

English Language Teaching in Japan Issues and Challenges: An Interview with Toshinobu Nagamine and Masaki Oda

by Flora Debora Floris

Petra Christian University (Surabaya, Indonesia)

Introduction

As English is now a global language and has become the language of business, science, technology, academics, entertainment, and politics, the demand for English language instruction in ‘expanding-circle’ countries such as Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia has increased dramatically in the last few years and will continue to do so. However, despite its rapid growth, often times we know very little about English Language Teaching (ELT) in these ‘expanding-circle’ countries. Thus, it is an honor to introduce two esteemed Japanese ELT scholars, Dr. Toshinobu Nagamine of Kumamoto University and Professor Masaki Oda of Tamagawa University who can elaborate more about ELT in this ‘Land of the Rising Sun.’

Toshinobu Nagamine is currently Associate Professor in the Department of English Language Education and the Graduate School of Education at Kumamoto University, Japan. When he was an undergraduate student majoring in international studies in Japan (Miyazaki prefecture, Japan), he had a chance to take English phonetics courses and seminars in teaching English pronunciation to Japanese learners of English. While taking the courses, he became really interested in learning and teaching English in the Japanese EFL context, so he enrolled in courses in a teacher education program. Upon graduation with a BA, he worked as a senior high school teacher. After teaching for two years, Toshinobu gave up the teaching position and continued his graduate studies at Murray State University in Kentucky and Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. He worked on his doctoral dissertation project in Japan while teaching in a junior high school and a national college. He gradually developed a keen interest in becoming an EFL teacher educator, so he applied for a full-time teacher-educator’s position at Prefectural University of Kumamoto. He was involved in in-service as well as pre-service teacher training/education in and outside of the university before moving to nearby Kumamoto University starting from April 1, 2013.





Masaki Oda is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Tamagawa University in Tokyo, Japan. He was the 2003-2004 Chair of the NNEST Caucus. When he was a child, his parents enrolled him in various short summer programs abroad, mainly in the US, the UK and Canada because they wanted him to gain experience by interacting with people from different backgrounds. During that time, he encountered wonderful teachers at his schools, people who later inspired him to become an English teacher. Upon graduation from high school, Masaki Oda achieved a BA in English at Tamagawa University. Next, he took his MA degree in TESL/TEFL in St. Michael's College in Vermont, and then went on to the PhD program in Georgetown University, where he also taught Japanese for several years. He returned to Japan in 1990 and began teaching EFL and training EFL teachers at Tamagawa University.

This article, based on an online interview with these two Japanese scholars, highlights the current foreign language policy in Japan and the future of ELT in the country. It also presents some suggestions for anyone involved in this expanding field.

Current foreign language policy

When asked about the current status of English in Japanese schools, Toshinobu mentions that fifth graders (at the age of 10 or 11) have started to learn English not simply as a curriculum subject but as a form of a communicative English activity held once (one hour) per week. Explaining further, Masaki states that English is not a required subject in secondary schools in Japan. He elaborates, saying, “It is a ‘foreign language’ that is required despite the fact that nearly 97-8% of secondary schools offer English as ‘the’ only foreign language.”

For Masaki, teaching English classes in English rather than in Japanese in upper secondary schools and the inclusion of Foreign Language Activities (FLA) in the elementary school curricula are considered policy makers' responses to public opinion as the Japanese government has often cited public demands as the primary reason for new policy. “The problem, however, is that everything seems to be half-baked,” says Masaki. “FLA is supposed to be a ‘foreign language’ activity, but the reality is ‘English’ activities. And because it is defined as an ‘activity’ not as a ‘subject,’ anyone can teach it as it does not require formal

evaluation, even though the schools have to have FLA in their timetable in lieu of other subjects,” he further observes. These are contentious issues in Japan.

FLA is offered in elementary schools for 35 meetings (or weeks) per year, with each meeting lasting for 45 minutes. In public junior high schools, English class is usually conducted three to four hours per week, while in public senior high schools, it is conducted six to eight hours a week. Private schools have more English classes. Toshinobu points out that except for the elementary-level English education, which focuses more on the development of speaking and listening skills, English is typically taught with a focus on grammar and translation as the university entrance exams generally focus on these facets, and many teachers are most comfortable teaching them.

Developing students' Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) has also become considered one of the crucial goals of English education (de facto foreign language education) in Japan, according to Toshinobu. He further explains that the Course of Study issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) alluded to the importance of ICC. Students are expected to develop sufficient knowledge, attitudes, and skills regarding ICC through English education. It struck him, however, that the teachers' pedagogical approaches vary to a great extent due primarily to the lack of clear guidelines from the MEXT. “Teachers may not have ample opportunities to cultivate a common understanding of the very concept of ICC, evaluation and/or assessment procedures and techniques, etc.”

When asked about the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in Japan, Toshinobu says that MEXT has not adopted CEFR model but that there are some scholars who have been trying to develop CEFR-J (Japanese version of CEFR) for future use. Recently, MEXT has been trying to adapt, develop and utilize a ‘Can-Do list’ as it is used in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) while referring to CEFR. In fact, it has only been introduced to senior high school English education. “Senior high school English teachers have thus been rushing around trying to develop their own Can-Do lists (school-specific lists) because the ministry of education will enact a new language education policy to conduct all English classes in English (in senior high school) from April of 2013. A major pedagogical shift from a traditional approach (e.g., Grammar Translation Method) to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) will be made

soon,” he adds. Unfortunately, although it seems that the CEFR and various Can-do lists are becoming popular in Japanese ELT circles, many people are just jumping on them without much knowledge about them. “I often see instances in which can-do lists are used to find out what students ‘can not do,’ and thus penalize them, instead of (finding out) what students can do,” Toshinobu adds.

Another important issue in ELT in Japan is related to the status of the Native English speaking teacher (NEST). Both Toshinobu and Masaki agree that the enactment of the new language education policy will probably bring the extreme idea of ‘Native Speakerism,’ especially among teachers whose English proficiency is low and those teachers whose perceptions of the new language education policy are negative. “A few participants of my recent research clearly stated in an interview that the ministry of education is trying to lay off Japanese senior high school English teachers whose English proficiency is not up to the level of native English-speaking teachers. Such a perception, I believe, reflects a dominant view among non-native English teachers in Japan,” Toshinobu asserts.

Masaki is of the opinion that there is still a demographic division between the NEST and Non-Native English speaking teachers (NNESTs). He observes that “Native English speaking teachers in Japan often complain that it is difficult for them to participate in ELT organizations as most of them are conducted in Japanese. In contrast, JALT is the only major ELT organization in which English serves as the de-facto official language. This attracts many NES EFL teachers. At the same time, Non-Native English speaking teachers (NNESTs), most of whom are Japanese-speaking local teachers, participate in local ELT organizations which operate mainly in Japanese.” Considering this situation, Masaki suggests that ELT organizations in EFL countries like Japan operate bilingually (in English, the target language, and the local language) as “the role of local language is very important as it is the language to connect the organizations with the community.”

The future of English language teaching in Japan

Masaki believes that in the future, there will be more educated “consumers” and that network-based lessons delivered from the US, Phillipines and other countries will become more popular. He further says that “A substantial number of language institutions may also be established solely to accommodate this specific purpose.”

According to Toshinobu, the fact that the ministry of education has been financially supporting textbook publishers in Japan in digitizing their textbook/workbook content and that some companies have developed and already introduced electronic blackboards to some schools will obviously influence future class dynamics, the types of in-class activities, and teaching and learning styles. It further implies that English teachers' and students' roles should be re-examined in classroom settings. As Toshinobu states, "English teaching/learning may change its shape in terms of many aspects due to the advent of new technology in Japan."

Suggestions for the government, pre-service education administrators, teachers and prospective teacher-graduates

Both Toshinobu and Masaki believe that there are some issues that need to be addressed by all stakeholders involved in ELT in Japan. Toshinobu states that after World War II, the government of Japan carried out a series of education reforms. It was generally believed that knowledge of science and technology promoted the productivity and prosperity of Japan and stabilized the national position in international affairs. As a result, it has been assumed that conformity in the quality of education has made it possible for Japan to claim excellence in basic education rooted in the rigid compulsory education system. But, as Toshinobu further affirms, "It cannot be denied that such educational conformity has generated some negative repercussions. For instance, scientific knowledge and mathematical certainty were excessively valued and actively sought in the education system, while humanistic aspects of education were underestimated, particularly in the area of liberal arts."

The second issue is related to the quality of teachers. The ministry of education started a teacher-certificate renewal system in 2009. So far, this system has not been implemented in such a way that teacher development can be fully promoted. According to Toshinobu, there are no clear guidelines for the faculty members of universities and colleges to develop and offer programs for in-service teachers. In fact, course objectives, as well as content, offered in teacher training programs vary to a great extent, which has generated teachers' negative reactions to the system.

Another pressing issue is related to the implementation of the new language education policy, which requires that all senior high school teachers teach 'all English classes in English.' In addition, English teachers are now expected to teach in a more communicative, student-

centered manner. For Toshinobu, merely adopting communicative language teaching (CLT) in the Japanese EFL context is not sufficient because the current teaching practices and beliefs, which are based primarily on the Grammar-Translation Method, are likely to conflict with CLT. Teachers, therefore, need to explore/develop context-sensitive, locally-appropriate approaches, by adapting to some of the CLT principles. “Otherwise, as one of my recent studies revealed, (non-native) teachers of English are likely to end up as the main barrier to educational change, limiting their role to such a specific area of instruction such as grammar teaching and entrance-exam preparation,” he adds.

Masaki and Toshinobu agree that providing quality teacher education is the key to effective English language teaching in Japan’s future. Teachers need to acquire “astute analytical skills to scrutinize 'macro-structures' of their educational, political context.” In order for these teachers to survive in the changing educational environment, acquiring political tactics to get engaged in discursive practices to negotiate and change the realities may also be vital. For Toshinobu, knowledge and skills to take part in political dialogue and discourse pertaining to education will enable teachers to develop context-sensitive, locally-appropriate teaching methodologies in the long run.

Masaki strongly suggest that teachers, especially those based in EFL contexts, become actively involved in local and international ELT communities. Sharing the resources and maximizing their utilization among the ELT professionals are both crucial for them to develop their professionalism. He further asserts that learning English (and any foreign language) must always benefit each learner; so all teachers must do their best at maximizing the benefits in a given context.

Both Toshinobu and Masaki also wish to increase the number of teacher-educators who are from other EFL countries (outer- and expanding-circles). In Toshinobu’s opinion, the expertise of such teacher-educators may contribute “to change the status quo of the ELT profession in Japan.”

Acknowledgement

Much acknowledgement and appreciation goes to Dr. Willy A. Renandya for his valuable comments on the earlier drafts of this interview. Thanks to Fenty ‘Lidya Blue’ who provided

an additional question and to other members of *Teacher Voices* who offered continual encouragement.

About the Author

Flora Debora Floris is currently a senior lecturer at the English Department of Petra Christian University, Surabaya, where she teaches subjects in the English Education Business program. Her areas of interest include teachers' professional development and the issues of English as an International language.