

# The Transformation of Learners :

## A Study of Elocution in Sapporo Agricultural College

### 学習者の変容—札幌農学校における“Elocution”の考察から

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**Abstract:** 明治初期の英語教育の主流は、いわゆるイマージョン・プログラムであった。中でも札幌農学校は佐藤昌介、新渡戸稲造を始め、その初期に多くの優れた英語習得者を輩出したことで知られている。“Recitation”, “elocution”, “composition”, “original declamation”, “extempore debate”—これらは明治初期の札幌農学校における日課及び科目の名称である。彼等 1、2 期生は、卒業までの 4 年間のカリキュラムにおける実に 56%の時間をこれら “output” 活動に費やした。特に、文学の暗誦を核とした“elocution”は、“recitation”から“original declamation”へ、そして“extempore debate”へ続く過程において橋渡しの役割を担っていたように思われる。これらの活動自体にいかなる効果があったのか、史的文献と近年の第 2 言語習得研究を合わせて議論し、その基点としての“elocution”にどのような認知的メカニズムが存在するのかを考察する。

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**Keywords:** Sapporo Agricultural College, immersion program, elocution, poetry, play  
札幌農学校、イマージョン・プログラム、暗誦、朗読、演説、詩、劇

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#### 1. What does the course imply in Sapporo Agricultural College?

Recitation, elocution, original declamation and extempore debate — these are the names of the routine or the subjects in Sapporo Agricultural College in the early Meiji era.<sup>1</sup> However, these activities are scarcely innovated in English teaching in present Japan.

In fact, education in the early Meiji era was very different from any other period in Japan. ‘The early Meiji’ here specifically refers to 19 years before *Teikoku daigaku Rei* (Imperial University ordinance) promulgated in 1886, which established the direction of the educational system to the present. Foreigners taught a variety of subjects by their mother tongues and textbooks from their countries. English was the most popular language to learn, so a lot of private schools adopted English and the knowledge of Europe and America.

As a result, the government laid the system that all lectures should be given in English at *Tokyo Kaisei Gakkou* (now Tokyo University) in 1873 and established *Tokyo Eigo Gakkou* as the cram school, after which it established Sapporo Agricultural College in 1876.

In the history of English learning in Japan, this system has been called as *Seisoku*, that is, “Immersion Program” (Saito, 2001).<sup>2</sup> Above all Sapporo Agricultural College was the most typical additive total Immersion Program and the most effective in view of consisting of competent students sent from *Tokyo Eigo Gakkou* and professors invited from America. Many graduates were successful in English acquisition, and later played initiative roles as representatives of Japan in various stages of internationalization.

However, there seemed to be few researchers having an insight into English Learning in the college except Toyama (1992)<sup>3</sup>, Ota (1995)<sup>4</sup> who have pointed out that the cause of success derives from that they were immersed in English and gained numerous input. Yet, they were not only immersed. They also practiced pronunciation, note-taking, conversation, parsing, recitation of literature, and composition in their early teens at *Tokyo Eigo Gakkou*.<sup>5</sup> Then they were given active tasks like recitation for four more years, elocution from freshman to junior and original declamation and extempore debate as senior at Sapporo Agricultural College.<sup>6</sup> Swain (2000: 99) points out observing some French immersion class in Canada,

・・・, the written and spoken French of these students included numerous grammatical and syntactic deviations from native-speaker usage. Furthermore, our observations in grade 3 and 6 immersion classes suggested that although students used French in class, little of it included extended discourse, and, generally speaking, teachers did not ‘push’ their students beyond their current level of interlanguage as the teachers interacted with them.<sup>7</sup>

Borrowing Swain’s terms, there is high possibility that students in the Sapporo Agricultural College may have been “pushed” by teachers to “extend their discourse” “beyond their current level”. The course from recitation to extempore debate implies an explicit direction from passive to active engagement, from imitation to assimilation. In addition, the direction also illustrates the transformation of students from receivers to the senders of information.

## 2. What was elocution like in the college?

The focus of this paper is elocution, because it involves recitation and is the turning

point of the transformation for original declamation and extempore debate, which are clearly different from elocution in the view that the words are learners' original expressions.

According to the literature written about this period in Japan, elocution was one of the popular activities in English learning spread by foreign teachers (Matsumura: 1997)<sup>8</sup>. The material of elocution was literature such as poems, plays and historic speeches. The case of Sapporo Agricultural College often treated the Bible and Shakespeare. First, they watched their teacher acting out the lives, and then, they performed on their own. Finally their teacher gave them feedback about intonation, pace and attitude. One of the graduates, Oshima Masatake, later said that this practice certainly had encouraged their English abilities.<sup>9</sup>

As a matter of fact, elocution was popular in America at the time. Kaneko Kentaro was studying in some American schools then. He noted how he learned English in detail and particularly referred the benefits of elocution: he read a text aloud repeatedly, learned it by heart, and practiced expressing his emotion through gestures.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, elocution here is defined as using literature and having the process of observation, repetition, memorization, recitation and feedback.

### 3. What was and is behind elocution?

Regarding literature used as materials in elocution, some studies have endorsed the effect to learn English (Widdowson, 1975<sup>11</sup>; Maley&Duff, 1982<sup>12</sup>; Maley&Moulding, 1985<sup>13</sup>; Cook, 1997<sup>14</sup>). Several reasons are cited: literature has (1) universal theme and emotion, (2) typical rhythm, (3) easiness to remember. Furthermore, these studies have one common effect: readers tend to focus much on language itself along with meaning. In other words, readers make the negotiation of meaning through focusing on form when they read literature. Literature is so poetic and emotive (e.g. sound pattern including rhythm and rhyme, syntactic role) that we often stop reading and imagine the meaning focusing on form that we are liable to overlook in our daily lives. As a result, it achieves decent efficiency to appreciate literature or to even rewrite it or compose learner's own, especially if immersed in the target language. What about elocution?

The rationales of advocates above seemed concerned with poetic function of language, as termed by Jakobson (1960). He divided basic language functions into six categories: referential, connotative, phatic, metalingual, emotive, poetic. Especially, the poetic function is emphasized and defined as follows (ibid: 356), "the set toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake". It is indispensable to study "the general problems of language" and to scrutinize language.<sup>15</sup> However, the effect of elocution seems to commit



setting like classroom and informal setting like immersion situation, (3) conquest learner's timidity and inhibition by generating words and sentences to gain confidence. Third point clearly illustrates a different effect of elocution. There is high probability that success of elocution gives confidence to the learners and scaffolds the attempt to express themselves beyond their timidity and inhibition.

The objection lies against the activity of reading aloud. Curtain & Pesola (1988) point out that learners are liable to pay attention to only pronunciation in reading aloud.<sup>20</sup> Yet, it doesn't seem like a crucial problem. Childs (2005: 16) states "there are degrees of meaningfulness".

What do we mean by "mindless" when we speak of mindless repetition? In fact, no use of language is completely mindless. Every use arouses meaning or a search for meaning, intended or not, correct or not (ibid.).<sup>21</sup>

After all, elocution in Japan had had an influence on English teaching through the Meiji era (Matsumura; 1997).<sup>22</sup> He does not indicate the reason of the decline of afterwards. It may be attributed to the wholesale lay-off of the foreign native speakers. Apparently it was very difficult for Japanese teachers to instruct elocution, for it may require particular expressions of emotion aged in the language for a long time. If a school now hopes to implement elocution, does it need to employ native speakers? If possible, perhaps. However, if Japanese teachers have the confidence to engage in it using audio-visual aids like DVD, it is certainly worth trying for themselves and for students.

## End Notes

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<sup>5</sup> Tokyo Eigo gakko (1875). *Tokyo Eigo gakko kyosoku* [The Manual of Tokyo English School]. Tokyo: Tokyo Eigo gakko

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<sup>7</sup> Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: Mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In J.P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language*

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