

YAKUDOKU: THE JAPANESE APPROACH
TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY*

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1. Introduction

The teaching of English as a foreign language is often greatly influenced by the sociolinguistic environment of the country in which English is taught. In many countries, English is taught in accordance with indigenous educational traditions. This paper presents a case study of one such example as it affects the teaching of English in Japan. The influence of the traditional Japanese approach to the reading of foreign languages known as yakudoku will be discussed, and its effect on the teaching of English illustrated.

2. What is yakudoku?

Yakudoku is a generally unconscious technique for reading a foreign language in which the target language sentence is first translated word-by-word, and the resulting translation reordered to match Japanese word order as part of the process of reading comprehension (Kawazumi 1975, Ueda 1979). An illustration of the yakudoku process might be as follows:

[target language sentence] I saw her standing there.

Stage I [The reader mentally makes literal translation.]

I	saw	her	standing	there.
watashi	mita	kanojo	tatteiru	soko

*I am grateful to Professor Ted Plaister and Professor Kenneth Jackson for comments on an earlier version of this paper, and to Professor Jack Richards for assistance in preparing this version.

Stage II [Translation reordered to match **Japanese** syntax.]

Watashi mita kanojo tatteiru soko
1 5 2 4 3

Stage III [Recoding in Japanese syntax.]

Watashi-wa kanojo-ga soko-ni tatteiru-noo mita.

There are two aspects to yakudoku. One is the forward and regressive eye movement resulting from the word-by-word translation. The other is the fact that the meaning is not understood directly in the target language but only via translation.

In teaching students how to read English, teachers introduce students to the yakudoku technique. This may be referred to as the Yakudoku Method of teaching English, the method used by the majority of English language teachers in Japan from junior high to college level (Matsumoto 1965, Kawazumi 1975, Ueda 1979, Tajima 1978, Imamura 1978, Ito 1978, Osawa et al. 1978). The Yakudoku Method aims to teach the yakudoku technique to a stage whereby the student is able to use it without help from the teacher. The teacher's job in class is to explain the word-by-word translation technique, to provide a model translation, and to correct the student's translation (Kakita 1978, Tajima 1978). On the surface, this might appear similar to what is called the Translation Method, but there is one crucial difference. The ultimate goal of the Translation Method is to teach the student to be able to read directly in the target language without recourse to translation (Jackson 1981). The ultimate goal of the Yakudoku Method, however, is translation itself, and the ability to render a target language text into the mother tongue.

3. Disadvantages of the Yakudoku Method

For many Japanese students, reading English and yakudoku are the same thing (Matsumoto 1965, Tazaki 1978). They are not aware that it is much more natural to read English in the original word order nor that it is desirable to read directly in English without recourse to a Japanese translation. Hence for Japanese students of English, the word yakusu (=translate) is used synonymously with yomu (=read). Having been trained to read English via translation, they have come to identify this with the process of reading in a foreign language itself. It may even be that the goal of reading a foreign language text is regarded as simply to render it into a possible Japanese equivalent, without consideration of the value of the translation in understanding the contents of the original. Once the English is transformed into Japanese, it is considered read (Tazaki 1978, Osawa et al. 1978). Conversely, if an English text has not been recoded into Japanese, "reading" is not considered to have taken place (Ueda 1979, Kakita 1978).

The yakudoku habit clearly is a severe handicap to the Japanese student. It limits the speed at which the student reads, induces fatigue, and reduces the efficiency with which s/he is able to comprehend. The meaning of a text is obtained via Japanese translation, and is only an approximation to the original.

Yakudoku also has detrimental effects on the other language skills--listening, speaking, writing. Students who have been trained in yakudoku reading employ a similar strategy in listening comprehension. They attempt to understand speech by translating

every sentence into Japanese (Tazaki 1978). As a consequence, they cannot follow speech unless it is delivered very slowly, and they find comprehension a tiring, imprecise, and ineffective process. In speaking and writing, the yakudoku process is applied in reverse. A Japanese sentence is composed, translated into English word-by-word, and then the words are reordered according to English syntax (Matsumoto 1965). The result is seldom idiomatic English sentences, which are produced very slowly,

In spite of these serious disadvantages, why is the Yakudoku Method still so prevalent? To answer this question it is necessary to examine the historical background of yakudoku.

4. History of yakudoku

Yakudoku as a method of reading goes back at least to the 6th century, when the Japanese began to read Chinese--the first foreign language they encountered. They read Chinese by translating it into Japanese word-by-word. This process is basically the same as the current yakudoku practice. For example:

	毎 見 秋 瓜 憶 故 丘 ¹	[target language sentence]
Stage I.	毎 見 秋 瓜 憶 故 丘	[literal translation]
	goto miru shu ka omou ko kyu	↓
Stage II.	goto miru shuka omou kokyu	[reordering]
	3 2 1 5 4	↓
Stage III.	Shuka-o miru goto-ni kokyu-o omou	[recoding in Japanese syntax]

¹ 毎 = every time, 見 = see, 秋 = fall (autumn), 瓜 = melon, 憶 = remember, 故 = home, 丘 = hill; "Every time I see a melon in fall, I remember the hill in my home."

However, there is an important difference between the original form of yakudoku and the current yakudoku practice in reading English. Today, yakudoku is usually an unconscious mental process. Yakudoku in reading Chinese was an explicit process. For example:

	每 見 秋 瓜 憶 故 丘	[target language sentence]
Stage II	每 _✓ 見 _二 秋 _一 瓜 _一 憶 _二 故 _一 丘 _一	[symbols ² added to indicate Japanese word order]
Stage III	每 _二 見 _ル 秋 _ヲ 瓜 _ヲ 憶 _ヲ 故 _ヲ 丘 _ヲ	[Japanese postpositions and suffixes written beside the Chinese words]

Having perfected the yakudoku technique in later years, it came to be applied to the study of other foreign languages. In the 18th century it was used for the study of Dutch, and in the 19th century the Japanese produced texts for the study of English in which the yakudoku technique was used. Eibei taiwa shokei (A short cut to English conversation), a textbook written by Manjiro Nakahama (1827-1898), is a good example of the application of yakudoku to English. For each English sentence, Nakahama numbered the words to indicate their reordering into Japanese word order, by putting the same symbols as the ones used in reading Chinese. For example:

I am happy_✓ to see_二 you in_一 good health_一. (Quoted in Kawazumi 1975.)

If rewritten with numerals:

I am happy to see you in good health.
1 2 9 8 7 3 6 4 5

²For example, ✓ indicates the reversal of adjoining two words.

Since the 19th century, yakudoku has continued to be widely practiced in the study of English. But that is not to say that yakudoku has not been without its critics.

5. Criticisms of yakudoku

An early critic of yakudoku was the Confucianist Sorai Ogyu (1666-1728), who voiced objections to the method in his book Gakusoku (Rules of learning) written in 1727. He argued:

The traditional method of reading Chinese is a misleading one, which should be avoided. You cannot truly understand Chinese in this way. Chinese should be read as Chinese. (Kawazumi 1975)

Sorai warned that the spirit of the Chinese people cannot be grasped through yakudoku, which is merely a literal translation which ignores the linguistic and cultural differences between the two languages.

Gentaku Otsuki (1757-1827), scholar of the Dutch language and culture, criticized the application of yakudoku to Dutch in his book Rangaku kaitei (Steps in Dutch studies) written in 1788. His main argument is similar to Sorai's criticism:

In reading Dutch, beginners may use the method used for reading Chinese, but it is desirable for advanced readers to read directly in the original word order. You can understand the contents more clearly this way. Dutch often loses its meaning if rendered into Japanese, (Kawazumi 1975, 1978)

It is recorded that some people, though very few, were able to read directly in Dutch. The 19th century scholar Genichiro Fukuchi was one of them. He describes his experience and that of two other non-yakudoku readers:

In those days, most people read Dutch in the same way as they did with Chinese. Mr. Seikyo Sugita read, however³ directly in Dutch without translation. Others

achieved understanding only via word-by-word translation. I also read directly in Dutch, though I may sound arrogant. . . , I insisted that Dutch should not be read via such forward and backward translation Rinsho was just 14 years old, but he read Dutch in my way. He was able to read three times as fast as the other students. (Reprinted in Kawazumi 1978. Translation the present writer's.)

Though Fukichi said "in those days," the situation actually remains unchanged even today. The majority of Japanese believe yakudoku to be the normal way to read a foreign language.

In 1911, Yoshizaburo Okakura of Tokyo Koto Shihan Gakko (presently the University of Tsukuba) published a book entitled Eigo kyoiku (English language education). This was the first systematic study of the teaching of English in Japan. Here, we find a thorough criticism of yakudoku:

In the teaching of English in our country, students are taught to translate word-by-word, with forward and regressive eye movement. This is a strongly established convention. I think this comes from our traditional method of reading Chinese, in which Chinese words are reordered to match Japanese word order This is a wrong method, which treats Chinese not as a foreign language but as a kind of Japanese. We should not use this method in studying English It is a pity that everyone considers this to be the only way of reading foreign languages.

In reading Chinese, it is best if you understand the meaning of a text in the original word order. The contents are understood well enough in this way. As a matter of fact, this is the best way to achieve understanding. Likewise, direct reading is the best way of reading English in terms of time, energy, and efficiency. (Reprinted in Kawazumi 1978.)

Other critics of yakudoku in pre-war Japan include Professor Naibu Kanda (1857-1923) of Tokyo University, Minister of Education Masakazu Toyama (1848-1900), and novelist Soseki Natsume (1867-1916) who wrote Kokoro (Ueda 1979, Kawazumi 1975, 1978). Today, criticisms of yakudoku are frequently found in Japanese TESL

journals as well as in books and **magazines** for the general public, In spite of these criticisms, yakudoku still dominates the **way Japanese read foreign languages.** ,It dies **hard.**

5. Conclusions

With the continued widespread use of the **Yakudoku** Method in **Japan**, pedagogy for the teaching of foreign languages needs to acknowledge the **special** problems Japanese learners face in developing efficient reading habits. Remedial teaching techniques need to be developed by **EFL** reading teachers which lead learners **away** from the yakudoku habit and which show them how to read English in English. Such techniques will expose learners to reading materials in which the reading tasks required for the **learner** do not **allow** for **word-by-word** translation but demand a holistic approach to sentence decoding. Faster Reading in English by **Ando** and Sell (1971), which **makes** extensive use of timed reading and word-group **reading**, is one effort in this direction. The present paper also suggests that in developing or selecting teaching methodology suitable for **any EFL** country, **it** is essential to investigate its indigenous educational tradition.