

# The bilingual perspective versus the Street Lamp Syndrome

**Steve McCarty** rethinks issues of language acquisition in Japan.

Anomalies can be discerned across basic issues regarding language acquisition, teaching and learning, particularly as manifested in Japan. A Street Lamp Syndrome is proposed to highlight the common fallacy represented by looking for one's lost keys under a street lamp because there is more light there. For instance, a quantitative trend in linguistics combined with top-down accountability pressures in a faculty, may displace communicative language education to the extent of the imperative to teach to standardised proficiency tests. But where views and practices reflect such anomalies or lack full dimensionality, the bilingual perspective can shed new light.

## Fallacy 1: We learn a language to achieve mastery

Expressions of the ultimate goal of studying a foreign language seem conspicuously absent, at least in Japan; it would be easier to ask why people are currently studying a foreign language. One reason may be that most learners do not come close to what their institutions are convinced is goal territory in terms of test scores.

Two reasons Japanese adults study English conversation in particular are more about people and relationships than about language: to be able to interact with the L2 target community and, perhaps more importantly, to form new peer relationships. Granted these can only be inferred, because it is considered impolite to ask people's motives. This assumes that the learners are following mores in a society that frowns on people meeting spontaneously outside existing social structures.

The goal of L2 education should not necessarily be the unequivocal and complete mastery of that language. In subtractive cases of L2 replacing L1 (Baker 2006: 4), often where immigrants' children's L1 is not valued in the community (Vaipae 2001), more can be lost cognitively than gained. Rather the goal should be to become bilingual and, to the extent one chooses, to become bicultural. Salient thresholds (Cummins 2001: 42 ff.) need to be delineated to complete this picture, but unpredictable individual factors, such as career needs, relationships and usefulness can upset tidy formulations.

## Fallacy 2: Non-native speakers owe native speakers a favour

Since overwhelmingly more people are learning English, particularly in Asia, than are gratified by foreigners learning their native language, the result of having a global lingua franca is not to the credit of native speakers of English but rather to its learners. The unsung heroes of intercultural

reconciliation are the millions of EFL learners who make this communication possible. Moreover, they are becoming bicultural to some extent to accommodate the different family of cultures behind English.

That is another point about the goal of L2 education. The teacher who knows the students' language and culture models the goal. This teacher's actions say, with conviction and credibility, 'Come to where I am'. Whereas the

## institutions and students alike are discouraged from venturing out of their monocultural shell

monolingual language teacher is saying by his or her own example, 'Go where I have not gone. *Bon voyage*, but where are you headed?'

Concomitantly there has arguably been undue attention to the idea of the native speaker, which indirectly privileges its proprietors, stemming from those very vested interests in the native-speaker model. Supporting or even simply not countering the illusion of one correct English has condemned millions of non-native users to unnecessary feelings of inadequacy.

## Fallacy 3: Standardised tests are the best measure of proficiency

The Street Lamp Syndrome extends to standardised tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL, which predominate in Japan, purporting to measure overall proficiency. They conveniently avoid the issue of speaking, as it is difficult to measure and even more difficult to identify the standards or acceptable boundaries, where each item of pronunciation is actually a multidimensional range with comprehensibility differing according to who is listening. Test takers cannot fake their acquisition, but there are biases toward business content, written media, test-taking skills owing to wealth, and so on. Whereas language is always specific to a certain context—domain, function, media, and so forth, where the user *needs* the language—artificial paper tests standing as profitable gatekeepers are not context sensitive in the same way.

The idealised notion of being bilingual in a fastidious society like Japan corresponds to unrealistically high proficiency test scores. Quantitative demands divert stakeholders from considering attainable goals in terms of bilingual functioning according to individual need. The tests can thus exacerbate the disconnect from ultimate goals. Mainstream students are relegated to intermediate objectives of specific courses, with bilingualism seen as only for the



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