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**Due for a Change: The Need to Assess Sociolinguistic Competencies on
Standardised Tests for Japanese Speakers of Business English**

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April 7, 2009

Word Count: 3078

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As recent as 2002, the Japanese Education Ministry reaffirmed its support for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) as a way for corporations to assess applicants' English communication skills (as cited in Kobayashi, 2007, p. 63); as such, "a majority of [surveyed Japanese] companies... [still] take TOEIC scores into consideration" when hiring (Educational Testing Service, 2008). Although this test includes an eleven-item speaking component, which evaluates pronunciation, intonation, stress, and the ability to answer questions and describe objects (Educational Testing Service, 2009), items that measure sociolinguistic competencies, even though they are integral to intercultural business communication (cf. Canagarajah, 2006, 2007; Cowling, 2007; Kato, H. & Kato, J., 1992; Morrow, 1995; Nickerson, 2007; Tanaka, 2006, 2008), remain absent. As a result, I contend that Japanese corporations would be more able to predict business English (BE) users' communication skills by using a more contextualised form of assessment that measures functional skills, pragmatic skills, and cross-cultural fluency in addition to TOEIC's current measurement of linguistic skills.

The Need for Relevant Categories – Long Overdue

Use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in Japanese business has continually been growing. Ever since Japan's "booming export-driven economy" of the 1930s (Nakasako, 1998, p. 102), the Japan Business English Association (JBEA) has encouraged BE use as a way to increase trade. In the 1980s, with a strengthened yen as a result of decades of phenomenal economic growth, increased foreign investment required more English-speakers to manage affairs at overseas business sites (Tanaka, 2008, p. 154). Then, as a

result of alliance formations and the merger and acquisition boom of the late 1990s, English use in the workforce extended beyond the group of expatriates working abroad and began to be integrated into domestic business affairs at all levels (Tanaka, 2008, p. 155). In 2001, foreign direct investment was supporting about 300,000 jobs in companies partly or wholly owned by foreign entities (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2002, as cited in Tanaka, 2006, pp. 28-29). Now, “a large and increasing number of people, even if they never set foot in an English-speaking country... use English in highly sophisticated communication and collaboration with people around the world” (Warschauer, 2000, as cited in Kamimura et al., 2007, p. 132). English, in fact, has become the preferred language of international business, even when native English speakers are absent (Graddol, 2006). Thus, at one Japanese corporation, executives, sales managers, and secretaries all reported using English daily for business correspondence and transactions (Kamimura et al. 2007, p. 134). As this trend of ELF seems unlikely to reverse (Graddol, 2006) and BE in Japan spreads laterally among business sectors and vertically to all corporate levels, categorizing BE users’ communicative skills, so that corporations can choose the optimum candidates for their varied positions, has been long overdue.

More than just Grammar and Lexicon:

Categorizing the Needs of Business Communication

The required communication skills of Japanese BE users can be considered along several strands. Canale and Swain (1980) divide communication into grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences. Saville-Troike (1995, as cited in Hornberger, 1995) argues that “communicative competence entails not only linguistic,

but also interactional and cultural knowledge” (p. 456). Gee (1996, as cited in Tanaka, 2008) sees BE knowledge in terms of social practices, beliefs, language, and values (p. 156). Marriott (1997, as cited in Tanaka, 2008) divides communicative ability into a communication component consisting of grammar, lexicon, and phonology, and a socio-cultural component consisting of strategies, frame, and channel (p. 155). McKay (2005, as cited in Canagarajah, 2006) separates sociolinguistic skills into dialect differentiation, code switching, style shifting, interpersonal communication, conversation management, and discourse strategies (p. 233). Canagarajah (2006) categorizes communicative needs in terms of “strategies of negotiation, situated performance, communicative repertoire, and language awareness” (p. 229), and more specifically, Cowling (2007), splits the abilities of BE users into functional skills, such as placing business orders, and content skills, such as participating in business meetings (p. 434). By synthesizing the above categories, grammatical skills and lexical knowledge can be grouped under the term, linguistic skills; communicative repertoire, conversation management, and discourse competency can be grouped under the term, functional skills; strategic competences, strategies of negotiation, and skills of interaction, dialect differentiation, code switching, style shifting, interpersonal communication, and situated performance can be grouped under the term, pragmatic skills, and lastly, sociolinguistic competency, language awareness and knowledge of values, beliefs, culture and social practices can be grouped under the term, cross-cultural fluency. As the TOEIC test already contains a linguistic component, this paper emphasizes the need for the other three groupings to be assessed – functional skills, pragmatic skills, and cross-cultural fluency.

Functional Skills

BE as a tool in its purist sense, stripped of context and allusion, contains numerous functions, i.e. patterned, often capsulated, discourse that should be assessed. Speech acts such as placing orders, telephoning, hosting visitors, and introducing (Cowling, 2007, p. 434) tend to consist of many “multi-word units” that can be “stored in and retrieved from long-term memory as if they were single lexical units” (Read & Nation, 2004, as cited in Wood, 2006, p. 16). Functional skills, such as describing and comparing the life cycles of products - more formulaic than content skills, such as carrying out complex negotiations, presenting, participating in meetings, and critically interpreting and analyzing information (Nakasako, 1998, p. 104; Warschauer, 2000, p. 518, as cited in Kamimura et al., 2007, p. 134) - are “often stressed by... Japanese business English students in sales and marketing positions” as necessary (Adamson, 2005, p. 358). Small talk has also been noted as a function as it provides “a picture frame around every business conversation” (Bruellman, 2008, p. 65). Even when these conventionalized BE functions are removed from context and free of nuance and the need to apply pragmatic knowledge, tests that compel students to produce and comprehend them, either in the shape of “entire utterances operating at discourse level” or “smaller units acting as single words and phrases” (Altenberg, 1998, p. 121, as cited in Wood, 2006, p. 16), may more accurately predict applicants’ BE proficiency than tests that are untailored to specific business situations.

Pragmatic Skills

Pragmatic BE skills, incorporating aspects of both functional skills and cross-cultural knowledge - thus serving as the center of this sociolinguistic Venn diagram -

must also be assessed, since grammatically-correct but pragmatically-problematic expressions “are rarely understood or interpreted... in terms of L2 inadequacies” (Meeuwis, 1994, as cited in Morrow, 1995, pp.89-90), and can, therefore, turn out to be “misleading or even offensive” (Hwang, 2008, p. 33). Pragmatic skills, “often seen as the ‘wastebasket’ into which all aspects of language that cannot be classified elsewhere are thrown” (Yule, 1996, as cited in Grabowski, 2008, p. 155), can be understood as involving “the appropriate conveyance and interpretation of implied meaning” (Liu, 2006, as cited in Grabowski, 2008, p. 155) and “the ability to relate to people from other cultures... through understanding the functions and symbolic values of their ways of speaking” (Hwang, 2008, p. 45). BE tests with a pragmatic skills component could assess several areas, including intercultural greetings and introductions (Cowling, 2007, p. 432), “speech accommodation... for shuttling between English varieties” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 233), “harmony-orientation” (Yamada, 1992, as cited in Tanaka, 2008, p. 156), “turn-distribution strategies” (Yamada, 1990, as cited in Morrow, 1995, p. 88), “bargaining behaviors... conversational rhythm, facial expression, and [the] amount of facial gazing (Graham, 1990, as cited in Morrow, 1995, p. 88), “pacing and pausing, listenership... intonation, [and] indirectness” (Tannen, 1984, p. 189, as cited in Morrow, 1995, p. 88), back channel behavior, gestures... and thematic progression patterns” (Maynard, 1989, as cited in Morrow, 1995, pp. 88-89), as well as the strategic use of silence. Westerners may believe that “when a speaker is silent for a moment, it can be a signal for the other person to take a turn in a conversation... however, if the [Japanese] speaker wishes to hold his turn, he may [actually] look away from his partner” (Tanaka, 2008, p. 158). Such pragmalinguistic knowledge allows BE users to apply “creative strategies to make the

appropriate alignment between [their] language resources and the requirements of the context” (Canagarajah, 2007, p. 930) in order to “collaboratively build coherence” (p. 932). As a result, as BE is a “mode of practice, not resident solely in cognition” (p. 932), BE proficiency tests without a pragmatic component remain poor measurements of BE users’ “intercultural communicative competence” (Hwang, 2008, p. 46).

Cross Cultural Fluency

One more component that should be added to a BE proficiency test is cross cultural fluency, ideally specified to the culture(s) test takers intend to work with - the term, *cross* highlights speakers’ ability to cross over to others’ perspectives and beliefs. To bridge understanding, BE users must make themselves aware of potential areas of difference. For example, culturally-based systems of corporate management are undoubtedly dissimilar to Japan’s system of seniority-based wages, long-term employment, and enterprise based unions (Ito, 2000). There could also be differences in values of power sharing, sense of time (i.e. mono-chronic versus poly-chronic), how action and change are prioritized (Zieghan, 2001, as cited in Inoue, 2007), and the level of context; e.g. Japan is a high context culture, which means “meaning is communicated as much through the context of the communication as through the content” (Kato, H. & Kato, J., 1992, p. 15). This last potential difference fits with Neustupny’s (1987, p. 134, as cited in Morrow, 1995) observation that “Japanese organizations use letters and memoranda less frequently than Western organizations, and... there is a preference for conducting negotiations through the spoken channel” (p.89). Negotiation, itself, can be a major source of misinterpretation. Western business culture’s “shoot first, ask questions later” (Kleinberg, 1994, as cited in Tanaka, 2006, pp. 26-27) tendency to expose all sides

during meetings conflicts with the Japanese value of avoiding confrontation. *Nemawashi*, or the tradition of “participatory decision making” (Tanaka, 2008, p. 157), highly valued as a way to reach a balanced compromise, may be viewed by westerners as dishonest and simply causing delay (Nakasaka, 2008, p. 105). Moreover, westerners’ uninhibited ability to express their feelings, argue strongly, choose effective words, and speak quickly can help them dominate conversation. Japanese BE users must learn to counteract this – otherwise, when the North American ideals of individual independence and equal opportunity face off against the Japanese ideals of “participative decision-making, and harmony-oriented management (Mendenhall and Oddou, 1986, as cited in Tanaka, 2008, p. 156), even honourable intentions, such as goodwill, can get misinterpreted. As a result, corporations would do well to hire applicants whom they knew had high levels of cross-cultural fluency.

Discussion – How to Induce Change?

The objective of this essay is not to suggest how a test of BE may be created, but rather, to emphasize the need for change and to contribute ideas regarding what should be assessed. Although grammar and lexicon remain important, emphases must shift from “language as a system to language as social practice, from grammar to pragmatics, [and] from competence to performance” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 234). “To be really proficient in English today... one needs the capacity to negotiate diverse varieties [of English] to facilitate communication” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 233). With this acquired “cultural capital,” as a “long-lasting disposition of the mind” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 99), BE users may be more able to negotiate and succeed in cross-cultural environments than their BE speaking peers who prioritize skills emphasized on the TOEIC test. With this in mind, a

helpful way to induce change may be to try to understand why Japanese corporations continue to rely on current TOEIC assessment scores.

Much like how excelling in university may demonstrate less about one's knowledge and more about one's work ethic, perhaps Confucian-based corporations view those who excel when presented with the same variables as millions of others, e.g. the TOEIC test, as worthy hirees. A logical confidence may exist that these candidates will likewise excel in other areas – and any actual English competence is an added bonus. This value placed on hard, but not necessarily smart, work, in reference to Hofstede's idea of Confucian dynamism (2001, as cited in Swaidan & Hayes, 2005, p. 10), would be viewed more positively than a BE user's ability to creatively negotiate meaning in varied contexts, a, perhaps, more western-based ideal. In addition, there could be reluctance on the part of corporate managers to replace this long-held Confucian value of hard work, since, they may feel that, like a house of cards, if one traditional Confucian value falls, than others may follow, such as the highly institutionalized tradition of seniority-based hierarchical relationships. And few corporate managers would encourage a reexamination of values that might lead to getting themselves replaced.

With this understanding, BE users, themselves, may be the most promising source for change. If they can demonstrate their added value, not only as English speakers, but as capable practitioners of sociolinguistic competencies, companies will not be able to ignore their worth and begin to demand hiring tests that assess sociolinguistic skills.

Implications for Business English Teachers

Regardless of whether or not a new type of test is demanded by corporations, however, or even if a valid and reliable test can be created - indeed, “there is currently no

test of pragmatic knowledge that can be used operationally” (Grabowski, 2008, p. 154) - functional, pragmatic and cross-cultural competencies should be learned by BE students. Fortunately, there are several ways to help students improve.

Functional skills can be learned with various types of graphic organizers. By using flow charts, students can develop “flow thinking” (Burgess, 1987, as cited in Burgess, 1994, p. 310), as they link “causal sequences” (Burgess, p. 310) and create schema of conversational patterns in order to increase their ability to anticipate formulized instances of small talk and business conversation. Small talk, such as conversation about weather, sports, and family, in fact, was rated by one BE teacher’s students as more “crucial” for business than skills like persuading, presenting, and participating in meetings (Bruellman, 2008, p. 64). Another graphic organizer students can use is the product life cycle (PLC) chart (see Figure 1) that facilitates the

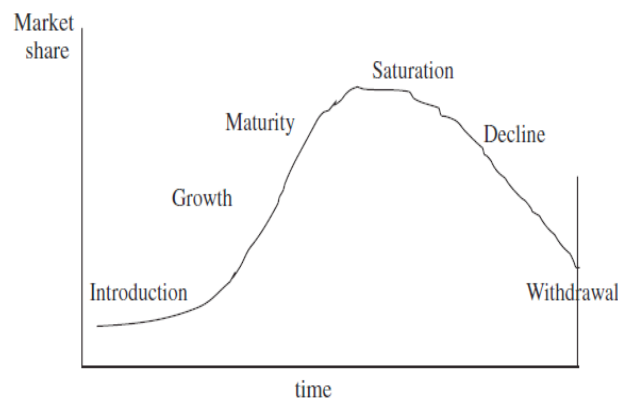


Figure 1, Product Life Cycle Chart (from Adamson, 2005, p. 360)

description of a product “in terms of its market growth and market share over time” (Adamson, 2005, p. 358). It not only provides students with lexicon and an easy to follow

sequence for description, it helps students practice tense usage and comparison, since historical sales and future prospects can be described, and PLC charts can be placed together. One more graphic organizer is the Boston Consulting Group's marketing matrix (Adamson, 2005, p. 363; see figure 2). This chart helps students describe a

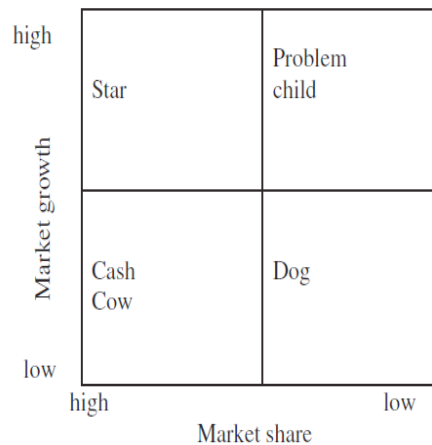


Figure 2, Boston Consulting Group's Marketing Matrix (from Adamson, 2005, p. 363)

product's present position in terms of its market growth and market share. Students can also formulate patterns of discussion related to potentiality by predicting which box a product may transfer to. By using these internationally recognized graphic organizers, students can intertwine business concepts, lexicon, and conversational patterns, and thereby, increase their intercultural functional skills.

Regarding pragmatic skills, becoming able to understand “the appropriate conveyance and interpretation of implied meaning” (Liu, 2006, as cited in Grabowski, 2008, p. 155) and how to negotiate meaning are challenging tasks. The teacher becomes a source of cultural knowledge and a provider of metapragmalinguistic feedback. For example, Japanese BE speakers must be made aware that when they produce an *mmm*

sound to signal they are listening, western speakers may interpret it as understanding, which may not be the case. As a result, since “meaning and intelligibility are intersubjective” (Canagarajah, 2007, p. 931), students should practice “negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments” (Long, 1996, as cited in Foster & Ohta, 2005 p. 406) with various types of clarification requests, comprehension checks, and confirmation checks (Long, 1980, as cited in Foster & Ohta, 2005 p. 411). Students must also practice non-linguistic communication strategies, such as “paraphrasing, mime, transfer, avoidance, and appeal for assistance” (Tarone, 1980, p. 429, as cited in Tanaka, 2008, p. 159). Furthermore, Canagarajah (2006) suggests devising “interactive and collaborative formats for testing one’s proficiency... in context-bound situations of ongoing communication” (p. 238). With role plays of this type, students can practice ways of greeting, initiating conversation, turn taking (Tanaka, 2006, p. 43), assertiveness (Bruellman, 2008, p. 66), and keeping conversation going. Without such reliance on contexts, the teacher’s ability to address how “connotations, references, functions, implicatures, [and] inferences” all having bearing on the meanings of words (Hwang, 2008, p. 32) remains severely limited.

Cross-cultural fluency can be learned with authentic texts and through business content-based learning. Authentic texts, defined as “material produced to fulfill some social purpose” (Little et al. 1989, p. 25, as cited in Peacock, 1997, p.146), bring learners closer to the target language culture. Text books may not be good enough, since Cowling (2007) purports that text book models do not reflect the models that are actually used in business settings (p. 433). Also, as a framework or background for other types of language learning, Stark (2005) recommends STEP (socio-cultural, technological,

economic, political) and SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analyses of multi-national corporations (p. 41). Although not nearly as effective as cultural immersion, authentic texts and content-based learning can help students prepare for cross-cultural encounters.

With these ideas, BE teachers can avoid Teaching English for no obvious reason (TENOR) (Cowling, 2007, p. 427) and may be better prepared to respond to the needs of their students, even when their students view their own needs as more in line with the skills required for the TOEIC test.

Conclusion

United Parcel Service may have coined the phrase “moving at the speed of business”; similarly, English can be said to be moving in the *direction* of business. Test writers, instead of looking back at traditional cognitive skills, should look to how business people are skilfully and fluently using BE. In this way, corporations who rely on tests to help them decide who to hire can be more confident that successful test takers are successful BE communicators. Since meaning is socially constructed and does not reside in the language, a BE measurement of proficiency must take into account “the ability to engage in meaningful social and institutional functions... according to local conventions” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 230). Indeed, the idea that language proficiency should be measured more by “standardized decontextualised tests” than by “observing L2 users’ “written and spoken... use in specific situations” (Hornberger, 1995, p. 469) insults English learners and impinges on common sense.

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