
Fish Bowl, Open Seas and the Teaching of English in Japan

Yoshida Kensaku

Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH TALK recently about how English education in Japan must change in the 21st century (Yoshida, 2001a; b). When the report of the *Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century* was released in January 2000, a heated discussion followed among many educators about the committee's proposal to make English the second official language of Japan. Regardless of how individuals interpreted the proposal itself, the document has had a profound influence in creating an awareness among the Japanese about the importance of learning English to maintain their nation's global status in the 21st century.

Although there have been many attempts to innovate English education in Japan—including the introduction of native speakers of English as assistant English teachers through the JET Program (McConnell, 2000)—the results have been far from successful. One of the factors contributing to Japan's inability to implement a better and more communicative way of teaching English is the failure to understand the fundamental differences between the so-called traditional approaches and the communicative approaches. In many cases, the latter have been introduced by native speakers of English and some Japanese who have received TEFL/TESL training in English-speaking countries. Many of these people, however, have expressed frustration on coming to or returning to Japan, because it soon became apparent that much of what they had learned did not seem to work in Japan. In other words, they began to realize that what might work in ESL contexts, where English is the language of every day life, does not necessarily work in EFL contexts, where English is seldom used outside the classroom.

Based on the results of a questionnaire administered to expatriate and Japanese teachers of English, Miller (2001) states that there are qualitative differences between the traditional approaches

and the communicative approaches in terms of *goals, language activities, content, teacher roles, student roles, correctness*, as well as *classroom atmosphere*. The frustration experienced by teachers trained in the TEFL/TESL framework very often comes from their inability to accept the fact that the socio-linguistic environment in which English is taught in Japan is different from the environment that was assumed in their TEFL/TESL teacher training programs in English-speaking countries. Miller concludes that “expatriate teachers would be wise to pay careful attention to Japanese contexts of English learning and teaching (Miller, 2001:34).”

In this paper, I would like to show that, while the difference Miller notes between as the traditional approach of teaching English and the imported communicative approach cannot be denied, there is a further distinction that needs to be acknowledged. Even if TEFL/TESL teachers in Japan were to do away with the traditional approach and adopt a communicative approach, they would have to find a model that would work in the Japanese EFL context. As a vehicle to address this issue, I will present two models that I have developed to explicate the way English has been taught as a foreign language (TEFL) in Japan.

The Fish Bowl Model

The first model is what I call the *Fish Bowl Model*. Consider the characteristics of fish living in a fish bowl. The fish in a fish bowl rely 100% on the caretaker for their existence. If the caretaker fails to change the water, or feed the fish, the fish will die. However, as long as the caretaker periodically changes the water, cleans the bowl, and feeds the fish, the fish will live comfortably. In short, the caretaker has complete responsibility for providing the best environment for the fish.

As a result, the fish in the fish bowl survive, albeit in a very artificial environment. While they might be able to live with other fish living in the same fish bowl, they will not be able to mingle with those living outside.

Here is a summary of the characteristics of the Fish Bowl Model.

Reliance on others:

- Someone must feed the fish
- Someone must change the water

Preservation of an ideal environment:

- Someone must maintain the ideal water quality
- Someone must provide the best food
- Someone must keep the environment free of dirt and debris

Isolated, artificial environment:

- Fish are isolated from other fish
- Fish live in a limited, artificial environment

If we now look at this Fish Bowl Model in the context of the traditional teaching and learning of foreign languages in Japan, we realize that students rely almost 100% on the teacher for their “existence.” The classes are teacher centered, and the students are passive learners, absorbing only what the teacher provides them. Very often students ask, “Will this be on the test?” “Do we have to memorize these expressions?” “How much material will be covered in the test?” In this model, the teacher, accordingly, will give the necessary information to the students. “Memorize this because it will be on the test.” “This is an important structure that will definitely be asked in entrance examinations.” “Don’t worry about this word—it’s not going to be on the test.”

The teacher tries to provide the students with the “ideal” and “perfect” grammar, definitions and usages. The students must not be contaminated by “impure,” “erroneous” language. The students are fed on the “perfect” rules and meanings explained in the grammar book and dictionary. No deviations from the norm are tolerated because they will only result in lower scores for the students. Therefore, only ideal native speakers are accepted as models.

In this model, communication in the target language is not a priority. Why waste time “using” the language if all that will produce are ungrammatical sentences, mispronunciations, and misuse of vocabulary?

The students are expected to *adapt to the language* as it is given to them—everyone is expected to learn and memorize the same structure, the same vocabulary, the same pronunciation. There is just one answer to each question presented. The students, therefore, often ask for the one and only “best answer,” and show little interest for “other ways” of saying the same thing.

This is the kind of foreign language instruction that Miller talks about, when he mentions the “traditional” approaches. It is test oriented, teacher centered, and is anchored in the strong external motivation that students must learn English because it is needed to pass examinations and get into university.

Here is a summary of the Fish Bowl Model in the context of an EFL classroom.

Reliance on others:

- Teacher provides all material, activity
- Students learn passively

Preservation of an ideal environment:

- Errors not tolerated
- Other (native-speaker) model used

Isolated, artificial living environment:

- Communication not required
- Meaningful only in limited context

The Open Seas Model

So long as the emphasis on entrance examinations and passing tests is the goal of foreign language learning, the Fish Bowl Model will have a role to play in Japan's English education. However, knowing how to solve entrance examination questions will not help students to communicate and live in the international society of which they are an essential part. Students must get out of the Fish Bowl and learn to live in the *Open Seas*.

The fish in the Open Seas cannot expect an ideal environment to live in and must adapt to the existing environment. It cannot rely on a caretaker for its existence. If the water is too warm or too cold, it will have to search around for the right water to live in. When we look at the fish living in the Open Seas, we notice the fish must learn to live by itself. It must adapt to the dirt, fungi and other foreign substances that might be in the water. The only food it will find will be the food provided by the natural environment in which it lives. In other words, the fish in the Open Seas lives in a natural habitat, where co-existence with other fish and animals is the rule.

Here is a summary of the characteristics of the Open Seas Model:

Reliance on self:

- Fish must find appropriate water to live in
- Fish must find their own food to eat

Adaptation to existing environment:

- Fish must adapt to existing water quality
- Fish must adapt to existence of fungi and other foreign substances
- Fish must find food provided by environment

Coexistence in a natural habitat

- Fish coexists with other fish and animals
- Fish shares natural environment

How can this model be applied to the TEFL situation? First of all, a TEFL program based on this model requires the students to be autonomous learners, as well as communicators. Students learn English for the sake of using English in some "real" situation—for some "real" purpose—and not because there is a test to pass. In order to use English in this way, students must use whatever language forms they know. If they cannot come up with an appropriate expression, they have to ask other people, or consult a dictionary on their own. Instead of asking their teachers whether a certain structure will be on a test, students in the Open Seas will ask, "How can I say this?" "What's a better way to say this?" The teacher's job is then to lead the students, to guide them in their own learning process. Teachers are tolerant of formal errors because the main aim is not "perfection" in the use of language form, but mutual "communicability" of meanings and intentions between those interacting. In this model, the students do not adapt to the language, but *the language adapts to each student*. The language

becomes tailor-made to meet the needs of each student. In the words of Tanaka (1997), each student will have his/her “My English” that will be unique to that student.

Students also learn to accept differences in the use of language, as well as patterns of interaction. In the “real world” of communication, the English our students hear and read will not necessarily be that of native speakers. In fact, most countries where English is spoken as the native language are multilingual and multicultural, where a vast range of Englishes is used and heard. Furthermore, if we turn our eyes to what Kachru (1991), Crystal (1997) and others call the *External Circle*, where English is used as an official or auxiliary language, we see an even greater variety of Englishes being used. In other words, students who learn English by using it themselves become more tolerant of different varieties of English—simply because they themselves cannot be like ideal native speakers. For them, diversity becomes the norm, rather than the exception.

Here is a summary Open Seas Model in the context of an EFL classroom:

Reliance on Self:

- Learner-centered, active learning

Adaptation to Existing Environment

- Imperfection tolerated
- Diversity acknowledged as normal

Coexistence in a natural habitat

- Intercultural communication important
- Need to communicate in English acknowledged

What the Course of Study Says

The dichotomy of approaches, as presented by Miller, suggests to many people that the traditional method of teaching English is used in Japan because that is what the Ministry of Education and Science advocates in its Course of Study, revised only every ten years.

However, if we look at the goals noted in the Course of Study over the past forty years, we see a slightly different picture. In 1960, the emphasis was on the teaching of all four skills, plus understanding the people who speak the foreign language. In 1970, after Japan experienced its first real test on the international stage by sponsoring the Tokyo Olympics (1964) and the Osaka World Fair (1970), the emphasis was placed not only on teaching the four skills, but also on the more integrated communicative skills of “comprehending the foreign language” and “expressing oneself in the foreign language.” The need to understand the world views of foreign peoples and the creation of a basis for international understanding were also included.

Although few changes were made in the 1978 revision, the 1989 revision contained some major changes. It was in that Course of Study that the expression “communication” was first used. The major emphasis in these guidelines was placed on the importance of inculcating our students with a

positive attitude about communicating in the foreign language, not simply learning the language to take tests and pass entrance examinations, as is the case in the Fish Bowl Model. Furthermore, in addition to the need to create the basis for international understanding, the 1989 guidelines went a step further, emphasizing the need to deepen our understanding of the international society.

Finally, while the newest Course of Study—to be implemented beginning in the year 2002—continues to emphasize the importance of our students developing a positive attitude toward communicating, it also adds the need to develop the practical ability to communicate in the foreign language.

As can be seen from this short review of the aims of the Course of Study, the Fish Bowl Model has never been the policy of the Japanese government. In fact, the Ministry of Education and Science is trying to direct English education in Japan toward the Open Seas.

Motivation in the Open Seas Model

One of the biggest problems with the Open Seas Model is motivating students to swim in the Open Seas—especially when there is no imminent need to do so. It is relatively easy to imbue our students with an external motivation in the Fish Bowl Model—success in passing tests and getting into good schools. In the Open Seas, on the other hand, if motivation is left completely up to each student, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to determine one common motivational goal that everyone will respond to. The Open Seas would have a different meaning for each individual student.

However, it is not impossible, even in the Open Seas Model, to create a common aim toward which everyone might work—as in the case of students preparing to study abroad, or preparing to take part in international volunteer activities. It, therefore, becomes essential in setting goals for the Open Seas to focus on the relevance of learning foreign languages for concrete and specific objectives.

From this perspective, let us reconsider the goals set in the Course of Study. The goals in the Course of Study are well written, and present an “ideal” picture of what a foreign language program should accomplish. It would be very difficult to refute any of the goals as they stand: “to understand foreign languages,” “to develop a positive attitude to want to communicate in a foreign language,” and “to develop the basis for international understanding.” However, the fact that it is ideal implies that it is also abstract, and lacking in direction or concreteness.

The need to develop in our students a “practical ability to communicate in the foreign language” was added in the most recent Course of Study—with sample lists of practical situations and functional expressions that could be used in class—to compensate for this lack in concreteness. However, the situations and functional expressions introduced in the new Course of Study are “decontextualized” in the sense that they do not refer to situations in any particular socio-linguistic context. In other words, although the situations were introduced to provide concrete contextual frameworks in which actual communication should necessarily take place, I believe that it is still too general and abstract.

Different Routes to the Open Seas

Looking at the aims of foreign language education in some other countries, I see a clearer definition of the role foreign language education plays. For example, when we look at the principles of foreign language education in the United States, we see that because the United States is a multilingual and multicultural nation, the setting of the Open Seas is internal rather than external, as can be seen in the following quote from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2001) stating the purpose of foreign language education is to “educate students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad.” In other words, there is a clear objective stating the need to learn foreign languages in order to communicate in the internal Open Seas. Although it is mentioned that foreign languages are also necessary for communicating with people outside the United States, there is a strong emphasis on the need to learn it for the purpose of communicating within the country itself.

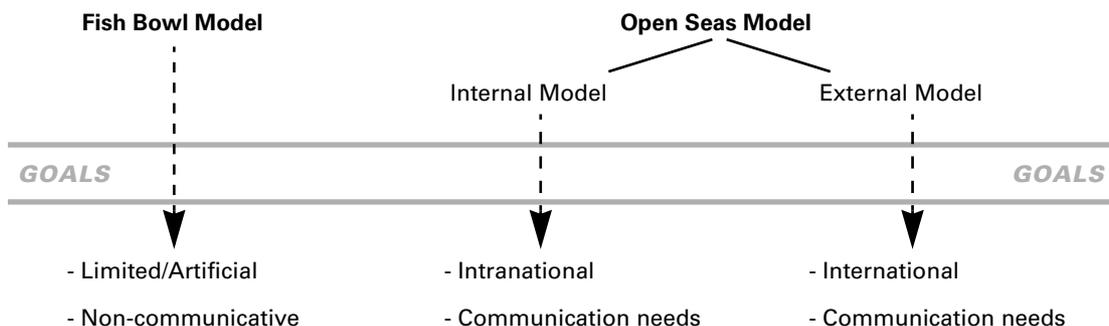
On the other hand, when we look at the aims set in South Korea—which considers itself to be a typical monolingual/monocultural society—we see a different emphasis. According to Koizumi (2000), the English taught in South Korea is International English. It is assumed that English is a tool to communicate with people from around the world—regardless of whether they are from native English-speaking societies. The aim is to develop the basic competence for mutual communication, using and understanding modern everyday English, thereby contributing to the understanding of international society and foreign cultures, as well as the development of one’s own culture and national growth.

The aim in the South Korean guidelines can be said to be focused on the “external” Open Seas. The emphasis is in educating Koreans to be able to cope with the international society, as well as to develop one’s own cultural identity and to contribute to the growth of the nation itself. English, therefore, is an necessary tool for moving into the external Open Seas and becoming a member of that international society as Koreans, while maintaining personal and national pride.

The above examples show that even within the Open Seas Model, there are at least two varieties—an internal variety and an external variety. In a multilingual/multicultural nation such as the United States, the need to understand foreign languages seems to be directed more inward than outward. Being able to understand and communicate with the large non-English speaking population within the country itself becomes an essential goal for the learning of foreign languages. On the other hand, in a monolingual/monocultural country such as South Korea, the importance of learning a foreign language—especially English—lies in developing the ability to deal with the external Open Seas. Figure 13.1 (on the top of the next page) shows how all these models fit into the setting of goals.

Returning to the goals of the Japanese Course of Study, it becomes apparent that the Japanese goals are neutral and non-committal, not specifying any clear direction as to why it is so important to learn foreign languages.

What must be done in Japan, therefore, is to develop more concrete goals detailing the needs of the Japanese to learn foreign languages, especially English.

FIGURE 13.1 Setting Goals for Foreign Language Education

Report of the Committee to Promote the Revision of English Education

In January 2001, the Committee to Promote the Revision of English Education, commissioned by the Minister of Education and Science, released its report in which it proposed the setting of two goals in the teaching of English in Japan. The first goal was to be attainable by all Japanese, while the second goal was set for those working in specialized fields in which the ability to communicate in English on an equal footing with representatives from all over the world is required. These goals could be said to reflect Cummins' distinction (1984) between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)—the former being the ability to conduct everyday, contextualized and cognitively undemanding conversation, and the latter referring to a more de-contextualized, cognitively demanding use of language. Not everyone needs the ability to conduct discussions, debates, negotiations or formal presentations in English. It is, however, something that will be required of those Japanese who must represent Japan's interests to the world.

From the point of view of psycholinguistics, the distinction between these two levels of language proficiency is a significant one. It frees many Japanese from the burden of thinking that everyone must be able to conduct discussions and debates in English. At the same time, it clarifies to both teachers and students that simply knowing how to converse in English is no guarantee for being able to conduct more cognitively demanding tasks in it. Although this psycholinguistic description plays an important role in clarifying the goals for studying English, it falls short in that it fails to present more concrete socio-linguistic situations in which English should be used.

Japan's Internal Versus External Open Seas Model

The number of Japanese who go abroad each year is approaching 18 million (Table 13.1). In other words, almost one out of every six Japanese went abroad in 2000. In 1998, more than 160,000 high school students went abroad on school excursions, more than 4,000 went abroad to study, and more than 37,000 went abroad for some sort of training trip in (Table 13.2). These data suggest that it is no

longer unusual for the ordinary Japanese to go abroad. Regardless of whether they must actually use a foreign language on trips abroad—tour leaders handle most of the necessary negotiations—it further suggests that the probability of having to use a foreign language has risen.

TABLE 13.1 Number of Japanese Going Abroad (Ministry of Justice, 2001)

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Japanese Going Abroad	16,694,769	16,802,750	15,806,218	16,357,572	17,818,590

TABLE 13.2 Number of High Schools Students Going Abroad (Committee to Promote Revision of English Education, 2001)

Year	Overseas School Trips	Study Abroad Trips	Overseas Training Trips
1986	28,940	3,165	–
1988	50,728	4,283	17,713
1990	61,732	4,421	31,243
1992	79,332	4,487	32,288
1994	96,672	3,998	32,465
1996	130,669	4,481	34,110
1998	161,438	4,186	37,426

Although Japan is considered to be a monolingual/monocultural nation (although there are opinions to the contrary—cf. Maher, this publication; Maher and Yashiro, 1995), the number of foreigners visiting Japan is increasing every year (Table 13.3). The percentage of foreign residents in Japan (not just visitors) is also rising steadily (Table 13.4).

TABLE 13.3 Number of Foreigners Entering Japan (Ministry of Justice, 2001)

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Foreigners Entering Japan	4,244,529	4,669,514	4,556,845	4,901,317	5,272,095

TABLE 13.4 Percentage of Registered Foreigners in Japan (Ministry of Justice, 2001)

Year	Total	Percent of Total Population of Japan (%)
1975	751,832	0.67
1980	782,910	0.67
1985	850,612	0.70
1990	1,075,317	0.87
1991	1,218,891	0.98
1992	1,281,644	1.03
1993	1,320,748	1.06
1994	1,354,011	1.08
1995	1,362,371	1.08
1996	1,415,136	1.12
1997	1,482,707	1.18
1998	1,512,116	1.20
1999	1,556,113	1.23
2000	1,686,444	1.33

These data suggest that even if we were to accept that Japan is essentially a monolingual/ monocultural society, the need to interact with foreigners within the country is increasing every year. This implies that there is a need for an internal Open Seas Model as well as an external Open Seas Model.

The characteristics of an Internal Open Seas Model for Japan would consist of the following:

- The physical context would be Japan
- The socio-linguistic context would be Japanese
- The content (topics) for using English would be mostly about Japan and what is Japanese
- International understanding would center on the development of an awareness toward people who have different world views and customs

The internal Open Seas Model specifies Japan as the physical context in which the foreign language is used. Being able to describe the social customs and everyday scripts—for example, answering simple questions about Japan and its culture—must be the focus of the teaching of foreign languages

in the internal context. Furthermore, the people met on the streets of Tokyo will not always be American or British; they will be from all over the world. Therefore, the development of an awareness and tolerance toward the diversity of different Englishes as well as world views will be required.

On the other hand, the External Open Seas Model would have the following characteristics:

- The physical context would be outside of Japan
- The socio-linguistic context would be different from that of Japan
- The content (topics) would consist of non-Japanese everyday topics, as well as CALP level content
- International understanding would consist of not only understanding the host country, its people and its customs, but also the ability to express oneself as a Japanese

In the external variety of the Open Seas Model, the physical context will be outside of Japan, and this means that the socio-linguistic customs and everyday scripts that will be encountered will also be different from those of Japan. The topics of interaction will be non-Japanese, and for representatives of Japanese interests, CALP-level content will have to be expressed in English. Finally, international understanding will consist in both understanding about the host country and its people, as well as being able to talk about the differences and similarities with the Japanese.

As can be seen in the internal and external Open Seas Models above, the goals and objectives of English language education in Japan can and must be made more specific in order to give both teachers and students a concrete, motivational goal for studying English.

Conclusion

I have argued that the teaching of English in an EFL context such as that of Japan is not the same as teaching English in an ESL context. On the other hand, in EFL contexts, it is often the case that the only real objective for studying foreign languages has been to pass tests and enter institutes of higher education. However, by using the analogy of the Fish Bowl and the Open Seas, I have tried to show that teaching English in the Fish Bowl is a very limited and artificial enterprise which, for the most part, will contribute little to the development of a real communicative proficiency in the language.

If we look at the goals for studying foreign languages in other countries, we see concrete goals—internally-oriented or externally-oriented—in the way they are formulated. However, when we look at the goals set in the Japanese Course of Study, we cannot decipher whether the goals are pointing inward or outward. There is an abstractness to it that makes it difficult for teachers, as well as students to feel a real need to learn English.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to conduct a simple “needs analysis” to show that the Japanese have an internal as well as an external need to learn English. The Open Seas Model, where the purpose is to learn a language for communication and self-expression in the real world, must be considered, not only as an abstract model exemplifying the ideals of the communicative approach, but also as a concrete model that meets the learners’ real needs to communicate.

References

- ACTFL. 2001. National Standards for Foreign Language Education. (<http://www.actfl.org/public/articles/details.cfm?id=33>).
- Crystal, D. 1997. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cummins, J. 1984. *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Kachru, B. 1985. Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: the English language in the outer circle. *English in the World*. Quirk, R., and H. G. Widdowson, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Koizumi, H. 2000. Kankoku “dai 7 ji kyoiku katei” ni miru eigo kyoiku. *Eigo Tenbo*:107.
- Maher, J. 2001. Transition and language policy in multicultural Japan. Paper presented at the Monterey conference, Language Policy: Lessons from Global Models, Monterey Institute of International Studies, Monterey, California.
- Maher, J., and K. Yashiro, eds. 1995. Multilingual Japan: an introduction. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 16(1 and 2):1–17.
- McConnell, D. 2000. *Importing Diversity: Inside Japan’s JET Program*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Miller, T. 2001. Considering the “fit” between native and imported approaches to teaching English in Japan. *Studies in English Language and Literature* 48 (vol. 25, no.2):21–35.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. 1960, 1970, 1989, 1999. *Koutou gakkou gakushu shido yoryou (High School Course of Study)*.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. 2001. *Report of Eigo Shido-Ho Tou Kaizen No Suisin Ni Kansuru Kondankai (Report from Committee to Promote Revision of English Education)*.
- Ministry of Justice. 2001. Hakusho, Toukei. <http://www.moj.go.jp/TOUKEI/index.html>.
- Prime Minister’s Office. 2000. *Report of the 21 Seiki Nihon No Kousou Kondankai (Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century—The Frontier Within: Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium)*.
- Tanaka, S. 1997. Eigo gakushu no shinri futan (My English ron). Suzuki, Y. K. Yoshida, M. Shimosaki, and S. Tanaka, eds. *Communication Toshiteno Eigo Kyoiku Ron*. Tokyo: ALC.
- Yoshida, K. 2001a. From fish bowl to the open seas: Taking a step towards the real world of communication. TESOL 2001 featured speaker presentation. St. Louis, Missouri.
- . 2001b. The need for a qualitative change in the teaching of English in Japan in the 21st century. Furness, Wong and Wu, eds. *Penetrating Discourse: Integrating Theory with Practice in Second Language Teaching*: 159–169. Hong Kong: The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.