Since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese government studied and borrowed the political, economic, and social systems of Britain, Germany and France. Many intelligent people favored reading the literature of the Germans, Russians, French and Chinese like European people studying Latin.

For these reasons, Japanese people study foreign languages to increase their own intelligence and for their own cultural cultivation. To study a foreign language is a very high level subject that reaches beyond communication with na-

* The entrance examinations to universities are very competitive in Japan. The university one enters (and graduates from) confers a social status depending upon the rank of the university.

tive speakers of the language. It is because of this that foreign language programs such as German, French, and Russian have been broadcast constantly since 1955. Since traditionally many medical words are in German and medical doctors have high status in Japan, people who can understand German are highly respected. The other reason for this continuity is that it is very difficult for NHK to quit a program once it starts one.

One more important factor that explains the attitudes of Japanese people for foreign languages is the need to prepare for entrance examinations. Because many entrance examinations are only in written form, English for the entrance examination emphasizes reading and writing instead of oral communication with English speakers. This is the reason why so many Japanese cannot communicate with English speakers even though they have studied English since they were in junior high school.

Conclusions

There are five reasons why a certain language contacts with another language. They are 1) human contact; 2) products contact; 3) mass media; 4) national lan-

guage policy; and 5) multiculturalism⁴. According to Miura, the expansion of a language that crosses a national boundary depends upon the total power of the country where the language is used⁵. In other words, which foreign language is learned in another country has been influenced by the result of the relationship between these countries as well as their language policies and educational systems.

Through the investigation of TV and radio programs of NHK between 1955 and 2000, Japanese attitudes towards learning foreign language is revealed. As the Japanese economy expanded from the 1970s, many Japanese people traveled abroad. Globalization and internet use increased since 1990, giving many Japanese people opportunities to communicate with foreigners. As a result, Japanese realized that they could not communicate with foreigners well because their foreign language classes, particularly English classes, were focused solely on reading and writing. As a result, programs that emphasize practical conversation have begun to increase. The main task for Japanese people who are studying foreign languages is to develop their communicative ability.

REFERENCES

1. TOEFL Test and Score Data Summary. Paper-Based TOEFL Total and Section Score Means. (Educational testing service, Princeton, 1999). — 2. FURUTA H., The NHK Monthly Report on Broadcast Research 48 (1999) 2. — 3. KATO, K.: Survivals and

Future Goals for Small Travel Agencies. (<http://nippon.zaidan.info/seikabutsu/1996/00867/contents/003.htm>, 2003). — 4. ABE, K., Nihongogaku Japanese Linguistics, 21 (2002) 85. — 5. MIURA, N.: What Is Multilingualism? (Fujiwara, Tokyo, 1997).

K. Abe

*Department of International Studies, Kyritsu Women's University, 4-1-27-208,
Kichijojikitamachi, Musashino-shi, Tokyo, 180-0001, Japan
e-mail: abekei@wta.att.ne.jp*

STAVOVI JAPANACA PREMA UČENJU STRANIH JEZIKA

SAŽETAK

Cilj je ovog istraživanja ispitati stavove Japanaca prema stranim jezicima na temelju vrsta i promjena u televizijskim i radijskim emisijama nacionalne japanske televizijske kuće (NHK) u razdoblju od 1955. do 2000. godine. Emisije na stranim jezicima se s obzirom na sadržaj mogu razvrstati u tri skupine, tj. one koje se tiču izobrazbe, učenja i komunikacije. Za Japance su učenje i poznavanje stranih jezika znak inteligencije bez obzira da li se oni stvarno upotrebljavaju u komunikacijske svrhe ili ne. Broj emisija na stranim jezicima značajno je porastao od 1965. godine, dijelom i zbog globalizacije koja je pridonijela približavanju zemalja. Od 1990. emisije kojima je cilj unapređenje komunikacijskih sposobnosti na stranom jeziku brojčano su porasle zbog sve veće potrebe za komunikacijom sa strancima što je uvjetovalo i postepenu promjenu stavova Japanaca prema stranim jezicima od prvenstveno intelektualnog prema sve više komunikacijski usmjerenom interesu.