

A Regular Column on the Issues that Matter Most to Classroom Professionals.

In each issue, Mike will present opinion and perspective pieces on various aspects of English teaching and learning. Readers are encouraged to respond or to initiate new discussions. Responses to the previous piece and new discussions will be selectively published in subsequent issues of the "ETJ Journal". Please send your contributions and responses to: <michael@post1.miyazaki-med.ac.jp>

## Should English be taught through *katakana*?

This is an issue that seems to divide teachers into distinct camps. Those who feel that *katakana*<sup>1</sup> is useful in aiding the acquisition of English skills point to the fact it is best to use the skills a learner already has in the learner's first language (L1) in order to guide them through the unfamiliar waters of a second language (L2) (see Reynolds, this issue, p.18). After all, if a learner already has an existing language schema (including native literacy), why not use it to that learner's advantage?

Detractors from this view argue that the syllable structure and phonotactics of English simply can

a teaching orientation that in effect says "L1 is real language, L2 is not".

When the argument turns to the question of acquiring "correct" pronunciation, however, the pro-*katakana* camp has a point. After all, what exactly is undesirable about maintaining a Japanese accent? Can one really point to a worldwide English standard of pronunciation that we should be directing learners towards? I agree that Japanese learners of English should not be made to feel guilty about 'sounding Japanese' and not sounding 'native' (whatever that term means). But it is arguable that the anti-*katakana* camp does

As long as learners expect to hear, for example, "girl" rendered as "gya-a-ru", they will have always have trouble comprehending even the most elementary utterances made by non-Japanese in English. I believe we have all experienced cases of even stellar students not being able to catch simple English phrases (phrases that they know and are able to construct themselves) simply because the sounds failed to conform to their aural expectations—expectations that are largely the result of interference from the unnatural L1 filter of *katakana eigo*.

IMHO, that is. But what do you think?

*"What exactly is undesirable about maintaining a Japanese accent? Can one really point to a worldwide English standard of pronunciation...?"*

not be reduced to the limited phonetic range of *katakana*. Thus, *katakana* would prove to be a false friend, ultimately retarding the acquisition of English and literacy in it.

I tend to find myself in the latter camp. First, I believe it's axiomatic that, for a true understanding of any language, it must be approached and accepted on its own terms, not through the distorting filter of L1. Of course, there will always be an element of L1 interference in acquiring any L2. However, actively pursuing this interference by promoting, for example, the use of *katakana* may reinforce a psychology that distances the learner from L2. This is

not seek to remove every last vestige of Japanese-ness from the learner's L2 pronunciation. Rather, they would like to lessen it to the extent that, say, "coffee" rendered as "ko-hi" will no longer result in the speaker receiving a glass of Coca-Cola instead. Therefore, we need to re-examine the continuum of issues that separate concerns about accent from those that deal with intelligibility.

I feel, however, that the strength of the anti-*katakana* camp's argument lies not in its wishing to improve the learner's comprehensibility through guiding pronunciation. More important, I would argue, is the concern for improving learners' listening skills.

### Notes:

1 *Katakana* is one of two syllabaries used in modern written Japanese; it is largely used to represent non-Chinese loan words, such as the numerous English loan words in Japanese called *gairaigo*. It is also used in some contexts to represent native onomatopoeia, to show emphasis in a written text, to transcribe the readings of Chinese characters in legal documents, to provide a quickly keyed language for telegraphy, and to represent the popular names of animals and plants in native taxonomy, among other uses. For the purposes of this discussion, we are looking at *katakana*'s supposed usefulness in phonetic transcription for learning and reading English.

NOTE: This issue may also be of relevance to those teaching children, but for the purposes of this publication, please limit responses to situations and experiences where adolescents, young adults and adults are being taught. Please feel free, however, to direct your thoughts, opinions and knowledge about this issue as it pertains to teaching children to our sister publication, *Snakes & Ladders*.