

## LESSONS FROM THE PAST: TRADITIONS AND REFORMS

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By looking back into history and learning from the experiences of others . . . [promoters of innovations] can avoid many problems that plagued previous campaigns.

(Henrichsen, 1989: 201)

### 1. Introduction

This chapter provides a historical perspective on English language education in Japan by examining three major attempts to reform secondary school teaching methods in the twentieth century: those instigated by Harold E. Palmer and the Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET) in the 1920s and 1930s, American-backed efforts to introduce Charles Fries's Oral Approach in the late 1950s and 1960s, and reforms promoted by the Japanese government itself from the late 1980s onwards. In the course of this examination, we highlight the importance of underlying traditions, and, on this basis, identify constraints and possibilities which have preserved their salience up until the present-day. We begin, though, by considering the late nineteenth century background, identifying the emergence of a particular English teaching tradition which has remained dominant despite all attempts to dislodge it over the last hundred years.

### 2. The *hensoku / yakudoku* tradition

Although the beginnings of English studies in Japan are usually dated to the first decade of the nineteenth century, modern language study was generally the prerogative of only a few official translators and interpreters until Commodore Perry's "black ships" from the USA forced Japan to open its doors to the outside world in 1853. Until then, and for some time thereafter, the main languages studied were Chinese and Dutch rather than English.

Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, however, English-medium instruction became the norm in universities and some schools (particularly between the mid-seventies and mid-eighties), with large numbers of British and American teachers being hired to aid in the modernization of Japan via instruction in a variety of subjects.

Students read English textbooks in most of their classes, learning "*in* English and *through* English, but never *about* English" (Redman, 1931: 79, italics in original). However, the Meiji Rescript on Education of 1890 ushered in a period of nationalism, and Japanese interest in practical foreign language learning declined. English had become a compulsory *subject* on the curriculum, and teaching was increasingly geared towards the needs of examinations. Foreign teachers were largely replaced by Japanese teachers who were not always proficient in spoken English. In consequence, "studying from Japanese textbooks and having infrequent contact with native speakers of English, [students] had reached the stage of learning *about* English in *Japanese*" (Bryant, 1956: 25, italics in original).

The type of teaching which became established at this time, and which has continued to remain dominant, is often dismissed as "grammar-translation", with no attempt being made to analyse it further. However, use of this label is misleading, since the grammar-translation "method", first developed in Germany from the late eighteenth-century onwards (Howatt,

1984: 131), does *not* appear to have been imported into Japan. Two main differences can be pointed out. Whereas late-nineteenth-century reformers in Europe (see Howatt and Smith, 2002) were particularly opposed to the use in grammar-translation of disconnected, often nonsensical sentences to exemplify grammar rules, the materials used for core English teaching in Japanese schools have always tended to consist of reading texts or (at lower levels) dialogues, with the former being selected for their educative content. Secondly, whereas European grammar-translation involved translation both ways (from the mother tongue into the target language as well as vice versa), Japanese priorities have tended to focus on gaining information *from* English texts, not on encoding into English.

How, then, shall we characterize the type of teaching which became established towards the end of the nineteenth century in Japan? Turning to contemporary writers, we find it being called *hensoku* (“irregular”) and contrasted with more “regular” *seisoku* teaching, which was associated with English-medium instruction or “teaching by conversation” (a form of direct method promoted by early reformers such as Kanda Naibu (1857–1923)). In explanation of these terms, Omura (1978: 94) cites the following entries in Brinkley’s *Unabridged Japanese-English Dictionary* (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1896):

*Seisoku*, n. A method of learning a language by studying the correct pronunciation as well as the meaning (opposite of *hensoku*).

*Hensoku*, n. A method of learning a foreign language which consists in translating the meaning without regard to the correct pronunciation of the words, and without paying much attention to the rules of syntax.

According to one critic of *hensoku*, Nitobe Inazo (1862–1933), “Its sole object is to get the sense of a sentence and therefore it gives no heed whatever [to] how a word sounds. If it is necessary to pronounce an English word . . . as little respect is paid to the pronunciation of the original as in the case of Kango” (Nitobe, 1929, cited by Omura, 1978: 94).

Nitobe’s reference here to the teaching of *kango* (classical Chinese) is highly pertinent: teachers and students in the elite institutions where English was taught at the end of the nineteenth-century already possessed considerable knowledge of *kanbun* (the Chinese classics). Syntactic similarities between classical Chinese and English were often exploited to aid learners in the understanding of English (Ike, 1995: 7–8), and a particular technique derived from traditions of Chinese study was transferred to Dutch, then English studies. This *yakudoku* (literally, “translation-reading”) technique appears to have formed the centrepiece of *hensoku* instruction: in essence, it involved the provision of literal word-for-word interlinear translations accompanied by a numbering system which enabled the student to reorder words in line with Japanese syntax (Kawasumi, 1976; Hino, 1988). Thus, “the target language sentence [was] first translated word-by-word, and the resulting translation reordered to match Japanese word order” (Hino, 1988: 46). The prevalence of this technique within *hensoku* is indicated by Okakura (1911, cited by Hino, 1988: 51): “In the teaching of English in our country, students are taught to translate word-by-word, with forward and regressive eye movements”.

Although *hensoku* was increasingly blamed for low English standards by progressive educators at the beginning of the twentieth century, some admitted arguments in its favour. Thus, Nitobe (1929, cited by Omura 1978: 94–5) says “It must be said to its praise that students who are trained in this way have usually much more accurate and precise comprehension of what they read than those who are taught to read parrot-like one sentence after another without thinking fully of the meaning”. Indeed, the spread and refinement of *hensoku* owed much to its early adoption by a widely-respected educational reformer, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), at his private school, Keio Gijuku, predecessor of the present Keio University (Omura, 1978: 95).

The particular *yakudoku* translation procedure we have described above is generally employed these days only in examination-oriented “cram schools” (*juku* or *yobiko*). However, the term “*yakudoku*” tends to be used nowadays in a more general sense, to refer to the overall focus on sentence-by-sentence translation of connected texts into Japanese which continues to form the mainstay of typical English teaching at all levels of formal education, in particular in senior high schools and universities.

Whether characterized (misleadingly) as “grammar-translation” or described in its own terms as *hensoku* or (more commonly nowadays) *yakudoku*, the “traditional” form of English teaching in Japan, with its roots in the teaching of classical Chinese, has proved – despite its many critics – remarkably resilient.

### 3. Harold E. Palmer and the Institute for Research in English Teaching (1922–41)

Typically, during the Meiji Era (1868–1912), solutions to domestic problems were sought in the first instance in western models. This approach was adapted to the reform of English language education as observers noted a worrying decline in standards of proficiency (accompanying the establishment of *hensoku*) towards the end of the nineteenth century. One pattern was established early on, whereby Japanese scholars themselves visited western countries to report on the methods in use there. Around the turn of the century two well-known academics, Kanda Naibu (1857–1923) and Okakura Yoshisaburo (1868–1936), were sent on separate official tours of inspection to Europe – in particular Germany, which was the most favoured source of western ideas, generally, in the latter part of the Meiji Era. Kanda, who had attended university in the USA and was already a firm believer in the “natural method”, or “teaching by conversation” promoted there by Lambert Sauveur (1826–1907), was less favourable towards the German “new method” than Okakura, finding little “new” in it during his study tour of 1900–1 (Furber, 1927: 58; for more on the “natural” and “new” methods, see Howatt and Smith 2000, 2002). On the other hand, Okakura, who spent 1902–5 in Europe, argued on his return that the German reformers did offer an instructive model for Japan, one which sufficiently emphasized the *educational*, not only utilitarian value of English teaching in schools. These views were expressed most forcefully in an original (1911) contribution entitled *Eigokyoiku* (English Language Education) (see Imura and Takenaka, forthcoming). However, the defeat of Germany in World War I brought with it a collapse in esteem for German models and a shift in attention to Britain. Kanda’s and Okakura’s textbooks were widely-used and Okakura, in particular, met with some success in diffusing his ideas as head of the English department at the principal teacher training institution for secondary schools, Tokyo Higher Normal School (Imura, 1994, 1997: 60). However, as the end of the Taisho Era (1912–1926) approached, English teaching in schools had not changed very much overall, and standards of oral English in particular had been little improved.

Another predominant pattern of reform in the twentieth century involved inviting foreign “experts” to Japan, as in the cases of Harold E. Palmer, Charles C. Fries and (with less emphasis on “expertise”) the present-day JET Program(me). This pattern follows on from the early Meiji import of “hired foreigners” to which we have already referred. We turn now to the first and perhaps the most significant of these foreign reformers, Harold E. Palmer (1877–1949), who spent a period of fourteen years (1922–36) in Japan as “linguistic adviser” to the Department of Education. The account below is based on our own recent investigations into Palmer’s work and the history of the Institute he founded in Tokyo (see, in particular, Imura, 1997, Smith, 1999, and Smith and Imura, 2002).

Palmer, at the time he was invited to Japan, was a lecturer at University College London. He had established himself as a leading authority on foreign language pedagogy via publications such as *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages* (1917), *The Principles of Language-Study* (1921a) and *The Oral Method of Teaching Languages* (1921b). Palmer’s

major achievement lay in his fusion of two strands of influence: the scientific, “applied linguistic” approach inherited from the Reform Movement (Howatt and Smith, 2002) and practical ideas deriving from the Berlitz Method and his own experiments in teaching adults in Belgium prior to World War I. Both strands involved a focus on the spoken language, and led him to develop his “Oral Method” (see Smith and Imura, 2000). He had, though, only had a limited opportunity to try out his ideas in secondary schools, as a part-time teacher of French for a short period in London.

In 1921 Palmer was invited by a prominent educationalist, Sawayanagi Masataro (1865–1927), to come to Japan for three years to develop appropriate methods for Japanese secondary schools. Although he was nominally employed by the Department of Education, Palmer’s energies were mostly channelled through an independent Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET), established in 1923, of which he was the first Director. This was a “semi-official” organization, with premises in the Department of Education but with its own independent board of advisers, bulletin and publishing outlets.

At first Palmer appears to have believed that, by uniting reform-minded Japanese teachers within the Institute, he could help bring about structural reform in the educational system. The IRET conference of 1925 proposed a radical four-point programme for such reform involving reduced class sizes, increased freedom for teachers in textbook selection, improved in-service teacher education and more effective involvement of native speaker teachers. There were also calls for university entrance examinations to be reformed to feature “plain English” (as opposed to over-literary words and expressions) and for oral/aural testing to be introduced in counterweight to translation tasks. Although these proposals may be considered unrealistic in retrospect (Ozasa, 1995: 86), it should be emphasized that they coincided with the period of “Taisho democracy” in the early to mid-1920s, when the government appeared to be willing to act upon reformist ideas. However, the proposals were not taken up. Instead, the political climate became increasingly unfavourable as “Taisho democracy” gave way in the late 1920s and 1930s to what has been called the “dark valley” of ultranationalism which led ultimately to the Pacific War. During the latter period there were increasingly strident calls for the abolition of English as a subject on the secondary school curriculum, accompanied by a progressive reduction in the number of hours allotted to English (Kawasumi, 1979).

After 1925, Palmer devoted his efforts to working “within the system”, and avoided involvement in political debates on the status of English as a subject. In relation to methodology, it is not true as several writers have assumed (e.g. Yamamoto, 1978) that Palmer expected to introduce his Oral Method unadapted. Instead, it is clear that, to a large extent, he attempted to research the situation and adapt his ideas to be appropriate in the Japanese secondary school context, as advised initially by Sawayanagi. Although Palmer’s ideas were grounded throughout in an unswerving belief, justified by contemporary linguistics, in the “primacy of speech”, he was guided also by a context-sensitive philosophy of “principled eclecticism”. The “multiple line of approach” which he had already sketched out in his 1921 work, *The Principles of Language-Study* was further developed in a 1924 *Memorandum on Problems of English Teaching* which offered a general statement of pedagogical principles, at the same time suggesting a map of possible paths reform could take in the Japanese context. He then devoted considerable effort to developing experimental materials for different lines of approach, and to gathering feedback from Japanese members of the Institute.

As Palmer learned more about Japanese priorities, IRET efforts began to be concentrated on the development of a “reader system”, whereby the reading textbook was seen as central, with oral work (oral introduction and question and answer routines) revolving around it. This compromise solution, most favoured by Japanese teachers, was similar in many respects to the “new” or “direct” method which had been introduced into Continental European schools as a consequence of the late nineteenth-century Reform Movement (see

Howatt and Smith, 2002). In his *The Reformed Teaching of English in the Middle-grade Schools* (1927) Palmer clearly recognized the importance in the Japanese context of enhancing writing and reading abilities, maintaining nevertheless that “direct” oral procedures rather than translation were the best means for pursuing these goals (Imura, 1997).

Having established the need for a “reader system”, Palmer produced a set of *Standard English Readers* (1926–7), with accompanying resource books to aid teachers with oral work. Palmer’s later years in Japan (between around 1930 and 1936) were taken up largely with lexicological research, motivated, at least initially, by the need to determine appropriate linguistic contents for the various levels of the secondary school English curriculum. Enlisting the aid of A.S. Hornby (1898–1978), an active member of the Institute who had come to Japan in 1924 to teach in a university in Kyushu, Palmer embarked on an ambitious classification of lexis (including collocations). This research programme was to bear fruit not only in revised versions of the *Standard English Readers* and graded supplementary readers published for Japanese secondary schools but also in the *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language* (Faucett et al., 1936) compiled with Michael West (1888–1973) and other colleagues overseas (see Smith, 2003).

Despite the undoubted achievements of IRET, overall assessments of Palmer’s work in reforming Japanese English education have tended to be negative (e.g. Redman, 1966; Yamamoto, 1978). To some extent these assessments have been based on false premises regarding his mission – he had not, after all, been invited to reform teaching in Japan single-handedly but encouraged (by Sawayanagi) to engage in research and suggest appropriate methods (see Smith, 1998).

Nevertheless, it remains true that Palmer had high initial expectations of leading a full-scale “Reform Movement”, and – despite his optimistic assessment in a speech to the Japan Society, London, in 1938 (Palmer, 1938) – political events, and the increasing perception that English was the “enemy’s language”, ultimately conspired to undermine the possible benefits of patient IRET research work in the Japanese context.

From a more positive viewpoint, however, it is clear that Institute ideas *were* appropriated by a number of Japanese teachers, who adapted them further to their own contexts. The “Fukushima plan” (Isoo and Shimizu, 1934) – a scheme of work for English teaching in a particular middle school in Fukushima prefecture – is generally held in Japan to represent the high-point of this achievement. This and another highly-valued curriculum developed by Japanese teachers, the “Shonan plan”, are seen to have succeeded because Palmer’s ideas on oral work were combined with more traditional forms of grammar instruction in Japanese and translation from English, thus ensuring an adequate preparation for university entrance examinations (Imura, 1997: 117). Despite the overall strength of American influence in the immediate post-war years (see 4. below), Japanese supporters of Palmer’s ideas had a major role in writing the first post-war Ministry of Education (MOE) courses of study for secondary schools, proposed in 1947 and 1951 (see Bryant, 1956: 28–9; Omura et al., 1980). Finally, the Institute itself (under the slightly different name “Institute for Research in Language Teaching”) has continued until the present-day to be one of the most important associations for Japanese secondary school English teachers and university teacher trainers. It has around 1,000 members all over Japan and is active in promoting research work, editing publications and organizing teacher training seminars and an annual Convention, very much under the influence, still, of the ideas of Harold E. Palmer (see IRLT 1985, 1994, 1995/1999; Smith, 1998, 2000).

It is noteworthy, as well, that Palmer’s ideas anticipated major contemporary methodological trends, world-wide. Total Physical Response, The Lexical Approach and even Communicative Language Teaching (in its “weak version”: cf. Howatt, 1984: 279) trace many of their components to Palmer’s work in Japan.

#### 4. ELEC and the “Oral Approach” (1956 to the late 1960s)

During the US Occupation (1945–52) there was a strong revival of interest in the learning of English, and American ideas, generally, exercised a strong appeal. The Occupation authorities did not themselves make methodological suggestions (Bryant, 1956: 26–8), leaving the field to Japanese educators (hence, the influence of Palmer’s ideas on the 1947 and 1951 courses of study, already noted above). However, a second major attempt to establish oral teaching methods in Japan was made from 1956 onwards, with the considerable financial backing of an American foundation.

In 1956 an “English Specialists’ Conference” was arranged at the instigation of John D. Rockefeller 3rd, and this paved the way for the propagation in Japan of the Oral Approach which had been developed at the University of Michigan by a well-known linguist and Professor of English there, Charles C. Fries (1887–1967). Sometimes known as the “Michigan method”, the Oral Approach had already gained the status of orthodoxy among TESOL professionals in the USA. The attempt to spread Fries’s ideas was carried out under the auspices of an “English Language Exploratory Committee” (ELEC), constituted in 1956 (later, in 1963, ELEC was established on firmer footing as the “English Language Education Council”). The ELEC reform effort between 1956 and 1968 has been investigated and described in great detail by Henrichsen (1989), and we base our account below on his work, with some reference to additional primary sources.

ELEC’s “ultimate goal”, as stated in communications with its principal instigator and sponsor, John D. Rockefeller 3rd, was no less than “the transformation of English language teaching methods in schools and universities throughout Japan” (correspondence cited by Henrichsen, 1989: 194). However, in attempting to bring about a self-styled “revolution” in teaching methods (Henrichsen, 1989: 1), ELEC’s backers and leaders generally ignored both the achievements of and the problems faced by IRET prior to World War II. Instead, they confidently expected the solution to poor standards of English teaching to lie in the most up-to-date and “scientific” method, that developed by Fries and his colleagues in a quite different setting, the English Language Institute (ELI) in Michigan.

The ELEC “Specialists’ Conference”, which started off the movement, was held from September 3–8 1956 in Tokyo. A.S. Hornby was invited as a representative of the British Council, and Fries – asked to select one more American scholar – invited W. Freeman Twaddell, a professor of linguistics and German at Brown University who had taught on summer courses at the ELI. As Hornby recognized, “American influences are strong now (Fries, of the University of Michigan, is the new star)”, although he also found that “Palmer’s work is remembered and appreciated” (letter to Dorothee Anderson, 13 October 1956).<sup>2</sup> Rockefeller’s representative in Japan was more blunt (in correspondence cited by Henrichsen, 1989: 142–3): “Fries and Twaddell so impressed the Japanese that Palmer and Hornby were overshadowed completely. In the process the British and Palmer have . . . been reasonably well eliminated as ghosts, which greatly simplifies matters and clears the road for progress”.

The “Conclusions and Recommendations” drawn up at the end of the Conference evidenced the strong influence of Fries’s “Oral Approach” ideas and set the future direction for ELEC activities. Included in the recommendations were the following: “Oral practice with materials prepared according to scientific principles is considered essential at the beginning of language learning”, and “teaching materials to be used for the new approach must be built upon a systematic comparison of the analyzed structural patterns of English and Japanese”. There was also an emphasis on the desirability of teacher training, particularly for lower secondary school teachers, and the need to improve the quality of entrance examinations.

Following the conference, two major avenues of attack on traditional Japanese English teaching were defined as: (1) training teachers and (2) producing Oral Approach materials. Virtually no action was taken in relation to the third area of concern, entrance examinations.

Later, an additional area of activity was the provision of English lessons to the general public, following the establishment of an “English Language Institute” in 1960 (Henrichsen, 1989: 42, 50).

Fries guided ELEC efforts between 1956 and 1959, visiting Japan for extended periods to engage in lecture tours, materials preparation and overall organization of teacher training efforts. During the same period, Twaddell took a more hands-on role in the “summer programs for teachers”. After 1959, however, these activities were largely delegated to Japanese staff and other American consultants and teachers employed by ELEC.

ELEC’s achievements may be summarized as follows: a set of textbooks was produced according to the “scientific” (contrastive) principles recommended by Fries, and these were approved for publication in 1960. Titled *New Approach to English*, they were not adopted widely, even in their revised (1963) edition. However, they were perceived at the time to have exerted some influence on other textbook writers and publishers. Perhaps a more long-lasting achievement was ELEC’s teacher retraining programme. After the war, there was a great shortage of qualified English teachers, and ELEC contributed much to necessary upgrading. The numbers of teachers attending its intensive two-week summer courses progressively increased until 1962 (when 1,169 teachers attended, in eight different locations). Numbers had declined to 418 by 1965, however, and thenceforth remained at or below that figure, with almost all courses being held in the Tokyo area. By 1984 a cumulative total of 10,028 teachers had participated, but even this number is small compared with the total number of English teachers in Japanese schools (estimated at 62,000 in junior high schools and 22,500 in senior high schools in 1956 (Henrichsen, 1989: 46)). The summer seminars have continued in a much-reduced form until the present-day, as have the commercial activities of the ELEC English Language Institute.

However, by around 1962 ELEC was “at a crossroads” (Henrichsen, 1989: 47). Large sums of money had been spent, and there was a perception that efforts could continue indefinitely; some success had been seen in the above areas, but voices of opposition had also become more pronounced (MOE, in particular, appeared generally unfavourable), and other arrangements for in-service training were beginning to be made available (see 5. below). To some extent, ELEC’s leaders appeared caught in routine and unwilling to initiate new projects on their own: the spark of new ideas had been lost following the withdrawal of Fries and Twaddell in 1959 (Henrichsen, 1989: 50), and there also seems to have been “a fundamental conflict between the desire, on the part of some of ELEC’s Japanese leaders, for stability and continuity, and the desire, on the part of the American funding organizations, for innovation and change” (Henrichsen, 1989: 52). ELEC had become, then, “a successful commercial enterprise that had virtually abandoned its original revolutionary goals” (ibid.). Finally, in 1968, the Rockefeller Foundation withdrew its financial support.

ELEC has continued to exist, but without its original sense of revolutionary purpose. After ten years of great expense and effort, even Rockefeller’s staff recognized that “ELEC had failed to achieve its main objective. . . . ELEC was not able to change the grand strategy of English-language teaching in Japan or to bring overall improvement in teaching methods” (staff report cited by Henrichsen, 1989: 194). As with the “reformed methods” worked out so painstakingly within IRET before the war, in the long run relatively few Japanese teachers undertook to use the Oral Approach in their classrooms. Although, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the techniques of mim-mem drill and pattern practice may have spread more widely than Palmer’s suggested procedures did before the war (Ozasa, 1995: 13), the Oral Approach suffered a more rapid decline than had Palmer’s ideas, largely mirroring its fall from favour in the late 1960s in its country of origin, the USA.

## 5. The JET Program(me) and the “communicative course of study” (1987 onwards)

It seems significant that in a widely publicized “Great Debate on the Teaching of English in Japan” in the 1970s between Hiraizumi Wataru (a member of the House of Councillors) and Watanabe Shunju, a Professor at Jochi University, very little reference was made to western methodology. Instead, arguments which had characterized the immediate pre-war years were paramount. Hiraizumi highlighted the inefficiency of contemporary English teaching and suggested that the emphasis placed on English in the secondary school curriculum should be reduced. Watanabe presented arguments in favour of the cognitive and cultural rather than utilitarian benefits of the study of English: its purpose, he argued, is to cultivate the learner’s mind, and to raise appreciation of the learner’s mother tongue and culture, as well as that of foreign cultures (Ike, 1995: 7). Oral-aural proficiency, the main concern of both Palmer and ELEC, received only scant attention. Nevertheless, practical goals and western influence were again to reassert their dominance in the third major twentieth-century “wave” of reform, starting around 1987.

This involved two notable particularities: the initiative taken by MOE in promulgating a reformist, “communicative” course of study (the IRET and ELEC efforts were not government-sponsored) and the introduction of large numbers of young westerners as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) into the school system. “Communication” as well as “internationalization” figured prominently in the goals of the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program(me), begun in 1987, while a new course of study first proposed in the same year also stressed the importance of students learning to communicate in English for purposes of international understanding.

There have been few published evaluations of these most recent reform efforts, and, since they are still ongoing, it is too early for overall assessments to be final. However, some research-based studies have appeared, the most comprehensive of which is McConnell’s (2000) ethnographic study of the JET Program(me), to which extensive reference will be made below.

The JET Program(me) was not entirely new, although in scale it far surpassed already existing programmes. Its first direct precursor was a Fulbright Commission-sponsored effort to place young American college graduates in prefectural boards of education as “assistant teachers’ consultants” (ATCs), an initiative which dated from 1969. ELEC, backed by Rockefeller until the previous year, had not been the only American attempt to radically improve the teaching of English in Japan after World War II, although the two other main players – the Ford Foundation and the Fulbright Commission – had found it no easier to make progress towards this common goal: thus, McConnell (2000: 41) mentions the “intense conflict that erupted when American ESL specialists, wedded to their particular techniques and goals, were placed in the public school system” under one previous Fulbright initiative. In 1969 the Fulbright Commission began to take a different tack, perhaps drawing inspiration from the Peace Corps program which had been established in 1961. Despite the young ATCs’ lack of specialist ESL training (or even basic teacher training), there was still a clear expectation on the part of the scheme’s US sponsors that they would help to “revolutionize the teaching of English in Japan” (Rubinger, cited by McConnell 2000: 42). Numbers were small, but the scheme appears to have been relatively popular with the prefectural boards of education where ATCs were placed: by 1976 their numbers had risen to fifteen (from an initial intake of four), and, in 1977, the Ministry of Education took over administration of the scheme, renaming its participants “Mombusho English Fellows” (“MEFs”). Another, similar government-sponsored programme called the British English Teaching (BET) Scheme was started up a few years later, with broader goals which included promoting “international understanding”. This reflected the involvement (from the beginning) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although the MEF Program and the BET Scheme by no means

“revolutionized” English teaching in Japan, they may be seen to have marked a turning-point in being sponsored by the government rather than outside agencies, and in being broadly acceptable to the majority of English teachers.

By 1986 around 50 new recruits to the BET Scheme and 100 to the MEF Program were arriving in Japan annually. In 1987, though, BET and MEF participants were incorporated within the JET Program(me), which began with 848 new arrivals, from Australia and New Zealand as well as the UK and USA. By 1999 – following further dramatic annual increases and further expansion in the range of participant nationalities involved – there were nearly 6,000 participants per year, with more than 20,000 alumni (McConnell, 2000: 2–3).

It is important to recognize that the main impetus for the massive post-1987 expansion associated with the JET Program(me) was political, not primarily educational, and that “internationalization” has been as much if not more of a major goal as reform of English teaching: a combination of factors was at work initially, including diplomatic pressure on Japan to open its markets and a relatively bottom-up movement in favour of international exchange at local government level. Finance came from local rather than national taxes, and MOE officials, who had effectively been sidetracked by the new proposals (McConnell, 2000: 40–1) were reluctant initially to support the JET Program(me). One condition of their becoming involved was that participants should be termed *assistant* language teachers (ALTs) and should not be allowed to teach on their own; instead, they should “team-teach” in the same classroom with, and under the supervision of a Japanese teacher. These conditions, MOE hoped, would minimize any sense of threat to job security among Japanese teachers of English. The educational rationale for team-teaching has remained somewhat obscure; nor has it been made clear *how* ALTs are expected to bring about reform. Nevertheless, from the beginning, MOE officials claimed publicly that the JET Program(me) was an opportunity to radically improve English teaching throughout Japan:

There is a big gap between what Japanese teachers are doing and what the Mombushô [i.e. MOE] wants to accomplish, and in order to bridge this gap we need ALTs. All 35,000 JTLs [Japanese teachers of language] throughout Japan follow almost the same teaching procedure, one that focuses on linguistic competence – grammar, sentence patterns, and pronunciation of new words. These teaching methods have been firmly established through a long history, and JTLs are very stubborn, though not entirely wrong, in sticking to them. I believe we need to change them.

(Wada 1989, cited by McConnell, 2000: 252)

The programme, according to McConnell’s assessment, has been successful above all in terms of internationalization (in the sense of Japanese people in all walks of life coming into contact with foreigners and the programme giving Japan a better press abroad): thus, it “has achieved phenomenal success as a cultural exchange program. Many of the JET participants, even those who are preoccupied with changing the Japanese system, come to feel close to Japan” (McConnell, 2000: 258).

However, McConnell is less positive regarding the power of the JET Program(me) to change ELT in Japan: until now “its effects on English education have been gradual and mixed” (ibid.). The point he emphasizes, and with which we concur, is that any change that is brought about tends to be limited to ALTs’ relatively narrow sphere of team-teaching influence: “Sometimes, it seems as if the atmosphere of the ubiquitous private English conversation schools has pervaded public secondary school English classes” but “in reality this change is, for the most part, limited to specific contexts and shielded from the rest of the system” (McConnell, 2000: 272). In other words, *yakudoku* has persisted in lessons taught by Japanese teachers on their own, and occasional team-taught lessons appear as a diversion for students (and teachers) from the “serious business” of exam-oriented grammar- and

translation-focused core English teaching, which continues unchanged. “As of yet”, McConnell (2000: 216) writes, “there is little carryover between the two”.

This may be seen to apply equally to the second major government-sponsored change of the late 1980s, MOE’s promulgation of a “communicative” course of study. This featured explicitly communicative goals with a balanced focus on all four skills, and also introduced new “Oral Communication” courses into the senior high school curriculum. The influence of the Communicative Approach, first developed in Britain from the mid-1970s onwards, is clear in the wording of the document, which came into effect in 1993 for junior high schools and 1994 for senior high schools.

Overall, however, the additional Oral Communication subjects seem to have suffered a fate similar to that of ALTs, in other words “marginalization” in relation to the core teaching of English, which goes on broadly unaltered. Many relatively academic schools are reported anecdotally to have ignored MOE directives regarding oral-aural proficiency, even during time-tabled Oral Communication lessons, and the situation has not been helped by the failure of the MOE-sponsored “Center” university entrance examination to incorporate a listening element.

Thus, a major problem with both team-teaching and the new focus on communication in the post-1987 course of study has been what McConnell terms “selective integration”. Japanese teachers and the school system have dealt with the “problems” posed by the imposition of foreign ALTs and recommendations to engage in communicative language teaching by involving these at the periphery (in occasional team-taught lessons and/or Oral Communication slots, conceptualized as distinct entities, while core English teaching continues unchanged).

There have, of course, been more upbeat anecdotal assessments than ours and McConnell’s of the reforms promulgated from the late 1980s onwards (e.g. Moore and Lamie, 1996), but these, we suggest, tend generally to be based on a strong *belief* in rather than any observed reality of “revolution” in overall teaching methods; more than anything else, they may reflect the over-idealism that characterized and perhaps – as we shall explain further below – actively hindered attempts to reform *yakudoku* throughout the twentieth century.

## 6. Plus ça change?

“Plus ça change . . .”: “the more things seem to change, the more they stay the same” goes the saying. To what extent is this true of Japanese ELT over the last hundred years? Viewed historically, the answer is perhaps not as straightforward as might at first appear. We shall examine the question from two sides, considering, first, constraints on change as revealed by the apparent overall failure of the reform efforts described above, and, secondly, possibilities for change which can also be identified. In the process, a number of lessons from the past for present-day and future reformers will be seen to emerge.

### 6.1 Constraints on change

From one point of view, the reform efforts of the last hundred years have collectively failed, since – according to all accounts – *yakudoku* remains dominant in Japanese schools. What, then, have been the main weaknesses of past reform attempts and why has *yakudoku* remained so strong? Below we suggest some possible answers to these questions, considering six related factors: structural constraints, lack of “linkage”, reform “hubris”, teacher resistance, method limitations, and neglect of tradition.

#### 6.1.1. Structural constraints

Negative reasons given by teachers themselves for engaging in *yakudoku* tend to include lack of time for lesson preparation and covering the textbook or syllabus, large class size and the

need to prepare students for entrance examinations. However, none of the three reform efforts described above developed effective strategies for dealing with these kinds of structural constraint. IRET, in its first phase, came closest to addressing the need for reform of examinations (see 3. above), and several of Palmer's publications consisted of examples of suggested "New-type examinations" (Smith, 1999). IRET accepted defeat in the struggle to bring about structural change after about 1929, and reductions in the number of hours allotted to English in secondary schools in the 1930s severely hampered its efforts to introduce new teaching methods. This in itself shows the crucial role of wider, structural factors in facilitating or hindering methodological change.

ELEC started out by identifying the reform of entrance examinations as a major priority, but in practice concentrated its efforts, like IRET in its later phase, on purely methodological solutions. Finally, the end-of-century reforms involved team-teaching and changes in the course of study, but not examinations. Even MOE's own "Center test" – an entrance examination it encourages all universities to adopt – failed to include a listening or speaking component.

As Henrichsen (1989: 179) has suggested, "proposing that the examinations be changed is easy, and many have done it. On the other hand, overcoming the barriers to change and actually modifying the exams is a far more difficult task". Over the last hundred years, there has never been a coherent strategy for actually attempting this task, and this has left teachers with good cause to resist change. For discussion of this and the other areas of structural reform mentioned above, *kaizenkyo* (The Association for the Improvement of Foreign Language Education) seems to represent an appropriate forum. This brings together representatives of all the major professional associations for language teachers in Japan and presents annual suggestions in the form of an "appeal" to MOE. Ultimately, however, the reform of college entrance examinations lies in the hands of universities and university teachers, reform of anything other than the Center test lying beyond the direct sphere of influence of MOE.

### **6.1.2. Lack of "linkage"**

Henrichsen (1989) has identified ELEC's failure to establish what he terms "linkage" either with MOE or with existing teachers' associations as among its most serious failures.

MOE reasserted its control over the education system in the so-called "reverse course years" after 1958, laying to one side several of the checks on its management of school affairs which had been instituted under the American Occupation. During this period, ELEC came increasingly to be perceived as a threat to MOE's authority. In the Japanese context, Henrichsen (1989: 135) implies, innovation can only come in a top-down manner, and ELEC leaders failed to develop connections with those in power, adopting instead the "horizontal" strategies of materials design and teacher training and relying on the "obvious" superiority of its methods for acceptance of them. To some extent, Palmer's efforts were also hampered by a lack of official approval, although in his case MOE tended to be neutral rather than actively hostile (indeed, the IRET office was housed in the Department of Education up until the outbreak of the Pacific War).

Nevertheless, as the government-led experiments of the late 1980s onwards seem to have shown, top-down "coercive" strategies do not necessarily bring about substantive change in present-day Japan, any more than "horizontal" efforts did for ELEC or IRET. As our analysis of team-teaching and the "communicative" course of study has shown, top-down initiatives can still be "selectively integrated" (i.e. largely avoided) when they are perceived to be inappropriate at grass-roots level. MOE often appears reluctant to spell out a preferred methodology (hence what to outside observers may appear to be the vagueness of its course of study and guidelines on team-teaching), but this is welcomed by many teachers given the extent to which its pre-war activities involved a perceived excess of control. MOE's apparent

inability to ensure compliance with its own course of study (for example, with regard to a balanced overall treatment of the four skills) can best be explained in this light.

More important than failure to involve MOE, then, may have been ELEC's failure to build on the achievements of IRET and make links with its successor organization, IRLT, or with other, existing players in the ELT field. As we have seen, there was instead a conscious attempt on the part of ELEC's promoters to supersede Palmer's influence, but this was ultimately to backfire as teachers linked with IRLT expressed their view that Fries's ideas offered little new (Ogawa, 1958). To a certain extent, Palmer himself had recognized the importance of solidarity among reformers, stating in 1933 that the Institute's greatest achievement to that date had been the way it brought together progressive teachers, replacing previous factionalism with a focused reform movement (Palmer, 1933). Nevertheless, there was conflict not only with traditionally minded teachers (see below) but also with supporters of Okakura Yoshisaburo, the doyen of English education at the time Palmer arrived, and an important precursor in introducing oral methods to the Japanese context.

The present-day situation appears to be little better. There are various reform-minded teachers' associations, which come together annually for a meeting of *kaizenkyo* (see above) but which otherwise engage in few shared activities. The development of team-teaching methodology appears to be largely in the hands of ALTs themselves, within their own extensive network, while other foreign teachers in Japan tend to be associated mainly with JALT (the Japan Association for Language Teaching), only rarely participating in the more "indigenous" Japanese teachers' associations, of whose existence many remain unaware. An end to factionalism and an enhanced spirit of "working together" among different reform-minded groups might go some way towards bringing about more fundamental, integrated change in the Japanese secondary school context.

### **6.1.3. Reform 'hubris'**

One of the most important and persistent barriers to effective reform has been – and may still tend to be – reformers' overriding belief in the superiority of their own favoured methods. In short, over-confidence in the (logical and/or scientific) "relative advantage" (Henrichsen, 1989: 84) of new ideas has tended to bring with it an over-optimism and accompanying lack of realism in relation to reform in the Japanese context.

IRET reform attempts, among all those we have described, ended up showing the greatest degree of adaptation to pre-existing forms of core (reading-based) English teaching in the Japanese context. Palmer's "principled eclecticism" and twelve-year commitment made this possible, but he was unbending on one point: the need for methodology to be based on universal principles which could be scientifically justified.

This was very much the approach taken by Fries, also, although in a much more dogmatic fashion. As Henrichsen (1989: 177) says, "ELEC's leaders – especially the American ones – seemed to think that the superiority of their new methods and materials would be enough to overcome any obstacles placed in their way". Fries made only occasional visits to Japan, and ELEC failed to develop an effective strategy for diffusion, other than teacher training and textbook production. As in Palmer's case, over-confidence in the power of science to persuade was misplaced and meant that – judged according to its own expectations of "revolutionizing" Japanese ELT – ELEC's efforts can only be seen to have failed.

Finally, with regard to communicative language teaching and team-teaching, there is a commonly-held assumption among ALTs (and other non-Japanese teachers in Japan) that their practices are superior to the "old-fashioned" methodology they see being put into practice by Japanese colleagues. However, it is also clear that mere expression or explanation of this belief fails to result automatically in uptake of their ideas by Japanese teachers themselves.

A certain narrowness of vision involved in excessive trust in rationality and “method” seems itself to contribute to failure to bring about lasting reform, since wider factors including the structural constraints and needs for linkage identified above tend to be inadequately considered. In the case of western reformers, at least some degree of cultural imperialism and/or “orientalism” is also likely to be involved (Susser, 1998; Pennycook, 2000). Nevertheless, the responsibility for this does not lie just with western teachers. Palmer, for example, was invited to Japan, as are ALTs nowadays. ELEC was clearly an American-inspired effort, but in general Japanese reformers have themselves sought solutions in western ideas, requesting the assistance of foreign experts or themselves importing the latest ideas from overseas. The latter tendency has been considerably strengthened over recent years by the increase in numbers of western-educated applied linguists at Japanese universities, who appear to have been just as instrumental, indeed, as agencies like the British Council in promoting communicative language teaching from the 1980s onwards.

In sum, over-reliance on the “relative advantage” or “self-evident superiority” of methods fashionable in the west, whether promoted by foreigners or Japanese, may be seen as a key to explaining why reforms have failed to be adequately tailored to the Japanese secondary school context.

#### **6.1.4. *Teacher resistance***

Evidently, the various reform methods proposed in the past have not been perceived as suitable in the majority of secondary school teachers’ eyes, and there may be a number of reasons for this. The first concerns teacher’s lack of confidence in their own abilities to teach in English, as they have seemed to be required to do in all three reform efforts described above, with their common emphasis on the development of oral proficiency. The improvement of teachers’ own abilities in oral English was not directly addressed by Palmer, and this seems to have been a failing of his approach. ELEC did, to its credit, recognize and tackle the problem by offering intensive courses of language as well as methodology to teachers. In the case of team-teaching, teachers’ abilities are presumed to improve through direct contact with ALTs. This does not necessarily mean that Japanese teachers gain confidence to teach in English in solo lessons, however, as they do not always gain the necessary experience via team-teaching (instead they seem often to be forced into a kind of interpreter’s role by the presence of an ALT).

Apart from teachers’ underlying abilities, another area of importance concerns teachers’ perceptions of constraints. Apart from structural constraints (see above), these can include pupil, parent and colleague expectations about the sort of teaching they should be engaged in (see Flenley, 1987 and Gorsuch, 2000 for some evidence that these are important factors). In future reform efforts, more attention may need to be paid to teacher beliefs, and to helping teachers see how perceived constraints can be addressed (see 6.2.1 below).

Finally, we need to consider the beliefs shared by many teachers (and university professors) – in particular, perhaps, those with a literary allegiance – that there are important alternative goals of English education aside from the apparently utilitarian one of proficiency in spoken English. Since the end of the Meiji Era, the idea has taken hold that the study of English should develop general cognitive abilities and cultural awareness (cf. Okakura’s arguments mentioned in section 2 above, and Watanabe’s in section 5).

Palmer was frequently criticized for his neglect of literature, and responded by emphasizing that oral proficiency is a necessary stepping-stone towards the appreciation of literary texts. The continuing strength of the following kind of belief, however, should not be underestimated:

For the Japanese . . . the advantages of studying foreign languages are of a higher and more intangible nature than are its so-called “practical” benefits. In some ways the most

valuable advantage lies in its “unpractical” aspect, namely, in its hidden and unutilitarian effect on the mind.

(Nitobe 1923, cited by Henrichsen 1989: 121–2)

Finally, there may be some truth in Mulvey’s (1999) assessment that there is ignorance on the part of teachers of possible methodological alternatives, relating to the frequently criticized “inadequate training system of EFL teachers in Japan” (Hino 1988: 52). It is true that Palmer had to persistently counter misunderstandings (often, it would seem, willful misconceptions) that he was proposing to introduce “teaching by conversation” wholesale into Japanese schools. There have been many misunderstandings, also, of communicative language teaching, for example relating to the assertion that it concerns only oral and aural skills. However, these misunderstandings may be less a result of ignorance than a mask for deeper concerns about the over-utilitarian assumptions of western methods and/or the excessive demands they place on the “non-native speaker” teacher.

#### **6.1.5. Method limitations**

From the above perspective, it may seem to many Japanese teachers that the methods proposed by reformers are severely limited in the emphasis they place on the utilitarian aspect of English teaching, at the expense – they may feel – of its wider educational purposes. Such methods may also appear to require a degree of native-like oral proficiency which they feel unable to cope with. Apart from these factors, other aspects of methods developed originally in completely different (western) settings are likely to make them appear inappropriate in Japanese secondary school classrooms, characterized as these are by their own norms of typical behavior (see Anderson, 1993). The kind of interaction students are used to in other subjects needs to be considered here (and the extent to which teachers of English can be expected to behave in ways which differ radically from those of their colleagues). From this perspective, Palmer’s and Fries’s methods, being relatively teacher-centred, might appear more appropriate to Japanese secondary school norms than the relatively free (student to student) arrangements which are usually associated with communicative language teaching. The game-like and other “fun” activities which ALTs, for example, feel able to engage in are not necessarily adopted by Japanese teachers concerned with maintaining students’ respect when the “excuse” provided by an ALT’s presence is lacking.

Western methods developed originally by native speaker teachers, often in universities or language institutes (as was the case with both Palmer and Fries), have tended to be recommended, then, on the false assumption that they can be translated with little modification into the practice of Japanese teachers in secondary schools (Holliday (1994) shows how inappropriate “technology transfer” of this nature has characterized the spread of communicative language teaching into education systems around the world). Little or no attempt has been made to *begin* with investigation of the context and on this basis build a methodology which might be appropriate (again, see Holliday, 1994).

#### **6.1.6. Neglect of tradition**

In general terms, then, past reformers have failed to investigate the context to be reformed, with a strong *a priori* belief in the relative advantage of their ideas having contributed in this, as in other respects, to ultimate failure. More specifically, foreign and Japanese reformers alike have tended to dismiss *yakudoku* out of hand, without any further investigation of its weaknesses and potential strengths. A greater historical awareness of the way traditional teaching has persisted despite all attempts to change it, and further analysis of the reasons behind this persistence (such as that attempted here) could result in an enhanced understanding of the difficulty of attempting large-scale, “revolutionary” reform in this, as in

any other comparable context, and thus increase a sense of realism among would-be reformers.

There has also been a strong tendency to ignore lessons which might be learned from past reform efforts (Henrichsen, 1989: 201). ELEC's failure to link up with IRLT, for example, reflected the still prevalent view that only the latest ideas can have any validity. Many teachers (in particular, perhaps, non-Japanese teachers) remain unaware of past reform attempts in Japan, and we hope our account above has gone some way towards remedying the situation.

All of the above lessons relate to a consistent, unchanging attitude on the part of past reformers: an excessive trust in the power of "rational" western ideas to sell themselves, tied to neglect and ignorance of wider historical, social and cultural forces which affect secondary school ELT in Japan. As we turn to more positive lessons from the past, the need for alternative conceptions of English teaching which take greater account of the particular context to be reformed will emerge as a dominant theme.

## **6.2. Possibilities of change**

From a relatively positive perspective, we will suggest below that further historical analysis could reveal changes over time within *yakudoku*, and that awareness of this might suggest avenues for future reform. Here, then, we shift our focus back to 'tradition' as opposed to "reform", extending our treatment of the beginnings of the *hensoku / yakudoku* tradition in section 1. We shall consider the following possibilities in turn: evolution not revolution; teacher development; bottom-up change; educational goals; and building on *yakudoku*.

### **6.2.1. Evolution not revolution**

The history of ELT in Japan, as in other contexts, is often portrayed as a succession of methods or other theoretical proposals, with little attention being paid to changes in practice which do not entirely match up with the proposed theory. However, an alternative approach to historical studies might involve greater attention being paid to continuity and longer-term changes in practice. Below we suggest some ways in which this kind of history could support the contention that reformers need to be satisfied with evolution and limited, possibly indirect influence rather than "revolution" and direct, dramatic influence of the kind usually envisaged in their own proposals (cf. Henrichsen, 1989: 200–1).

According to their own objectives, the reform efforts we have described above can only be seen to have failed, but there are also examples from the past of positive, largely indirect influence. We could cite, for example, the continuing influence on specific groups of Japanese teachers of Palmer's and, to a lesser extent, Fries's ideas. This is shown by the continuing operations of IRLT and ELEC, and the influence their members still exert on other teachers, via publications and pre-service and in-service training. A myriad of other teachers' associations exist, and many of them promote the development of oral-based approaches (one association, for example, is dedicated to I.A. Richards' Graded Direct Method, itself first developed a half century ago). As Ozasa (1995: 14) has emphasized, Palmer (and before him, we would suggest, Kanda and Okakura) established a tradition of conceptualizing language teaching in terms of "method" which was built on and strengthened by ELEC and which has now become widespread.

There has also been influence from past reform efforts on the goals of MOE courses of study and on materials design. As we have already mentioned, Palmer's ideas strongly influenced the first post-war courses of study, and their influence was also apparent in post-war textbooks (which generally reflect his emphasis on vocabulary limitation in contrast with over-literary English, and his advocacy of phonetic transcription and comprehension questions, at the same time as including conventional grammar and translation exercises). ELEC is also said to have influenced contemporary materials design, even though its own

textbooks were not widely purchased. Finally, the incorporation of communicative goals into the post-1987 MOE course of study can be counted as a significant reformist achievement, built on the back of previous IRET and ELEC efforts.

There has also been some change in entrance examinations over the years (Law, 1994; Mulvey, 1999), and this too might be seen as an indirect effect of past reform efforts. Palmer's emphasis on "plain English" (mentioned above) seems to have resulted in significant vocabulary limitation while there has been a more recent shift away from grammar puzzles and even intensive reading/translation towards comprehension questions encouraging more rapid and lengthy reading. ELEC efforts may have contributed indirectly to a trend towards the incorporation of listening tests in senior high school entrance examinations (Henrichsen, 1989: 179); alternatively, the cumulative oral-aural orientation of IRET, ELEC and the post-1987 reforms may have been responsible for this trend.

Even in the area of classroom methodology, there seem to have been overall changes particularly in junior high school teaching during the post-war period (Moore and Lamie, 1996), with greater emphasis being placed on dialogue practice and oral drills (and now "communicative drills" and games), partly as a result of ELEC (and now ALT) efforts. It is, then, possible to be more positive than we have been in our own account above about the current existence of pockets of innovation in the form of team-teaching. These may be islands of communication within a sea of *yakudoku*, particularly at senior high school level, but they do represent a form of reform at the edges which can seep into core English teaching, as Yukawa (1994) has shown in a rare case study. More research needs to be carried out into the true nature of "typical" English teaching in Japanese schools, and the picture may turn out to be rosier than the one painted when *yakudoku* is used bluntly as a dismissive, overall label.

Such research is likely to reveal that *yakudoku* now is not what it used to be. It is clear, for example, that there has been an internal development *within* this kind of teaching (which might relate to the cumulative efforts of past reformers), to the extent that it no longer tends to involve such features as sentence reordering which used to be prevalent, despite suggestions to the contrary made by Hino (1988) and others. There seems to be a stronger oral element than in the past, if only in the form of choral repetition and use of dialogues, especially at lower levels. If further investigation were to shed light on this kind of evolution within *yakudoku* as currently practiced, one implication would seem to be that reform efforts should focus on further improving typical teaching (see below), rather than seeking fruitlessly to replace it completely.

### **6.2.2. Teacher development**

Clear successes were achieved in the area of teacher development by IRET and ELEC. ELEC's teacher training programme was relatively organized, and the scale of its achievement deserves to be recognized. The continuing activities of both IRLT and the teachers' association linked to ELEC (ELEC *doiyukai*) testify to the strength of continuing contributions to teacher development by both organizations. IRET's annual conventions, with their demonstration lessons and other presentations by teachers, appear to have served as a model for many such events, held by teachers' associations all over Japan every year. A "craft" tradition, whereby teachers learn from one another, has become established in such associations, and this has clearly been made possible by previous reform efforts. Team-teaching might have a similar kind of potential for long-term teacher development, especially if this were better built in as a major focus of the JET Program(me).

### **6.2.3. Bottom-up change**

We have drawn attention to the IRET Fukushima and Shonan plans as representing positive historical models of appropriation by Japanese teachers of reformed methods, and adaptation to their own needs. After 1927, IRET Conventions were increasingly dominated by Japanese teachers themselves, with a variety of innovative means of adapting Palmer's ideas being

demonstrated. The fact that the drilling procedures emphasized by ELEC were more restricted and less flexible than Palmer's eclectic approach may have contributed to their more widespread initial adoption but also to their more rapid fall from favour. These examples seem to show that there is a clear need for Japanese teachers to take the initiative themselves and/or for the focus of reform efforts to be on helping them develop appropriate methodologies "from the bottom up" in collaboration with colleagues.

#### **6.2.4. Educational goals**

The development of Palmer's methods away from an initial focus on oral, even "conversational" class work to a growing focus on the use of a textbook and the provision of texts with appropriate content represented an effective, if partial response to pressures to meet educational and not only utilitarian goals. Palmer came increasingly to recognize the place that reading has in the Japanese English education system, but it is Okakura's comments on the educational role of English teaching which are perhaps most worth rereading today (see Imura and Takenaka, forthcoming). As the Hiraizumi-Watanabe debate of 1975 also showed, the practical goal of English teaching is just one among several it might be considered to have. There may, then, be a need to move further beyond the utilitarian goals which are stated in the course of study, and to recognize what teachers and publishers have never ignored, that the *content* of instruction is as important as methodology in Japanese schools.

#### **6.2.5. Building on *yakudoku***

The pre-war Fukushima and Shonan plans both involved incorporation of explicit grammar teaching and translation activities, to a far greater extent than Palmer had initially envisaged. Although demonstration lessons presented at major teacher conferences tend to involve exclusive use of English, at more informal teachers' meetings it is clear that Japanese teachers are, in the main, more comfortable attempting various kinds of compromise between traditional and orally-based teaching. This tendency deserves to be encouraged and built upon rather than hidden away.

Finally, then, there is a need to look again at, and perhaps base proposals for reform on traditional teaching, recognizing rather than ignoring implicit or explicit "conservative" arguments in its favour, since these have consistently remained most powerful in practice. As our consideration of Okakura and Watanabe has shown, the wider cultural and educational aspects of English teaching are considered significant in Japan but have been neglected in most imported western methods.

An argument could even be made that the very persistence of *yakudoku* shows that it is, in broad terms, a ready-made "appropriate methodology" (Holliday, 1994) in the Japanese secondary school context, given the structural constraints, teacher abilities and beliefs about the role of English in a broader education which have been revealed as salient in our account. If this argument is accepted, even partially, we would suggest that more effort needs to be put in the future into building on the strengths of *yakudoku* rather than dismissing and seeking to replace it completely as in the past.

In most historical and contemporary accounts *yakudoku* is seen as little more than a "backdrop" to an unfolding narrative of more exciting reform events. Considering its dominance, however, it deserves to be better investigated in its own right, not only – as Yukawa (1994) and Gorsuch (1998) have begun to do – in synchronic fashion but also from a diachronic perspective – not least in order for teachers to be encouraged to build on their existing strengths, "from the bottom up". There must be "good" and "bad" forms of *yakudoku* as there are with any methodology. With a return to a focus on the usefulness of explicit grammar instruction and use of the mother tongue within wider ELT discourse, the time has surely come for a more thorough investigation of traditional teaching, not only in Japan but also in other secondary school contexts world-wide.

## 7. Conclusion

On the one hand a somewhat pessimistic picture has been painted above: the twentieth century history of ELT in Japan may be viewed as a series of failed reform efforts, set against the backdrop of a continuous teaching “tradition” which has persisted in the face of all attempts to dislodge it. To this picture we have added the view that twentieth century attempts at reform represent another kind of “tradition”, revealing similar limitations despite their surface differences. We have emphasized in particular the limitations of attachment to *a priori* beliefs in the superiority of western methods and have emphasized the need for better investigations of history and the present situation as a basis for reform. Past reform efforts have been hampered by the dominant idea that what is desirable is reform according to what seems to “work” in other contexts — history shows, we have argued, that this conception needs to be reversed, with attempts at reform beginning with the context and building “upwards”.

From a different perspective, however, our analysis of the *yakudoku* tradition on its own terms, and of some relatively long-term reform successes, indicates that some progress has been made, and that evolution through teacher development and bottom-up change, involving a recognition of non-utilitarian goals in Japanese ELT and a reappraisal of the value of *yakudoku* itself are all avenues worth exploring in the future.

As Benson (2000) emphasizes, various factors which “have little to do with language learning” may tend to support conservative approaches to language teaching in many contexts, including the demands of examinations, teachers’ lack of confidence in their own abilities and “a social ethos that value[s] discipline and competitiveness” (Benson, 2000: 48). The general picture which emerges strongly from our own analysis is this: reforms which ignore local conditions and traditions have largely failed in the past and are likely to fail in the future. Palmer, in particular, was wise enough to change his approach to suit the context better, and this is one of the important lessons of the Japanese ELT experience – viewed from a historical perspective – which seems to have a broader, world-wide relevance.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Part 5 onwards by Richard C. Smith alone.

<sup>2</sup> In the personal files of Victoria Angela, Palmer’s great-granddaughter.

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