

## Ethics and Language Education

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I became interested in the emotional, deeply rooted controversies about English education in Japan after I started working full-time at the University of Tokyo in 2005. Although I had taught English part-time in Japan for more than twenty years, the ferocity of the disputes about the purposes and methods for teaching English in schools and universities caught me by surprise. Beginning in 1984, I had taught adults at a couple of English-conversation schools; I also taught English privately to individuals and to employees at several companies. In each case, the purpose of the lessons was clear—practice everyday conversation, enjoy fiction or films in English, discuss current events—and the content and teaching methods could be negotiated between the students and me. If the students weren't interested in the classes or didn't like the way I taught them, they could quit at any time. I knew, of course, that school education was different, and that children and even university students have little choice about whether or not to study English and about the curricula and teaching methods. But I hadn't realized how strongly educators and others disagree about why and how young people in Japan should be taught English.

My first-hand exposure to those disputes came when, in my full-time position, I began working together with colleagues to develop a new science writing course. The course had a practical goal: to teach first-year undergraduates the basic English-language academic writing and presentation skills that we thought they would need in the future as scientists and engineers. To replicate within the classroom the situation of many science labs and research conferences, the classes would be taught only in English. After we had taught some pilot classes and developed a provisional syllabus for the course, and after we had received from the university administration the promise of funding to hire teachers, discussions began within the English department and the undergraduate college about whether and how to integrate the new course into the curriculum. Those discussions were my first real exposure to the deep fissures that exist among English educators in Japan.

The faculty who raised doubts about the proposed course made several points. One was that English classes taught to first-year undergraduates should not focus on teaching practical skills, because the students have little need for those skills at that point; rather, it was said, the classes should continue to build a basis in grammar, vocabulary, and other linguistic and

cultural knowledge that the students could draw on when needed in later years. Another point was that the classes should be taught in Japanese, as it would be more efficient and effective to convey knowledge about English to Japanese students by teaching them in their first language.

A further issue was who we should hire to teach the classes. Some faculty favored native English speakers, while others advocated also hiring teachers for whom English was a second language. Because the course was focused on science writing, there was also disagreement about whether to favor language-teaching specialists or people with backgrounds in the sciences. These doubts and disagreements, expressed both in formal meetings and in private conversations, struck me not only for their intensity but also for the lack of consensus they revealed about why and how all students at that university should study English.

The course was launched in 2008 and, after some teething pains, eventually became an integral part of the undergraduate curriculum. A similar English writing course was launched a few years later for students in the humanities and social sciences, as well as a short course for all students focused on spoken fluency. Now nearly thirty full-time faculty members teach the three courses to over three thousand students a year, and the controversy over these “practical” courses seems to have died down. The faculty members who expressed the strongest opinions against them have since retired, and the younger faculty seem to accept them as a natural part of the curriculum. But, for me, the memory of that internal controversy within one university remains vivid—partly because I was directly involved in it, but also because, as I was later to realize, it encapsulated many of the larger disputes about why and how English should be taught in Japan.

It was also around 2005 that I began attending research conferences and reading the literature in both English and Japanese on English education. At the conferences, I was similarly struck by the strong emotions expressed about reasons for and approaches to the teaching of English. Sometimes in formal presentations and research papers, but more often during private conversations, educators showed extraordinary enthusiasm for their particular teaching philosophies and methods. Some could also be bitterly derisive about other approaches and the people who used them. I was not the only observer who compared the intense feelings of some language-education researchers to religious fervor.

My wonderment at the passion expressed by some researchers was matched by my doubts about the validity of some of their claims. Many of these doubts, I admit, were due to the difficulty of conducting empirical research on any complex human and social topic like

education and learning. Quantitative studies of, for example, student learning with a particular teaching method are very difficult to conduct well; it is hard to isolate the effect of one factor within the complex, ever-changing social and cognitive environment of a study's participants, or to identify or control for the variation among learners and teachers. Qualitative research—individual case studies, ethnographic observations of particular learning situations—often yielded interesting insights and seemed to me to be on firmer ground epistemologically, but the results of such narrowly focused studies are difficult to apply to curriculum development or educational policy.

But gradually I came to realize that my biggest dissatisfaction was not with the specifics of research design or analysis. Rather, it was with the logic of the arguments made by many researchers, particularly the connections they made between the data they obtained and the conclusions of their studies. A typical study might, for example, be presented as a straightforward scientific experiment: two groups of similar learners received similar lessons for a semester, with one group exposed part of the time to a novel technique for teaching a particular language point and the other group receiving conventional instruction on that point. Students were tested before and after the semester on that language point, and the difference between the two groups' test scores was analyzed to determine whether the novel teaching technique had been effective or not.

So far, so good. While there were sometimes issues with sample size or statistical significance, in general I did not see any major problems with such studies. What troubled me were the recommendations that many of the researchers tacked on the end of their presentations and papers. Rather than concluding with just "Method A is more effective than Method B," they would also say "Therefore teachers should use Method A." It was this logical leap, from "*is* more effective" to "*should* use," that bothered me. But I couldn't explain what the problem was.

Around 2015, I happened to mention my concerns about research on English education to a younger colleague who had recently received his Ph.D. in philosophy. He directed me to the *is-ought* problem, which was originally raised by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in his 1739 book *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions,

*is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.

Hume had put into words the doubts I felt more than two and a half centuries later: There is something very unconvincing about an argument that begins with an empirical statement of fact—*is* or *is not*—and then proceeds directly to an assertion of what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, ethical or unethical—*ought* or *ought not*, *should* or *should not*.

After learning about the *is-ought* problem, I looked into what philosophers since Hume have said about the issue. It turned out that this is just one of many issues that have been investigated and discussed in the branch of philosophy called metaethics. If ethics is the study of what is right or wrong, then metaethics is the study of what it means to say that something is right or wrong. Like much of philosophy, discussions of metaethics are often deep and complex, and I cannot claim to know the field well. But what I read about the *is-ought* problem helped to clarify why I had been dissatisfied with many research papers and presentations on language education. As Hume wrote, assertions of fact are fundamentally different from assertions of morality, and it is not possible to draw conclusions about *should* (= *ought*) only from assertions about *is*.

Those ethical questions about what *should* be, about what people *should* do, though, are very important in every area of our lives. In fact, most of the fierce disagreements about how and why to teach English in Japan are essentially *should* questions: *Should* English classes focus on practical skills or on general knowledge? *Should* children be taught American and British English or *should* they be exposed to other varieties of English as well? *Should* native speakers of English be chosen as teachers over nonnative speakers? *Should* students be taught only in English, or *should* teachers use Japanese in class as well?

While each of these *should* questions can be illuminated with empirical data—that is, with *is* statements—the validity of *should* cannot be argued convincingly only from *is*. There must be shared assumptions about *should*—about ethics, about morality, about what is right and what is wrong—in order to draw conclusions about *should*.

The mistaken belief that one's own ethical assumptions are shared by others is, I think, why many educators and researchers don't notice the flaws in their *is-ought* arguments. For

example, a research presentation might show, based on experimental data, that a Japanese child *is* able to pronounce English vowels more like native speakers' vowels when the child practices along with recordings of native-speaker English using a certain teaching method. The researchers will then conclude by saying that Japanese children *should* be taught with this method. People who believe, consciously or unconsciously, that English as spoken by native speakers is the appropriate model for Japanese learners will accept that argument despite the *is-ought* gap. That logical leap is more likely to be noticed by those who reject that ethical assumption—for example, by educators who question the native-speaker model on the grounds that it is impractical, discriminatory, or inappropriate in a globalized world. But if they raise their objection after the presentation, the presenters are likely to feel that it is beside the point, as they do not accept the ethical assumptions of those who reject the native-speaker model.

Reading what Hume and other philosophers wrote about the *is-ought* problem clarified for me the resistance I had felt toward much research on English education. Since then, I have become more confident about advising junior researchers in the field. By encouraging them to distinguish clearly their empirical findings from their ethical assumptions and assertions, I think I have helped them make their arguments more convincing.

Dipping into the philosophical literature on ethics led me to think about ethical issues more broadly. My interest in ethics was also sparked by my participation in the management of education programs in which ethical questions played an important role. In that undergraduate science writing program, for example, my colleagues and I had to struggle with questions about where to draw the line between acceptable use of others' ideas in student writing and unacceptable plagiarism. The students in that course are asked to design and conduct their own simple scientific experiments, so we also had to figure out, in consultation with our scientist colleagues, what kinds of experiments, if any, should be permitted with human or animal subjects. Many of my graduate-student advisees were doing research on language education with human subjects, and I had to submit their research proposals to the university's ethical review board. Few of the ethical issues that came up had clear answers. While often frustrated by that lack of clarity, I also became even more interested in the problem of ethics itself.

My new interest in ethics led me to wonder whether there were important ethical issues—other than *is-ought*—in the field of language education. So I did what I usually do when looking for information about an unfamiliar field: I searched the Web. I tried the following search strings (with the quotation marks) at Google:

"ethics and language education"  
"ethics and second-language education"  
"ethics and foreign-language education"  
"language education and ethics"  
"second-language education and ethics"  
"foreign-language education and ethics"

When I first tried these searches in the summer of 2016, I obtained exactly zero relevant hits for those phrases. Searches of the academic literature at Google Scholar also came up blank. This contrasted sharply with, for example, searches for "ethics and science education" or "ethics and medical education", which yielded hundreds of thousands of hits and many books and research papers. Clearly scholars and educators in the English-speaking world had not yet begun thinking about language education from the perspective of the philosophy of ethics. (When I repeated the search for the language-education phrases in February 2022, I found two relevant pages, one for a paper in Korean with the English title "A Study on Korean Language Education and Ethics" and the other about a Brazilian scholar named Alex Alves Egido whose "primary area of research [was said to be] ethics and language education.

The relationship between ethics and language education thus seemed to be an unexplored field, so I decided to start exploring it. During the autumn semesters of 2016 and 2020, I devoted my graduate seminar to the topic. After spending the first few weeks on some basic concepts from the philosophy of ethics, the students and I spent the rest of each term discussing ethical issues of language education from many perspectives.

We focused on language teaching at schools and universities, especially in Japan, so many of the questions involved classroom activities, testing, and grading. One question we discussed, for example, was:

How should classroom teachers respond to different preferences by students about taking part in group work?

This was an interesting question because working in pairs and groups—role playing, discussions, etc.—is often regarded as an important part of active learning in the classroom, and active learning has been promoted in Japanese educational policy in recent years. Group work is done in other subjects as well, of course, but some educators feel it is particularly

useful in foreign-language classes because it allows students to practice conversation skills that they would otherwise have little opportunity to use. Classroom teachers, however, have noted that some students don't like doing group work, perhaps due to shyness, conditions related to autism, personality conflicts with other students, or a preference for traditional lecture-style learning. One option would be to excuse those students from group work, but some teachers or students might object to that on the grounds of fairness or equality of treatment.

Another question involving equality of treatment was:

Should students be required to take part in immersive language classes even if they find them uncomfortable?

Some of the graduate students in my class reported that, when they had been in Japanese schools, some of their teachers had attempted to teach English classes using only English. Government policy encourages English-only instruction at the high school level, and many universities in Japan offer foreign-language classes taught only in the target language. The arguments in favor of target-language-only instruction tend to focus on its supposed educational effectiveness, while arguments against it focus on its supposed ineffectiveness. What is often overlooked is the fact that it makes some students very uncomfortable. Being spoken to in a language that one does not understand, especially by an authority figure like a teacher, can be upsetting, even traumatic to some people. Even if immersive instruction *is* effective, that doesn't mean it *should* be used with all students.

This issue of fairness and equality of treatment comes up in many educational disputes in Japan. The public education system, especially at the elementary and junior-high-school levels, makes great efforts to ensure that all children are given equal educational opportunities and are treated equally. Perceived deviations from the principle of fairness are subject to intense criticism. When the government tried to replace the standard university entrance examination in English with TOEFL, IELTS, and other commercially produced exams, the proposal was vigorously attacked and eventually defeated—largely because it was believed that those exams would make the university admissions process less fair. As an ethical issue, fairness is very complex. Deeper discussions of the various ways in which fairness is understood, and of the implications of fairness for language education, might lead to progress in resolving some of the thornier controversies about English education in Japan.

Some issues that we discussed involved not only fairness but also whether and how particular aspects of language should be taught. For example:

Should teachers encourage their students to follow the cultural norms—forms of address, gender norms, politeness, etc.—associated with the language they are learning?

When Japanese is taught as a second language, students are often taught to use the linguistic forms indicating politeness and respect (*teineigo* and *keigo*). The use of those forms among native Japanese speakers is largely determined by cultural norms about interpersonal relations based on differences in age, social rank, familiarity, formality, etc. Those norms may seem strange or unjust to people from other cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, learners of Japanese who do not use those forms in the standard way run the risk of being misunderstood or regarded as rude. Languages in which gender is deeply embedded in the grammar, such as Spanish or Russian, can seem to promote unfair gender discrimination to people who speak a less gendered language like English or Japanese. However, not using the gendered grammatical forms would, in many cases, be regarded as serious mistakes by fluent speakers of the language. (English, of course, is not immune to such issues, as shown by the ongoing evolution of cultural norms for the use of personal pronouns.)

Among the ethical issues we discussed in my seminar, the one that interested me most was:

Should teachers try to motivate language students to study harder?

The motivation of students to study English and other foreign languages is an issue of great interest to teachers. Not only do many teachers believe—no doubt correctly—that motivated students learn languages better; language classes are also more enjoyable to teach when the students are enthusiastic about studying. Classroom teachers, program administrators, and textbook writers have developed many techniques to motivate students, including trying to make the classroom more fun through games, songs, and skits; arranging opportunities for students to use the target language in real life so that they can better understand how they will benefit from knowing it; and making textbooks and other learning materials entertaining as well as educational.

In 2014, I had taught my graduate seminar on the theme of motivation and language education, so I had read some of the research literature in the field. I had also helped to supervise several master's and doctoral theses on motivation-related topics. Only after I started thinking about ethics and language education, however, did I notice that educators and researchers seemed to have overlooked an important ethical aspect of motivation. Motivating a student to study means intentionally trying to change the student's psychological and emotional state, sometimes drastically. Is that okay? (Some Japanese students *really* don't want to study English.)

Ethical issues involving motivation apply to subjects other than language. In my recollection, at least, teachers of mathematics also struggle to keep their students interested in the subject; the same is probably true of history and chemistry and art. But some of the ethical issues we discussed—such as whether native-speaker pronunciation should be emphasized, especially for an international language like English, and whether language students should be encouraged to adopt the mindset or identity associated with the target language's culture—were specific to language education. Language is deeply embedded in human psychology, society, and culture, and whether or not educators should try to motivate—manipulate?—students to study second languages harder needs to be discussed from an ethical perspective.

In popular use, the word *ethics* often refers to what is right and what is wrong; in philosophy, this is called *applied ethics*. While I am not unconcerned about the applied ethics of language education, I am more interested in what is called *descriptive ethics*: what do people believe is right or wrong, and why do they believe it? Clarifying the ethical attitudes and assumptions of teachers, administrators, students, and the general public about language use, language teaching, and the purposes of language education would not only reduce the frequency of *is-ought* fallacies in language-education research. It would also help to cool down some of the controversies about English education in Japan.

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