"The Psycho-Social Barrier" Revisited

by Drew and Debbie Dillon

The Antipodes Again

As avid and long-time students of things Japanese, we read with great interest "The Japanese Psycho-Social Barrier in Learning English," by Fred J. Edamatsu, in the fall 1978 issue of *TESL Reporter*. Mr. Edamatsu's views are characteristic of a popular school of Japanese thought whose eternal mission seems to consist in perpetuating the very problems it tries to solve. Readers should know that arguments such as Mr. Edamatsu's regularly find their way into popular Japanese publications and are often dutifully and, sad to say, uncritically adopted by students of English seeking to articulate the frustrations of learning an alien tongue.

Although Mr. Edamatsu's somewhat opaque language makes for rough reading, he seems to pursue the following line of reasoning:

A. Language and culture are inseparable.

B. Western culture and Japanese culture are irredeemably alien to one another.

Therefore

C. It is inevitable that the Japanese student will have a peculiarly difficult time learning the English language.

Having established C to his own satisfaction, Mr. Edamatsu suggests that awareness of this "psycho-social barrier" is the key to overcoming the difficulties it poses.

Clearly, there is considerable room for discussion concerning the validity of assumptions A and B. We choose here, however, to present some practical considerations immediately pertinent to Edamatsu's conclusion, which we find to be unnecessarily pessimistic.

Psycho-Social Advantages

We feel that the culture and idiom of a student from any country provide him with *both* advantages and disadvantages when it comes to learning a new language. Mr. Edamatsu has gone to great lengths to describe the social and psychological difficulties with which Japanese students of English must struggle. We would like to help balance the picture by outlining certain advantages enjoyed by these same students in their pursuit of competence in the English language.

Certain features of Japanese culture and the Japanese mind actually favor the assimilation of "English patterns of perception" and the development of foreign language skills. By way of example, we have grouped some of these into four categories:

1. Literacy
2. Familiarity with modern technology
3. Motivation
4. Discipline

In order to illustrate these features, let us consider the case of the "typical" Japanese student of English. We shall call him Mr. Tanaka.

Japan's is a highly literate society that places great value on learning and achievement. Mr. Tanaka has grown up in a world of books and facts, of language used both for artistic and communicative purposes. The Japanese have great reverence for the written language and for their sophisticated literary tradition. Mr. Tanaka began learning to read and write his own language at an early age. He worked very hard when he was a student in high school and college. He knows what it means to own books, to study them, to listen to lectures, to take notes and to assimilate new ideas. The rigorous Japanese educational system and constant contact with the written word have left Mr. Tanaka better prepared than students from many other countries to succeed in an academic program of English studies.

Mr. Tanaka lives in a large and modern Japanese city, where the latest technological tools and processes are as much a part of his daily life and language as in any part of the English-speaking world. His home is filled

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with modern electrical appliances and his wife shops in a well-stocked supermarket. He takes a subway to work and an elevator up to his fifth floor office. He knows at least as much as the average American about space research, solar energy, frozen foods and smog. And his familiarity with science and technology is more than skin deep, for he has more than likely learned as much about Western history and philosophy as have most Americans. The fact that the Japanese language has freely borrowed thousands of English words and expressions (e.g. "escalator," "television," "inflation," "microwave," etc.) bears further testimony to the close relationship between modern "Western" culture and life in contemporary Japan. Clearly, then, as Mr. Tanaka approaches the English language, his understanding of the way the world works turns out, in many respects, to be entirely appropriate.

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We have noted above that learning and achievement of any kind are very highly valued and encouraged in modern Japanese society. This observation alone goes a long way to explain why Japanese students of English are highly motivated. Such motivation further benefits from the characteristically exalted status accorded English and things American in Japanese society. It is instructive to note the extraordinary degree to which the most common objects (e.g. handkerchiefs, notebooks, T-shirts, etc.) can be made attractive to young Japanese by the conspicuous addition of a few printed English words. Profound interest in the English language is by no means restricted to the younger generation, however. Mr. Tanaka recognizes that English is an international language whose acquisition may well enhance his opportunities for job promotion. His company, like many others, actively encourages its employees to study English by giving them time off and paying their tuition. As Mr. Tanaka makes progress in his acquisition of English, he is more likely to be congratulated than "ostracized," as Mr. Edamatsu would have us believe.

Growing up in Japan, Mr. Tanaka has, as a matter of course, developed a strong sense of personal discipline. In a thousand different ways, he has learned the value of perseverence and tenacity of purpose. As a young adult, he set numerous specific goals for himself--what university he would attend, what he would study, where he would get a job, how much money he would save and when he would marry. He adheres unswervingly to these goals until some major setback or failure forces a change. When he realizes the inevitability of change, he devotes himself, with great resiliance, to an appropriate new goal. Difficult to discourage, he is somewhat uncomfortable in the face of "positive reinforcement" and is always striving to improve his performance. He will work tirelessly for long hours until he is satisfied that a task is completed. In this respect, Mr. Tanaka makes an ideal student. He studies long and hard, devoting much time and energy to the pursuit of success. He takes criticism well and is undaunted by repeated failure. On reaching a learning plateau, students of other nationalities often become discouraged, which results in reduced effort and a lack of visible improvement. Even when similarly discouraged, however, Mr. Tanaka continues to strive for perfection.

Concluding Remarks

We think we understand what Mr. Edamatsu is talking about, and have often noted in our Japanese students characteristics which might well be attributable to some sort of "psycho-social barrier." In many respects, Japanese are indeed "unique," but so are Vietnamese, Germans, Tongans, Greeks and Hottentots. Try as we might, we cannot persuade ourselves that any "psycho-social barriers" peculiar to the Japanese are significantly responsible for the difficulties they encounter in trying to

learn English.

There are numerous other reasons why many Japanese may fail to achieve dazzling proficiency in the English language. Many of these have to do with the rather sorry state of English teaching in Japan. We would like to see Mr. Edamatsu consider, for example, the effects of:

- antiquated and inappropriate teaching methods,
- a chronic unwillingness to weed out incompetent teachers,
- a lack of trained native-speaker instructors, and
- a traditional student-teacher relationship which is not conducive to the development of oral skills in a living language.

Perhaps the most unnecessary, and therefore most unfortunate aspect of all this, is that arguments of the type espoused by Mr. Edamatsu enjoy enormous popularity among the Japanese themselves, who seem to derive great solace from the suggestion that their difficulties with the English language are not really their fault. We fear that, far from promoting a constructive "awareness" of the problem, Mr. Edamatsu's article and others like it serve only to perpetuate the sort of fatalism which condemns language learners to unending despair.