

# BACK TO THE BARRIER

by **Fred J. Edamatsu**

In their article "The Psycho-Social Barrier' Revisited" (Winter, 1979), written in response to my article "The Japanese Psycho-Social Barrier in Learning English" (Fall, 1978), Drew and Debbie Dillon make statements that could cause readers to misunderstand my paper.

The Dillons begin by accusing me of saying that the Japanese have difficulty in learning English because "Western culture and Japanese culture are irredeemably alien to one another." That accusation is false. I stated that the difficulty is caused by another difficulty which the Japanese have—"To think like a foreigner." In other words, the problem that the Japanese learner of English has is caused not by cultural differences but by a psycho-social trait. The Dillons missed the thesis of my paper. They presented views which, they declared, were opposed to mine, but they were actually refuting a statement which I did not make. Hence, their arguments were aimed at a nonexistent target.

They then proceed to present certain advantages which, they contend, the Japanese learner (whom they call Mr. Tanaka) has, implying that I denied such a fact. I certainly did not. The subject of advantages was not within the scope of my paper; in short, it was irrelevant. That is why that topic was not taken up in my paper. I am aware of the fact that the Japanese learner does have certain advantages, although I do not subscribe to those the Dillons listed. It is doubtful that any intelligent reader would, for the arguments the Dillons put forth in pointing out the advantages are marred by superficiality and lack of logic. For instance, they list literacy as the first advantage. They state that "Japan's a highly literate society." Do they mean what others might mean by this statement—that Japan has comparatively a small number of illiterate people? When we talk about the literacy of a nation, we usually refer to numbers (not degree)—the portion of the population which is literate or illiterate.

"Japan's a highly literate society" because a small in comparison with most other nations'. Does the fact that the Japanese society has many literate people prove that any Japanese person can learn foreign languages better than other people? Or are the Dillons saying that the typical literate Japanese is more literate than the literate people of other nations? If so, where are their supporting data? Aren't the literate people of France, Canada, China and other countries just as literate as the highly literate Japanese? Even if the literate Japanese were more literate than literate non-Japanese, where is the proof that this fact gives the Japanese advantages over others in learning foreign languages? Can't illiterate people be adept in learning foreign languages, that is, orally? Surely, they can master the morphology, phonology and vocabulary of foreign languages well enough, so that they can speak the languages articulately. As a matter of fact, some English teachers in Japan believe that one of the causes of the difficulty the Japanese have in learning English is that they are too bookish; they try to learn English the way they learned other subjects in school such as history, by reading about it, by memorizing facts, by poring over rules of grammar and pronunciation in textbooks (the way dead languages like Latin are studied), instead of using "live" practice the way a living language should be learned. The Dillons claim that, because Mr. Tanaka "knows what it means to own books, to study them, to listen to lectures, to take notes," he has an advantage over "students from many other countries." Does learning a modern foreign language consist of such methods as owning books? Where are the data of research studies that testify that the methods so unquestioningly touted by the Dillons and rejected by many are effective in learning foreign languages?

The Dillons go on to say that another advantage Mr. Tanaka has is the wealth of modern technology in his life. What is the

correlation between modern technology and the study of English? Here again, there is no data to support their assertion that knowing how to ride elevators and owning electrical appliances are advantages in learning English. There's more to learning English than knowing how to operate or utilize mechanical devices. One needs to grasp the mechanical structure of the language. One needs to learn many other things. Besides, many English teachers in Japan would declare that the Dillons' Mr. Tanaka does not answer to the description of a typical student of English. For instance, the Dillons say "Mr. Tanaka lives in a large and modern Japanese city." So many students do not. The Dillons' Mr. Tanaka answers more accurately to the description of the stereotype Japanese that so many foreigners have created ever since Japan became a great economic power. I believe that the small-town Japanese who is not blessed with such bourgeois sophistication as Mr. Tanaka can make as much progress in learning English as the Dillons' phantom.

Other advantages, the Dillons say, are the motivation, industriousness, and perseverance of the Japanese. Legions will agree that the Japanese possess these time-honored virtues, but does possession of these virtues assure that no psycho-social barrier can exist alongside them?

The Dillons conclude their paper by proclaiming the *true* reasons why the Japanese "may fail to achieve dazzling proficiency in the English language." (It was startling to read this quoted passage in view of their ardent declarations of the advantages the Japanese have.) They state, cynically, that the educational establishment is the culprit, like "teaching methods" and "incompetent teachers." (This, mind you, after praising the "rigorous Japanese education system," page 15. I was startled again!) This discussion is also full of superficial statements. What do they mean by "a lack of trained native-speaker instructors?" "Trained" in what way? The way the Dillons themselves are? Or do they mean awarded with teaching credentials or degrees in teaching of foreign languages? People with and without teaching credentials are found in the teaching profession and competent professionals are found in both groups. In Japan today, there are many native-speakers of English. Some have degrees in foreign

language education and some do not. In any event, competent teachers are found in both groups. Or do the Dillons mean teachers who have studied the Japanese language and culture? Again, competent teachers are counted among those who have and those who haven't. Another question. Can the Dillons establish that native-speakers are better English instructors than the Japanese English instructors? Many Japanese pupils say they learn more from their Japanese instructors, because they understand their pupils' problems (their psycho-social problems, perhaps); they respect the goals of their pupils. The presence of a foreign teacher in the classroom may be thrilling; the sound of English spoken by a native may be ravishing. But, the pupils don't necessarily learn more from native-speakers. The Japanese instructors may have imperfect mastery of English, but, as it is well known, great music teachers are not always great musicians themselves, and great musicians have not always demonstrated that they are great music teachers. The Japanese instructors need not be abandoned because they lack native skills in English. There is another recourse; they can be sent to English-speaking countries to improve their English (despite their psycho-social barrier).

One more thing. The Dillons accuse me of condemning Japanese "language learners to unending despair" by suggesting that "their difficulties are not really their fault." As a matter of fact, it's the Dillons themselves who commit this misdeed. They put the blame on the educational establishment. Wouldn't they induce the Japanese learners to think, "It's not my fault; it's not because I'm incapable. It's because the educators are incompetent." I, on the contrary, put the blame on the patterns of thought and behavior (psycho) formed by the traditions of society (social). In short, the barrier is within the pupils. The awareness of this intrinsic barrier should (and, perhaps, would) incite the pupils to overcome it.

Moreover, the Dillons avoid confronting the psycho-social problem which I undertook to expound. Instead, they fly off on a tangent and flourish the advantages of the Japanese—their laudable literacy, perseverance, etc. It's like telling a child who has difficulty in learning the three R's that he needn't worry about his non-achievement because his artistic talents will see him

through in life. It's better to encourage students to confront their handicaps so as to overcome them and thus make learning easier, rather than lull them into complaisance with consoling praises.

I have pointed out only some of the statements made by the Dillons which are superficial and illogical. There are others, but if I continue, this paper will be longer than my original paper. I believe I have demonstrated that the criticisms the Dillons directed against my paper do not serve the readers. They do not offer additional information on the thesis of my paper. The reader is not enlightened further on the subject. They simply reject my thesis, then present arguments that are wide of the mark. If they have ideas of their own, why not organize them so that they enlighten rather than raise doubts and questions. Their ideas, as presented, need development, extensive investigation, and deep analysis. Moreover, the Dillons should observe the principles of logic to convince the reader.