

English in Japan

Martin Nuttall

Recently, I was surprised to see the following front page headline in a major English-language newspaper published in Japan: 'Japanese TOEFL average tops 500 for 1st time.' The article went on to explain that in the period 1998–99, the average TOEFL score attained by Japanese was 501, thereby raising Japan to 18th place in the ranking of scores among 21 Asian nations and placing it above Afghanistan, Cambodia and Laos. This compared very favourably to the previous year when Japan had come last with a score of 498, but still left it way behind its closest neighbours, China and South Korea, which scored 562 and 535, respectively.

Frankly speaking, as an English teacher at a Japanese university, I am not that surprised by Japan's relatively poor TOEFL scores. What does surprise me is the importance attached to the country's ranking and the fact that it made the front page. It seemed that the improvement in Japan's ranking was a source of national pride when in fact, in view of the huge resources Japan has, and the number of years spent studying English at school and university, we might expect a much better showing in the rankings. Why is it that Japanese people seem to have such a hard time with English? Some

people have suggested it has to do with cultural factors—shyness in dealing with foreigners or perhaps a fear of making mistakes and losing face. But in my view, the main reason has to do with the way English is taught in most middle and high schools in Japan and it is at this level that efforts should be made to improve English-language teaching.

Since most universities in Japan require students to pass a very tough English exam as a condition for entrance, teachers at the secondary level have tended to teach English as an examination subject rather than as a living language. Consequently, until recently, English has generally been taught through reading and translation as a set of rules to be memorized in preparation for entrance examinations. This 'entrance examination English' emphasizes knowledge about the language rather than performance in the language and so, after 6 years of textbook and blackboard oriented study with few opportunities to develop speaking and listening skills, is it any wonder students become demotivated and find English a chore?

In the modern world, however, with ever-increasing globalization and the importance of developing more effective communication skills, the traditional

grammar-translation approach to teaching English in Japan no longer meets the needs of students. In view of this, the Japanese Ministry of Education has introduced reforms in the way English is taught at secondary level to highlight listening and speaking, and since the late 1980s, thousands of young foreigners have been recruited to work as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in middle and high schools across the country.

While these are undoubtedly very positive developments, a more radical reform—though not I suspect a popular one with university administrators—would be to abolish English as an entrance exam subject entirely. Such a reform would enable secondary level teachers to focus on a more communication-oriented approach to English teaching rather than on meaningless drills.

This is not to say that grammar should be banished completely from the language classroom; on the contrary, grammar is a fundamental component of successful foreign language learning. But there has to be a balance between learning the nuts and bolts of the language and being able to use the language in meaningful communication. For the most part, Japanese people have poor communication skills in English and the sooner schools move away from entrance-examination English and embrace the development of speaking and listening skills, the better.

Another useful measure to improve English skills in Japan would be to encourage people to refrain from taking every opportunity to combine English words together in the oddest of ways. Wherever I look in Japan, whatever I'm doing, I seem to be surrounded by English words and expressions. Or rather, words and expressions that look like English. A Japanese version of English—let's call it *Janglish*—seems to have taken root in the country and it's almost impossible to avoid it. You can find Janglish on a beer can: 'Savor the mellow flavour of the harvesting



Drink vending machines with Janglish messages

(Y. Ono)

season'; on a bar of chocolate: 'Beautiful things are beyond time' and on students' pencil cases and notebooks. One of my favourite pencil-case lids reads: 'Without generation, all women like ice-cream. Because as it melts, the sweetness rushes to their heart. This is the taste of first love which we cannot forget.'

Like most languages, the Japanese language has borrowed widely from other languages over the centuries. Many of the Japanese lexical items in the fields of religion, philosophy and the arts, for example, came from Chinese and more recently, in the early years of the Meiji Era (1868–1912) when Japan began to open to the West, there was a great influx of foreign loan words into Japanese as new ideas and concepts entered the language. Many of the loan words that came into Japanese at that time came from English and ever since then, Japanese has become increasingly Anglicised—or should I say *Janglicised*?

Take the apartment block next to where I live, for example—'Lilac Mansion.' At a pinch, 'lilac' might just be acceptable, even though there is hardly a tree to be seen in this densely-populated neighbourhood, let alone a lilac tree! But 'mansion' is not quite the term that springs to mind to describe the cramped space of a typical Japanese apartment block.

Then there's the ubiquitous cigarette vending machine with the brand names of Japanese and imported cigarettes alike written in English. Not only do we find Marlboro and Camel cigarettes, but also 'Seven Stars,' 'Mild Seven' and 'Peace.' And that's not all; it's easy to tell which Japanese brand has a charcoal filter and contains low tar and nicotine, because it's all there—written in English.

The same is true for the drinks machines, where again many of the brand names and advertising slogans are in Janglish: 'Canned beverage makes you refresh. We carefully did the best selection. They are outstanding among others.' And on the cans themselves—when it comes to choosing a

can of coffee, for example, we are invited to 'Relax and enjoy Wonda Coffee with tasty aroma for refined adults.' And for tea drinkers, there's Kirin's Royal Tea 'A delightful blend of the world's finest tea with the rich taste of milk.'

Not only the vending machines, but also many shop fronts identify themselves in English—Date's Barber Shop, Nakamura's Liquor Shop and Renoir Cafe-Restaurant are neighbours. Then, of course, there are the simple awnings with 'Book,' 'Bakery' or 'Drug Store' clearly inscribed upon them, although sometimes it might be 'Bakely' by mistake!

Janglish is also all-pervasive in advertising. No self-respecting magazine, advertising flyer or brochure would seem to be complete without it. And not even JR East is immune from Janglish! Its recent advertising campaign, for example, was centred on the word 'TRAINING.' That is to say, an amalgamation of *train* + *ing* to give 'TRAINING,' the '-ing - form' of 'to take the train.' At least, I think that's what it means ... you can never be sure with Janglish.

Indeed, few native English speakers can usually make much sense of Janglish and for them, this hybrid language has been described as an Alice-in-Wonderland universe of strangeness and familiarity in which the connection between words and their original meanings is often obscured. Yet, Janglish is part and parcel of daily life in Japan, and not only in advertising. It crops up as much in everyday conversation as in commercial copy and here are just a few examples: *loose socks* (referring to the thick white socks that hang loosely around



JR East's (in)famous TRAINING poster (JR East)

the calves and are popular among Japanese high-school girls), *my-pace* (doing things at one's own pace), and *doctor-stop* (an expression used to explain a doctor's recommendation to stop drinking or smoking).

Despite the fact that Janglish is often nonsensical, there seems to be no end to new coinages. I guess it is just another of those trends so beloved of the Japanese, although it's probably here to stay in this case. But while it may be trendy, it does nothing to raise the standard of English in Japan. On the contrary, it devalues the language and few things frustrate me more in Japan than the weird concoctions of Janglish. ■



Martin Nuttall

Martin Nuttall was born in Britain and is a lecturer in English and linguistics at Tokyo Medical and Dental University. He has been in Japan since 1993, doing his best to improve the English-language skills of his students.