

A Reconsideration of the Grammar-Translation Method and English Lessons Using Literary Texts

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(Summary)

Japan has a long tradition of foreign language learning called *yakudoku*. *Yakudoku*, which has traditionally been conducted in English language education in Japan, bears a false resemblance to the Grammar-Translation Method of the West. It is not absolutely necessary to completely remove *yakudoku* from English lessons. In this paper, an argument will be made for the potential to conduct English lessons that utilize the merits of *yakudoku* to develop the “four skills” while also introducing examples of English lessons using literary texts.

Key Words : *yakudoku*, four skills, The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM),
literary texts

1. Introduction

Although there is a requirement to train the “four essential language skills” in a balanced way in English lessons in Japan, many English teachers end up thinking that they must conduct lessons that focus on “communication” when they are asked to conduct “English lessons in English.” Also, they believe that “communication” refers to “conversation,” and that they should aim to teach “practical” English. For these reasons, a movement has been developed toward reforming the “impractical” English language education that has been conducted until now. Similarly, *yakudoku*, which has been criticized as a synonym for “useless,” is being completely removed from English lessons. The general sentiment is that “conducting English lessons in English” is “right”. In terms of teaching materials, there is a preference for texts containing dialogues that resemble real life conversations rather than literary texts. Are *yakudoku* and literary texts completely useless in English learning?

In this paper, a re-evaluation of *yakudoku* will be made from the standpoint that *yakudoku* should not be completely removed from English language learning. After advocating for *yakudoku* and English lessons using literary texts, organization and development strategies for such lessons will be discussed.

2. *Yakudoku* and GTM

Yakudoku, which has traditionally been conducted in English education in Japan, tends to be criticized as being “ineffective” and “out of fashion.”

Richards & Rodgers (2014: 7) made a critical evaluation of GTM.

…It [GTM] is still used in situations where understanding literary texts is the primary focus of foreign language study and there is little need for a speaking knowledge of the language. Contemporary texts for the teaching of foreign languages at the college level still sometimes reflect Grammar-Translation principles. These texts are frequently the products of people trained in literature rather than in language teaching or applied linguistics. Consequently, though it may be true to say that the Grammar-Translation Method is still widely practiced, it has no advocates. It is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory.

Rivers (1968: 17-18) described the faults of GTM, as follows.

…Little stress is laid on accurate pronunciation and intonation; communication skills are neglected; there is a great deal of stress on knowing rules and

exceptions, but little training in using the language actively to express one's own meaning, even in writing. In an endeavor to practice the application of rules and the use of exceptional forms, the student is often trained in artificial forms of language, some of which are rare, some old-fashioned, many of little practical use. The language learned is mostly of a literary type, and the vocabulary is detailed and sometimes esoteric. The average student has to work hard at what he considers laborious and monotonous chores—vocabulary learning, translation, and endless written exercises—without much feeling of progress in the mastery of the language and with very little opportunity to express himself through it. His role in the classroom is, for the greater part of the time, a passive one—he absorbs and then reconstitutes what he has absorbed to satisfy his teacher.

These criticisms against GTM must be partially recognized (if, that is, lessons are “completely devoted” to GTM). If lessons are completely devoted to GTM, there is “very little opportunity [for the student] to express himself through it,” and “his role in the classroom is, for the greater part, a passive one” in lessons in which “he has to work hard at what he considers... monotonous chores,” which results in the justifiable criticism that the student is “completely unable to use English.”

However, it is hasty to draw such a conclusion. When actually examining the demonstration lessons, lesson practice reports and lesson plans of various schools across Japan, there are almost no lessons that are completely devoted to *yakudoku*. Even when *yakudoku* is conducted, other activities are often proactively incorporated such as an oral introduction at the start of the lesson, reading along with the text after *yakudoku*, English questions and answers regarding the text, listening and dictation activities.

Also, the GTM discussed by Richards & Rodgers, Rivers and others is not what was (is) performed at schools in Japan. Attention must be given to the fact that there is a difference in the content of the *yakudoku* that is the traditional English instruction method in Japan and the GTM of foreign language education in the West. Sugawara (2011: 84) stated that “GTM is a foreign-language learning method in which texts featuring brief (unrelated in content) examples are used after an explanation of the grammatical item. It is a format often seen even today in textbooks for classical Western languages (ancient Greek and Latin), and it is an educational method using these textbooks. With the aid of a disorganized understanding of the history of English language education, there is little regard for *yakudoku*.”

Torikai (2014: 159) stated that “Japan's time-honoured *yakudoku* is a special instructional method in which classics from Chinese, Dutch and English studies, for example, are used as reading materials with the objective of receiving the studied content, whereas, in the traditional Grammar Translation of the West, the translation of sentences

constructed artificially to teach a grammatical point has been criticized as ‘favouring form over meaning.’”

Hiraga (2005: 8-19) pointed out that the Grammar-Translation Method “is a foreign-language teaching method characterised by grammar study and translation practice that has long been used in Europe” that “has its origins in the study method of the so-called classical languages of Greek and Latin, for example.” The Grammar-Translation Method is the result of a “reformed teaching methodology so that the traditional method (author’s note: this is the Grammar-Translation Method) conducted on an individual level until the 18th century could be used efficiently and simply for large numbers of pupils in school education.”

Also, Hiraga (2005: 18-19) maintains that it must not be forgotten that the term “*yakudoku*,” which is distinctly Japanese, has always been unique to Japan, and the distinction between G-TM (the Grammar-Translation Method) and the grammatical/oral translation method of teaching used in Japan is made clear by the translated Japanese term for G-TM, “*bunpou-honyaku-shiki kyojuho*” (“grammatical/oral translation method of teaching”).

In comparison to GTM in which completely unrelated model sentences artificially created simply to study grammar are translated, Japan’s unique *yakudoku* is about reading and translating sentences written in natural English, and understanding the content of those sentences.

Cook, who is critical of the communicative approach, and who advocates the efficacy of “translation” in language instruction (learning), stated the following (2010: 10):

…Grammar cannot be practiced without vocabulary, but as Grammar Translation revolves around grammar, its presentation of vocabulary is more haphazard. A few words, chosen by the course writer for a variety of reasons, are presented in each lesson or unit, together with their translation equivalents for students to learn by heart. … The key principal of this approach is that the translation exercises should contain only words and constructions which have already been encountered. There are in other words no surprises, either for students or for teachers. (underline mine)

I do not believe in the correctness of lessons “completely devoted” to *yakudoku*, and, as stated earlier, there are no lessons in which *yakudoku* alone is used. However, the Grammar-Translation Method should not and cannot be completely removed. Even though he recognized that one would never be able to read and understand English for oneself if there is too much reliance on *yakudoku*, Tsuchiya (1983: 143-144) stated that, “as to whether translation is absolutely unnecessary, while that may be ideal, it is not realistic.

It is impossible for students who think in Japanese all day to think only in English when reading English texts. Therefore, translation can be explained as being necessary to some degree.”

Takeuchi (2007: 89-90) stated the following based on the study of successful English language learners, and data and theories regarding second language acquisition research.

With regards to reading, it seems that successful English language learners often “read analytically” between the early and middle periods of learning.

In other words, they use their grammatical and vocabulary capacities to practice reading as if studying for a test by analysing the locations of subjects, adverbs and relative clauses.

Meanwhile, when considering students for whom reading in English is a weakness, it was found that many people read in a truly imprecise manner while focusing only on meanings and information in the early period of learning.

(my translation)

I believe that *yakudoku* is necessary in the early period of English language learning. However, I am also against the method (or lesson preparation) in which students are required to make a “full translation” of a text, and to present their translated sentences written down in full in their notebooks (it is a fact that this method is used by some English teachers and in some English lessons). When students are given such tasks, the objective of *yakudoku*, which should be a “means” of reading and understanding English, becomes the production of a translation in which the Japanese language is pored over in order to produce a great translation and too much time is spent revising the Japanese text. Therefore, students are no longer able to understand whether this is the study of English or Japanese, and the true purpose is entirely lost. A proposal is made hereafter in order to avoid such issues.

3. English lessons using literary texts

It is worth noting that the March 2011 issue of the monthly magazine *The New English Classroom* (Sanyusha Publishing Co, Ltd.) included a feature entitled “Lessons based on literature.” The magazine is the bulletin of the New English Teachers’ Association, which is sold at bookstores throughout Japan. In part, it is a collection of research papers, but it also includes an abundance of information that is useful in lessons such as introductions of lessons in practice nationwide, works by students, and materials/teaching plans made by teachers, as well as articles that delve into modern educational issues. The magazine is also characterized by its authors, the majority of whom are teachers at junior and senior high schools rather than researchers. This

magazine is a useful aid in fully understanding the daily practices and approaches of English teachers.

The January 2014 issue of the magazine also includes a feature entitled “Now is the time for literature: Teaching materials that touch the heart” in which English teachers from junior high schools, senior high schools and universities contributed reports on lessons that use literary texts.

NHK Radio Eikaiwa, which uses the body of texts as dialogues with the main purpose of improving “speaking” and “listening” skills, has a “Special Week” about once a year in which literary texts are used as teaching materialsⁱ. Another NHK radio course is broadcast on the program called *Eigo de yomu Murakami Haruki* (Read Haruki Murakami in English). It is also interesting that literature is being used as educational texts even in NHK’s English programs, which have had a strong focus on “practical English” and “English communication.”

At a school at which I have previously taught (Numazu National College of Technology), a retelling of Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*ⁱⁱ was used in English lessons for first-year students (the same age as first-year senior high school students). I would like to introduce the lessons by quoting some pages from this book. This is a scene in which the protagonist Tom is being scolded by the teacher after arriving late for school:

‘Thomas Sawyer, why are you late again?’ he [the teacher] said. Tom began to speak, and then stopped. There was a new girl in the schoolroom — a beautiful girl with blue eyes and long yellow hair. Tom looked and looked.

Oh, how beautiful she was! And in two seconds Tom was in love! He must sit next to her. But how? In the girls’ half of the room there was only one empty chair, and it was next to the new girl. Tom thought quickly, and then looked at the teacher.

‘I stopped to talk with Huckleberry Finn!’ he said.

The teacher was very, very angry. Boys were often late for school. That was bad, but talking with Huckleberry Finn was worse, much worse!ⁱⁱⁱ

I had the students read this page in advance before attending the lesson. Then, I told the students the sentences that should be translated (not a complete translation) in advance (by underlining the sentences in the text following an oral explanation, or by handing out a printout featuring only the sentences to be translated, etc.). Alternatively, rather than giving any instructions about translation, the students would be told to read this page in advance and to underline any sentences that they couldn’t understand. In the lesson, the students would talk about the underlined sentences (that is, the sentences they couldn’t understand), and only those sentences would be translated into Japanese (translated by

other students who were able to understand, or translated through group discussion).

I had the students make a translation in advance of just the following section from the passage quoted above: “*I stopped to talk with Huckleberry Finn!*” he said. The teacher was very, very angry. Boys were often late for school. That was bad, but talking with Huckleberry Finn was worse, much worse!”

Alternatively, in some classes and for some grades, the task would be to underline the sections that show the reasons why “The teacher was very, very angry.”

In order to check whether the students properly understood the sentence “I stopped to talk with Huckleberry Finn!” some students would be asked to make a Japanese translation, and a small number of them would translate it as “*Watashi wa Huck to hanasu no wo yamemashita*” (I stopped talking with Huckleberry Finn). When I asked why the teacher was angry at Tom if he stopped talking to Huckleberry Finn (“The teacher was very, very angry”), the students realized that the correct translation was “*Watashi wa Huckleberry Finn to hanasu tame ni tachidomatta*” (I stopped to talk to Huckleberry Finn). The students who misunderstood were in the minority. One of the reasons why most of the students correctly understood the text was that the scene in which Tom and Huck converse on the roadside is actually on the same page. Also, Huck is described in the following way on the same page (Bullard, retold, 2008: 6):

…Huck had no mother, and his father drank whiskey all the time, so Huck lived in the streets. He didn’t go to school, he was always dirty, and he never had a new shirt. But he was happy. The mothers of St Petersburg didn’t like Huck, but Tom and his friends did.

All of the mothers in St Petersburg, where Tom lives, dislike Huck. They don’t want their children to associate with him, and that is why it was bad that Tom was late because he had stood around talking to Huck, which made the teacher angry. In this story, students can reconfirm difference between “stop + the ‘to’ infinitive” and “stop + gerund (-ing)” and enhance their understanding (and memory) with the episode.

After the content is fully understood by checking it in Japanese, the lesson is brought to a close by reading the text aloud along with the teacher, and instructions are also given to read it aloud at home. In the next lesson, it is effective to hand out a printout with some spaces in the text from the previous lesson, to write the words in the spaces while listening to the audio CD (the book is sold along with a CD that features a complete reading of the text), and for the teacher to read aloud some of the sentences from the page for dictation. It is also effective to conduct reproduction activities in which the students make a reproduction of the text in English based on a Japanese translation of the text handed out by the teacher. The teacher makes a printout of the text in Japanese (i.e. a translation), and

the students write an English translation under the Japanese (without looking at the text). If this activity is too difficult, classes can be stimulated using a method in which the teacher reads out the text in Japanese and the students raise their hand to answer if they can find the corresponding English sentence (or, instead of reading the English sentences aloud, they are written on a paper, and the students are put into pairs to check the partner's sentences written in English each other while discussing them together).

After reading aloud (chorus reading or shadowing) the conversations in the literary text (in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, for example, there are conversations between Tom and Huck, Tom and Aunt Polly, and Tom and Joe, etc.) in the lesson, students can be given different roles in pairs to practice these conversations.

I also asked students to write short comments in English at the end of lessons after reading the entire text. For both the student who does the writing and the teacher who makes corrections (or simply leaves comments), extensive writing takes a lot of time and cannot be maintained for long periods of time. For this reason, a short comment is always better. Alternatively, the language (words or sentences) that left an impression from the text can be written down, or lines can be drawn under certain parts of the text. The students will read the text again in order to do these activities, and they will feel encouraged when they realize that they can read it more quickly on the second or third time.

Due to space constrictions, I have only introduced example lessons using literary texts here in part, but the examples so far show that it is quite possible to train and practice the "four skills" using literary texts. Above all, rather than making Japanese translations of various English texts that have no context and are completely unrelated to each other, teaching and practicing skills such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation with stories and episodes is easier for learners to remember.

Cook (2010: 4-5) explains associationism, a psychological theory related to memory, as "a theory of memory current at the time, which claimed that information in connected texts is more likely to be retained than that in isolated sentences, and that memorization is aided by links made between texts and events," and I agree with this theory.

4. Conclusion

Regarding "communication-focused" English education that provides "balanced teaching of the four skills," there is a great proliferation of practical methods and pedagogies in educational settings, but this proliferation can also be seen as causing confusion in those same educational settings. In this situation, grammar translation and literary texts are considered to be far-removed from practical communication. However, the act of reading literary texts begins with correctly understanding the message conveyed by the author of the text. After that, the student considers his or her thoughts,

feelings and responses to the message received. This is expressed in writing or orally. This is a form of “communication” par excellence.

There is an excessive social (and governmental) demand to “teach English classes using English” and to “teach practical English”, and in this context there tends to be a high regard for English lesson formats in which teachers give “exciting” lessons using fluent English, and students (with no attention given to mistakes of grammar or pronunciation) carry on enthusiastically speaking English anyway. However, it is necessary to question whether such lessons are truly “practical.” When teachers speak unilaterally in English (explaining grammar in English and explaining English texts in English with no Japanese translation, etc.), it may be useful English-speaking practice for the teachers, but is it beneficial to the students?

Of course, it is important that students see Japanese teachers of English speaking in English. This will motivate the students and it may help them to realise that they too can speak English. I am also aware of the importance of English teachers being role models for learners. I recall even today the English expressions used by English teachers during English lessons in junior high school and senior high school, and it makes sense for teachers to speak in English and converse with students in English.

However, there is absolutely no importance or necessity to conduct grammar and reading lessons entirely in English. Although it is possible to explain very simple words at the junior high school-level (apple, run, read, etc.) in English while also using gestures, many abstract words appear in texts read in lessons at senior high schools and universities. How many students will immediately understand such words based on an explanation in English? If one considers that the explanation must be given slowly and many times (although there will still be some students who are not able to understand), some students will probably give up trying to understand (or will get bored). If it gets to that extent, it would be much faster and the students will understand more if students are first given an easily-understandable glossary to check the Japanese, and then model sentences are provided introducing the words within those sentences. To put it another way, no matter how much explanation is given of words and grammar (whether in English or in Japanese), as long as the student does not see examples of how such words and grammar are actually used in authentic sentences, he or she will not truly understand the meaning and will not reach the level of creating output. In that case, rather than putting effort and energy into explaining in English, one should search for reading materials that match the English ability and interests of the students, and be on the lookout as to how to make lesson plans based on those materials.

I undoubtedly believe in the practicality of lessons wherein literary texts written in English are read quietly (*yakudoku* for difficult passages and direct reading/comprehension for passages that everyone should be able to understand), English

sentences written by professional writers are read aloud, and English sentences are repeatedly transcribed for the purpose of imitation.

Notes

- i In the broadcast which I actually heard, O. Henry's "Witches' Loaves" was used, and the Japanese instructor talked about the content of the story in English with a native English-speaking regular guest, explained the words in Japanese (the text also includes detailed language notes and a complete translation), and gave English questions and answers, which could also be used in lessons in junior high schools and senior high schools. Refer to the July 2016 NHK text of "Radio Eikaiwa." (NHK Publishing)
- ii Bullard, Nick. Retold (2008) *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Oxford University Press. With 5,825 words in total, the level of difficulty is suited to the English ability of a junior high school graduate.
- iii Ibid. pp.7-8.

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