

An Anglo-Japanese Research Project: A Comparison Between the
Historical Understanding and Knowledge of Japanese and English
Children Aged Between 13 and 14

Martin Booth, University of Cambridge

Masayuki Sato, University of Yamanashi

A generous grant from two Anglo-Japanese foundations, the Daiwa and the Great Britain Sasakawa, is making possible the launch of what we believe to be a unique research project - a comparison between the teaching and learning of history in Japan and England.

The research is being undertaken when the teaching of the subject is undergoing radical changes in both Japan and England. Japan implemented a new national history curriculum for secondary school students in 1990. History is now being taught as a separate subject rather than as part of a social studies programme; the syllabus focuses on national and international history. England, too, has a new centrally imposed history curriculum which since 1991 is being progressively introduced.

Whereas in Japan the emphasis of history teaching is on content, coverage and rote learning, the English National Curriculum tries to strike a balance between inducting students into the process of historical discourse and giving them a sound knowledge of national, European and World history. Thus the English curriculum stresses the need for students to evaluate and use a wide range of historical sources - written, artefactual, pictorial, oral and so on - and to consider the ways in which evidence is used to create historical understanding of an event or issue. English history classrooms are often lively environments with the students actively engaged in research and discussion and with the teacher in the role of facilitator and guide rather than

as instructor or lecturer. Japanese history lessons by contrast tend to be more formal with the students spending a high proportion of their time listening to the teacher.

The purpose of this eighteen-month research (September 1992 - March 1994), therefore, is to explore the differences of pupils historical knowledge and understanding within the contexts of Japanese and English cultures. The hypothesis is that Japanese students will show a wider and greater grasp of historical information than their English counterparts but will be deficient when it comes to explaining the nature of this knowledge. English students may know less than Japanese students; but it may be that they are more able to understand the status and significance of historical knowledge and thus be in a better position to go on acquiring an understanding of the subject. We are also hypothesising that English students enjoy the subject more than their Japanese counterparts because of the varied and lively teaching methods they have experienced.

What then are our research methods going to be? We have eschewed the 'grand survey' approach, based on questionnaires given to a large number of students and aiming to come up with a national answer. Rather we are adopting the case study method. We are taking two schools in East Anglia and two schools near Yamanashi. In each school we will be making a detailed ethnographic investigation of one particular class of students aged between thirteen and fourteen. The history teacher will be asked to keep a log or record of the lessons he or she teaches to the group - the aims and objectives of the teaching, the teaching materials used, the methods employed and so on. We intend then to observe the teaching in action - probably visiting the school on six occasions. Here we will be looking at the seating arrangements and the student reactions to the teaching strategies and materials used. A minute by minute diary approach will be used to record our

findings. We intend too to video the class so that we can make visual comparisons between the two countries. We are also intending to use formal testing. Towards the end of our field work we will be giving the students a test which will be similar in format though different in content, reflecting the history the students have been studying in each of our four schools. The test will measure the students' factual knowledge, their understanding of the time element in history and their skill in evaluating historical sources as evidence. For this last section of the test, we intend taking a small group of students away from the class and letting them answer the questions on the sources orally. This will be filmed. Comparison then will be made between the written answers and the spoken - we suspect, following research by Ashby, Dickinson and Lee that the oral responses will show greater historical understanding as the students will not be inhibited by the 'high risk factor' of having to commit thoughts to paper. The students will also answer a questionnaire assessing their attitude towards history as a school subject; and we hope to make some measure of their general intelligence as assessed by a standardised non-verbal intelligence test - such as the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales' Non-Verbal DH test. We will be gathering information too about the socio-economic backgrounds of the students.

All of this will generate a great deal of data; and the period from the completion of the field work (by March 1993 in England; by July 1993 in Japan) to the end of the project funding (March 1994) will be spent sifting and making sense of our evidence. It is hard to know at this stage exactly how we will present our findings. We are certainly thinking in terms of a book which will compare and contrast history teaching in the two countries. The emphasis here will be on the outcomes of the teaching and the nature and extent of the students' historical knowledge and understanding. If our

original hypotheses - that Japanese children know more history but have less understanding about the nature and status of historical discourse and enjoy the subject less than English children - are correct, then we may wish to address the question: is it possible to create a teaching situation and to devise materials which will give students both the range of knowledge - the map of the past - that history educators believe they should have if they are to operate as effective citizens in today's world and an understanding of what history as a subject is? If on the other hand we find that Japanese students not only have a better knowledge of the content of what they have been studying but also a good grasp of the nature of the subject, then we may well want to question the emphasis that is given to student-centred learning in England. In either case we believe we will be highlighting fundamental issues concerning the nature and purpose of the teaching of history in our schools.

We are also intending to publicise our findings at a conference in 1994. Such a conference may well be held at Cambridge and form the framework for our annual International Society for History Didactics meeting; if the theme of meeting were to be 'The teaching of history in Japan and Europe' we feel fairly confident that we might get some financial support to help fund the enterprise. Our research would form the basis for one or two papers; other contributions might concentrate on the view of Japan given in a country's history textbooks or the ways in which the Japanese history books and teachers deal with the period 1931 - 45. It would also be good to invite one or two Japanese scholars to talk about research both on the teaching of history and into history itself which is currently in progress in their country.

Comparative studies in education are commonplace; but this is the first time that a detailed evaluation will have been made

of secondary school history teaching in Japan and England. We believe its value will lie in bringing the two history curricula into sharp relief, showing the strengths and the weaknesses of both systems. It could do much to enhance the status of the subject in both countries.