English Oratory in late Meiji Period Japan: 
Debating at Hitotsubashi

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Abstract

A variety of methodologies have been employed in recent years to analyze the debate practices for Japanese classrooms of English. In this study, an attempt is made to historically investigate English debate in the Meiji period. The purpose of the study is to examine typical examples of English debate in Tokyo. Archival data reveal that one commercial school played a pivotal role in demonstrating English debate, taking advantage of extra-curricular activities in which historically notable teachers of English actively participated. Although this exhibition type of debate functioned as a model debate around the Tokyo area, it was largely devoid of the competitive value and spontaneity often seen in debate. Nevertheless, this particular historical study proposes the option of goal-setting for debates, and the exhibition of debates to audiences outside the classroom as a means of encouraging greater classroom accomplishment.

1. Introduction

Recently English classrooms in Japan have witnessed the growing popularity of debate. Accordingly, theoretical and empirical studies have been presented (e.g., Fujii, 1995; Ono, 2001; Tamai, 1993). Few studies, however, have attempted to learn from the history of debate in English, and what is especially lacking is in-depth periodical or district research. Furthermore, research indicates that Yukichi Fukuzawa (1835-1901), returning from Western countries, advocated the importance of debate in early Meiji Japan. Moreover, a fair amount of textbooks concerning debate was published in the Meiji period (see Okabe, 1988). Still, no exhaustive study has been made to inquire into English debate in the Meiji period. Although a sparse number of debating practices around that time are reported (e.g., Mikuma, 2000; Noji, 1980), they do not suffice to grasp the picture of English debate in those days. This study, therefore, takes a close look at English debate in the Tokyo area during the Meiji period. Special attention
is paid to an institution, where debate was often practiced, and its characteristics are also described. The inquiry will elucidate a fragment of the historical facts of English learning and teaching, and contribute to informing the future direction of debating practices in English.

2. Debate in the Meiji Period

2.1 Debate in the educational context

The type of debate to be described here is conducted in an educational context, and carried out in classrooms, during extra-curricular activities, in tournament form, or even in the cultural festival to awaken interest about certain issues for students. This category of debate, called academic debate, includes the following essential attributes, mentioned by Ono (2001), whose criteria took definitions from various researches into consideration:

1. An agreed-upon topic of debate, called the proposition
2. Someone to argue for the proposition, and someone to argue against
3. Some agreed-upon rules
4. Judges to decide the superiority of the arguments

2.2 Methodology

In order to unpack the historical facts concerning English debate, some archival documents in Japan were referred to, including journals and school annals. Among these, the most informative materials are eigo sogo zasshi (comprehensive English journals, hereafter ESZ'), which contain information about linguistic studies of English, British and American literature, as well as English for entrance exams (Deki, 1992). Also, they show valuable information of debate from that time. Based on comprehensive information from the ESZ (see the foldout in Nihon no Eigaku Hyakunen Henshubu, 1969), all the ESZ published in the Meiji period were consulted. And the following ESZ were found to include a good description of the English debate that is defined in this study (see 2.1): The Chugwai Eiji-Shimbun, The English World, The Nippon, The Rising Generation. In these journals, writers describe and give some comments on English debate. The investigation concentrates exclusively on the Tokyo area in order to present a well-focused district study.

2.3 General findings

Debates that generally meet the above criteria were recognized in the following cases, arranged in alphabetical order (the figures in brackets show the year):

1. Aoyama Gakuin Bungakukai fall meeting (1909)
2. Hitotsubashi Eigokai annual assembly (1898, 1901, 1903, 1907, 1908, 1911, 1912)
4. Kokumin Eigakukai impromptu debate tournament (1909, 1910)
5. Tokyo Higher Normal School Eigokai annual assembly (1910)
6. Waseda University Eigokai annual assembly (1909)

These debate performances were identified in the annual assembly of the school extra-curricular groups, such as Bungakukai (Literary Society) and Eigokai (English Speaking Society). These annual exhibitions were held in public with large audiences, and were highlighted in ESZ. This fact suggests that these events drew the attention of those involved in English language education. Also, the teachers in each school are reported to have participated in the practice, including giving the opening address, or the closing address at the annual assembly. We can infer from this fact that the extra-curricular activities in those days functioned as an extension of regular classrooms for some teachers.

Hitotsubashi and Kokumin Eigokai2 (2, 3, and 4), among them, stand out in terms of the number of debate exhibitions, while debating activities in other institutions show only one record in each case3. Also, ESZ tended to allot many pages toward covering the activities at Hitotsubashi when compared to those of other institutions. It is concluded then that Hitotsubashi was a unique case that constantly performed debates. Moreover, Hitotsubashi Eigokai was called the "best Eigokai in Japan at that time" (Fujii, 1954, p. 86: author's translation), and was given the reputation that "English and Hitotsubashi are synonymous.4"

The focus of the study, therefore, is on Hitotsubashi Eigokai. This selection is deemed appropriate for the study of English language education, because those debates were done in the educational context where teachers and students interact, and debate at that time was culminated in the annual assembly of extra-curricular activities. Being a rare case in which an attempt was made to constantly display debate, typical examples of English debate in the Meiji period will be extracted. Also, rich information about Hitotsubashi in ESZ will provide an in-depth description of those historical events.

3. Hitotsubashi Eigokai

3.1 Hitotsubashi Eigokai in the Meiji period

According to Sakudoh and Etoh (1975), Hitotsubashi Eigokai was launched within Eigo-bu of Higher Commercial School5 in 1888. They were holding regular meetings monthly within the society to practice English performances, such as drama, speech, etc. Annual exhibitions were also held for the general audience to demonstrate their oratory performance, but in 1890, the shocking scene of the killing of Caesar in the Shakespeare performance caused a controversy among some of the audience. Consequently, the annual assembly was discontinued. In 1894, however, with the support of Professor Naibu Kanda, the Eigokai was reorganized, which ushered in the second stage of the Eigokai.

The new Eigokai held regular meetings twice a month, the annual assembly once a year,
and in 1895 they resumed the annual exhibition. Also, a medium-sized autumn meeting started in 1908. The number of members around 1895 topped 200, which is almost half of the total number of students in the school, according to Hitotsubashi Digaku (1976).

The following section will deal with the annual exhibition of the second stage of Hitotsubashi Eigokai.

3.2 Annual exhibition

The annual performance lasted several hours, and included debate, dialogue, drama, recitation, speech, and song, totaling about twenty English presentations. As with other schools, drama performance was the predominant activity and attracted many students in the Tokyo area at that time (Kokusai Shi Henshu Iinkai, 1983).

What is noteworthy is that historical figures in English language education played the role of giving an opening address in each assembly, such as Eiji Asada and Naibu Kanda. As stated earlier in 3.1, Naibu Kanda, appointed as a professor in 1893 (see Hitotsubashi Daigaku, 1976), actively supported students in the annual assembly, participating in the regular practice meetings.

Every annual assembly saw the hall full to capacity with audiences from 1,000 to 2,000 in attendance. Audiences were made up of teachers, missionaries, news reporters, students, and foreigners. This series of events in those days presumably gave Hitotsubashi the reputation (see 2.3 above) that “English and Hitotsubashi are synonymous.”

4. Debate Exhibition

In order to bring the characteristics of debate into relief, this section covers argument, delivery, propositions and format, and judgment.

4.1 Argument

In the case below, students are debating the proposition, “The mental capacities of woman are inferior to those of man?” In the underlined section, the speaker wittily turned around the opponent’s refutation; the tact led to laughter by the audience.

The first speaker asked if Caesar, Alexander, Milton are all females. Then, in response to the argument that women are physically inferior, the eighth speaker argued, “dogs take care of cows, although dogs are physically inferior.” Then the audience burst into laughter.

(“Tokyo Koto Shogyo Gakko,” 1903, p. 12: author’s translation)

The following excerpt describes the argument on “Has Western civilization helped to increase our happiness?” One of the speakers mentioned the demerit of civilization, using the
unique example of a train that provoked an outburst of laughter amongst the audience.

Thanks to Western civilization, we can enjoy the convenience of trains, but wow, how many people are killed every day? Perhaps, the population of Japan has decreased due to civilization....Long ago, the inventor of the Guillotine gained a reputation, and now we have a killing machine called a “train,” which is very convenient for committing suicide: We have only to cross the railroad track to be killed.

(“Hitotsubahi Eigokai,” 1911, p. 269: author’s translation)

As indicated above, the argument often is met with laughter, of which students may have been conscious. On the other hand, a writer of The Chugwai Eiji-Shimbun (1898) reports on the student’s use of objective data to support the claim, “Being full of statistical arguments, the speaker argued successfully with energy and fluency. Impressively, the speaker entertained the audiences without getting them bored” (“Koto Shogyo Gakko,” 1898, p. 128: author’s translation).

In general, however, most of the arguments were experiential, and intended to be witty, based on anecdotes rather than objective data. Also, in order to understand the obligatory elements of the arguments, the debating textbooks published in those days should be investigated.

4.2 Delivery

Students with distinctive gestures are often recorded as in, “G. Abe spoke like a politician, E. Idzutani was conversational, H. Hamada seemed to be preaching, and Y. Yamazaki spoke as if modeling his delivery on Baron Kanda. They were all characteristic” (“Koto Shogyo Gakko no Eigo Koenkai,” 1908, p. 154: author’s translation).

Aside from gesture, one writer of The Rising Generation mentioned the lack of spirit in the debate, “Some debaters appeared to have repeated the prepared sentences....I wish to see both sides argue with more ‘spirit’” (“Hitotsubashi Eigokai Taikai,” 1911, p. 94: author’s translation). The problem indicated by this comment may have been inevitable, because almost one year was allotted for the students to prepare for the debate (see 3.1 above). It will surely be the case that they had something planned to say in hand, even when spontaneous responses were expected.

The most frequently given comment is on pronunciation. The excerpt below is a comment on the proposition, “Will Bushidō perish with the progress of commerce?” in 1912.

The speaker emphasized “Bu” with a high pitch, stress and extraordinary length, in an attempt to make a native-like pronunciation of “Bushidō,” which appeared rather humorous. Also using “jis” for “this” and “towaazu” for “towards,” the speaker parodied
what is commonly called Japanese English.

As for this pronunciation problem, a writer of The Rising Generation comments on Hitotsubashi Eigokai:

With the longest history of Eigokai in Japan, sharing good reputation with a newly-emerged school of foreign studies, they also have instructional support from Baron Kanda, and foreign teachers like Ruth and Lloyd. So, it is no surprise their performance is good. Yet, I wonder why they still have a problem with pronunciation?

We can recognize that the problem of pronunciation was unavoidable, even with the support of a legendary teacher and user of English.

4.3 Propositions and format

Propositions are the agenda to be discussed in the debate round, as can be seen in 2.1 above. The format shown in Table 1 is comprised of the number of speakers involved during the debate, and the order of speakers for each affirmative and negative side.

Table 1
Propositions and Format of Hitotsubashi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Propositions and format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>The introduction of foreign capital is an urgent necessity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 (A→N→A→N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Which has done the greater service to Mankind - the printing press or the steam engine?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>The mental capacities of woman are inferior to those of man?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 (A→→→→→→→→)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>Does morality increase with civilization?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 (A→N→A→N→A→A→N→A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Is character influenced more by books than by men?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 (A→N→A→N→A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Has Western civilization helped to increase our happiness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 (A→N→A→N→A→N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Will Bushidō perish with the progress of commerce?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 (A→N→A→N)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* A represents affirmative to support the proposition, and N represents negative to negate the proposition. Information is not available for the blank space and the format of 1901.
Different propositions were selected each year, reflecting the controversial and social issues in those days. For example, issues concerning the merits and demerits of civilization in 1907, 1911, and 1912 (Table 1) might have been adequate throughout the Meiji period. Also, the year 1903 saw the proposition, “The mental capacities of woman are inferior to those of man?,” around the time when women’s positions were supposedly given conscious attention, including the foundation of Joshi Eigaku Juku in 1900, which later became Tsuda College (Tsudajuku Diagaku, 1960).

As for the format, it is not based on any fixed pattern. It is not clear, however, whether the use of various formats was intentional for educational purposes.

4.4 Judgment

In the annual exhibitions of 1911 and 1912, the chairman declares that the game was tied. Moreover, no record is found regarding the win-lose decision6 in Hitotsubashi. A similar case is found in Noji (1980), which describes a portion of English debate, as well as Japanese debates of extra-curricular activities in middle schools under the old system. However, it should be noted that debate in these cases displayed their in-house products to the general audience, which do not necessarily require a win-lose decision. In other occasions, such as the tournament among schools, a clear-cut decision would have been required. This fact seems to imply that a decision should be made dependent upon context and atmosphere, as Matsumoto (1995) says.

5. Summary and Discussion

Hitotsubashi played an active part in constantly demonstrating model debates to the general audience in Meiji Tokyo. It will surely be the case that whenever Hitotsubashi students practiced debating with teacher supervision, they were doing so with the goal of presenting the debate to the annual assembly. Based on various formats, students demonstrated their ability to debate on socially controversial issues to the general audience, which was prepared during a certain period among students and teachers. Also, their arguments were based on anecdotes or metaphors rather than the objective data or evidence. The problem with pronunciation was also pointed out frequently. The absence of a win-lose decision might have been specific to Hitotsubashi, although there is no inherent problem with this.

As shown above in 4.2, the debate presented to the annual assembly was lacking in spontaneity as needed for what it takes to be a genuine communication activity (see Ohtagaki, 1994). In addition, it was devoid of the competitive value of debate, which is often advocated as an educational value of debate (e.g., Wood & Goodnight, 1990). Therefore the author assumes that the above characteristics were products of the exhibition type of debate.

These findings then lead to the question of what made Hitotsubashi practice debate constantly within the school and demonstrate outside, while drama performance was still
predominant in any university exhibition (see 3.2). One might argue it is because historically notable teachers of English (see 3.2 and 4.2) were present to assist students in preparing for debate. The author would further argue that there was some incentive to practice debate. As members of a commercial school, students had motivation toward English for business purposes. In this sense, debate might have been appealing for some students. Also, around that time, drama performances in Hitotsubashi began to receive criticism (see 3.1), which brought about the coordination among the Eigokai, presumably by Professor Naibu Kanda, and the adoption of debate.

6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This historical investigation has revealed English debate to be most influential in an English-bound commercial school in late Meiji Tokyo. This study will fill in the niche of Historical English Studies in Japan. Also, the Eigokai of Hitotsubashi functioned as an extension of the regular classroom, where teachers and students interacted with each other. Therefore, these findings will provide implications for classrooms of English.

As has been shown, the debate by the Hitotsubashi annual assembly was lacking in competitive value and spontaneity (see 4.2 and 5 above). However, it also provided another reason for implementing debate: the exhibition type of debate as a goal or product. Many people seem to have regarded the goal of debate as a debate round which entails a win-lose decision. Yet, this study has led us to realize that there is another goal-setting mechanism for debate implementation. In any case, these findings imply that setting a goal that extends beyond the classroom will be effective in keeping students motivated. Having said that, these findings, paradoxically, suggest the importance of the process of implementing debate: Toward the goal of exhibition, appropriate procedures need to be taken. This idea supports the significance of “pre-debate activities” (see Ono, 2001), in which various activities are incorporated before the debate round.

Future study is also required to scrutinize the textbook on debate published in the Meiji period to investigate the adaptation process of debate in the Meiji period and onward.

Notes

1. The ESZ do not give full accounts of the debate in regular classrooms. However, they do not indicate that debate practice was limited to the extra-curricular activities. See the examples outside Tokyo, such as Kobayashi (1976) and Toyama (1992).
2. Kokumin Eigakukai, a private school of English founded in the Meiji period, will be elaborated somewhere else.
3. Caution is against concluding that other schools did not experience debate. Some schools
simply did not consistently present debates as events in the annual exhibitions, but they did have chances to debate in regular meetings as an in-house practice (e.g., Keio Gijuku, 1960).

4. The original version is "Eigo no Hitotsubashi ka: Hitotsubashi no Eigo ka." This phrase is reported in Kokusaibu Shi Henshuinkai (1983, p. 3) and Sakudoh & Etoh (1975, p. 1154).

5. During the period this study mainly covers (1898-1912), the name of the school changed from Higher Commercial School to Tokyo Higher Commercial School in 1902. It is currently called Hitotsubashi University. Eigo-bu is translated as English club.

6. Outside Tokyo, win-lose decisions were made in Hiroshima Higher Normal School in 1908, 1909, and 1910, although it was also the exhibition debate.

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References


