

Observations on Some Success and Failure Factors in the Learning of English in Japan

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The new school year in Japan begins in April, a fitting time to mirror nature and start anew. The majority of the freshmen classes in junior high schools displays a vast amount of curiosity and enthusiasm for English, their new school subject. This novelty, however, is as fleeting as springtime and by July— or surely September, the majority has settled into an acceptance of English as just another subject to master for examinations but one which will have little relevance for the future. Most will never need it; most will not come into contact with foreigners; most will never again pick up an English book. In each class, though, there are a few who, given the same basic teaching, will succeed in the oral and aural skills. Why? Is there a fundamental reason for some being able to overcome the considerable amount of work and frustration associated with learning a language and how did they do it? The answers to these questions will aid English teachers in their no-less difficult and discouraging task.

This paper then is an attempt to investigate these questions and analyze the answers. In order to do so, eight Japanese subjects were interviewed, five women and three men, ranging in age from 22 to 46. All but two received their secondary schooling in Okayama; one did not attend university; one is presently a medical student. Of the six, three received their university degree in Okayama and three in Tokyo; one also took a post-graduate degree in Tokyo. Five were English majors; one received a degree in Shintoism and Comparative Religions.

The occupation, gender, and years employed of each subject are as follows: one medical student, male; three housewives (one taught English in junior high for a year); one Shinto priest, seven years; one retired junior high English teacher, female, ten years; one junior high English teacher, female, seven and a half years; one university assistant professor, male, fifteen and a half years.

With the exception of the medical student and the university teacher, all the other subjects are presently taking English lessons— three from native English speakers and three from Japanese. Each interview took an average of two hours during which time the following thirty-three questions were asked.

1. How old were you when you first began to learn English?
2. What were your feelings toward English when you first began?
3. Was English your favorite subject?
4. What was your incentive to learn?

5. At what levels and how many different foreign teachers of English did you have?
6. Did you ever become bored with English or feel that it had no relation to your future career?
7. In your learning of English, how could the schools have helped you more?
8. How did you help yourself?
9. What would you have liked the schools to have done?
10. What would you have liked the schools not to have done?
11. How did you succeed in improving your English? (most important factor)
12. What was the most effective teaching method in your learning of English? Study method? Ever talk to yourself?
13. How helpful was preparing for and taking the entrance examination for university?
14. How necessary is oral English in your everyday life?
15. How necessary is oral English for your career?
16. Which skill—writing, reading, speaking, listening—do you consider to be the most important for your purposes?
17. Which of the above skills do you consider to be the most important for today's students in relation to the entrance examinations?
18. Which of the above skills do you consider to be the most important for today's students if English were not a requirement on entrance examinations?
19. Which of the above skills do you stress in your own classroom?
20. Which of the above skills is stressed in your classroom?
21. Do you translate when you use English? If not, how did you acquire this skill?
22. How much reading do you do in English, professional or other?
23. What is your strongpoint in English?
24. What is your weakpoint in English?
25. What do you consider to be the strongpoint in the teaching of English in Japan?
26. What do you consider to be the weakpoint in the teaching of English in Japan?
27. What do you consider to be the strongpoint in the learning of English in Japan?
28. What do you consider to be the weakpoint in the learning of English in Japan?
29. What is your opinion of the government's hiring foreign teachers of English?
30. What is English to you?
31. Why did you become an English teacher?
32. Have you been teaching according to your ideals?
33. How do you think the teaching of English could be improved in Japan?

Only one subject began the study of English before junior high school. At seven and a half years of age, he accompanied his family to the United States where they remained for two years. His only preparation for English prior to leaving Japan was to learn the alphabet. However, he felt that when he left the United States he could understand everything and although he had no particular feelings toward beginning his formal study of English in

junior high, he does recall having no difficulty in remembering. Six of the other persons interviewed all expressed a strong interest, a certain amount of excitement about learning a new language; only one found it too difficult and uninteresting at first.

One interesting feature of this study was that all but two of the participants expressed a boredom with English very early in their study either because of uninteresting classes, or poor marks, or English having no apparent relation to a future career. The one subject who never ever tired of English as a language did become bored with English literature in university because it was simply a translation course and not a study of the literary work itself. If boredom did set in, it was sometimes overcome by having a different teacher either in school or in juku. If a teacher used English in the classroom, it proved to be a good way to regain interest since it showed that English was for communication and not simply translation. This, of course, increased their own confidence in English and led to better examination scores. It also helped if the teacher presented the material simply and made comparisons between the two languages. The personality of the teacher played an important part for many of the subjects' success or failure in English. One preferred the very learned type; one the systematic type; some the amusing teacher who could tell jokes in class but could also speak English; one suggested that the teacher who was himself confident and interested in English was capable of inspiring his students to study even after they themselves had given up.

It is important to realize that although English is studied in Japan, there is so little opportunity to use it. Unless a student is highly self-motivated, he will soon get discouraged. English is not useable; therefore the incentive needed must come either from within or be imposed from without. All but one of the eight subjects had no motivation whatever; if the school had not forced it on him, he would not have studied any language (however he does need it in his career). In a sense, another was also forced to because the university taught most of its English courses in English although this participant always knew she would be an English teacher. Five others wanted English for communication with foreigners someday. The eighth simply wanted to be good in English and to secure a better job (at that time, his future did not include plans to teach). English was always the favorite subject of only two; one began to like it in his second year of junior high; one took an interest in it in senior high school and the other four definitely preferred other subjects.

How necessary is contact with foreigners in attaining speaking and listening skills in English for a Japanese? Except for the subject who went to the United States at seven and a half years of age, all the others had no contact with foreigners until after high school and this in all but one case was in university classes taught by non-Japanese. For most of them, their aural ability was limited, especially during their freshman year. One stated that during the summer vacation of his freshman year, he listened to a tape on pronunciation

and intonation and, upon returning to school in September, had no trouble in understanding native English teachers. In the case of the subject who did not attend university, she states that after graduation from high school she listened to the English programs on television and while working in a museum, had her first contact with foreigners, spoke to them for about thirty minutes and had no difficulty in understanding them.

Six of the eight subjects have lived abroad from thirty days to two years at the most. All but one have had contact with foreigners in Japan; two have the most--one on a bi-monthly basis for about the last thirteen years, and one, whose wife is an American, on a daily basis for the last seven years. However, when asked what the most important factor was in improving their English, the latter replied reading and the former studying every day by listening to the English radio program for the last seven years. Both indicated though that regular contact with foreigners has helped to make their English less bookish and more natural. Only two subjects felt contact with foreigners was the most important factor; two credited teachers with sustaining their interest; one her tutor in the third year of junior high school and one the English program on radio since it taught correct pronunciation, intonation and easy English in which to communicate.

What did these successful language learners do to help themselves? The answers are many and varied: reading extra (sometimes aloud); listening to the English programs on radio and television; tutoring; attending juku; having penpals and later keeping up contact with friends in other countries; joining ESS clubs or international friendship associations; working for foreigners; attending English conversation courses; speaking English with Japanese friends; studying and traveling abroad; talking to themselves in English.

Although the effectiveness of the schools is not being minimized, it is necessary to examine how it can become even more instrumental in helping to acquire a foreign language. Questions 7, 9, 10 and 12 relate to this point. The schools could have helped more by hiring teachers who could and would speak English in the classroom. Proper pronunciation was a concern of most of the participants as was intonation and conversational English. One subject, who had traveled in Europe for two years, visited English classes in Switzerland where the native language was not used and the students could speak English. He feels the same could be accomplished in Japan if the teachers would stop using Japanese. Another suggested that translation be kept to a minimum at the first stages of learning and never to do a literal word-by-word translation. By senior high school, then, no Japanese would be used in the classrooms at all. He pointed out that although translation is still needed for university examinations, its role is being de-emphasized. If students were trained this way, by the time they were in senior high they would be able to read more and to read more interesting novels. This in turn would definitely prepare them to pass examinations but in a less direct and less boring way.

Tests are not motivation enough for most students to study English; therefore teachers

must try to make the lesson more active, exciting and pertinent to students' lives. This can be partly achieved by the teacher's own continued study of the English language and methodologies being developed for language teaching. One went as far as to say that the very detailed teacher's manual should be abolished in order to compel teachers to study and to create their own lesson plans. This further study would naturally lead not only to the teacher's using English with the students, but to his understanding of the culture of the language taught; his English would therefore not reflect Japanese thought. Also by increased study, the teacher would have a more current working definition of a word and not merely a dictionary meaning.

Literature provides a good "excuse" for using English in the classroom. There is no reason why Japanese cannot teach literature in English and discuss it in English instead of using literature as another translation exercise. One subject who was taught literature in English remarked that it was itself self-motivating and the more he read and learned, the more he wanted to read and learn and discuss.

What should the schools not have done? They should not have stressed the entrance examinations; they should not have used Japanese so exclusively in the English class; they should not have taught grammar for grammar's sake--minute rules which even now, after years of study, are not understood or even met in most reading selections. Lastly, they should not have inadvertently reinforced bad habits of intonation and pronunciation by having the students do choral reading after the teacher.

The schools, however, did some things to the subjects' liking. Only one participant answered no to recalling any effective teaching method, study method or interesting English teachers. If the others could not cite a specific teaching method, they could remember a teacher who was active and vigorous, interesting and attractive; a teacher who gave unusual assignments like translating enka; a teacher who left students with a strong impression of having used English for a purpose and made the language live or sound like music. The teaching methods considered helpful were at the university level: each week, for twenty-eight weeks, a two-hundred-and-fifty-word summary of a reading passage was handed in, marked and returned; group work where students had to speak in English. Regarding study methods, reading a great deal and memorization were given as being very helpful. One subject memorized every basic sentence pattern by heart and even in university, he memorized many of Shakespeare's passages. Two found practicing English by talking to themselves was one way to solve the problem of not having anyone with whom to speak English.

Although the subjects did feel too much time was spent on preparing for entrance examinations, none of them denied that it was time well spent for increasing vocabulary, developing understanding and learning correct usage.

Questions 14 and 15 point out again the importance for most of having a need in order to master a language. Unless one has as a motive contact with foreigners either personally

or professionally, the necessity of oral English diminishes greatly for the ordinary Japanese. Therefore of the eight participants, three answered affirmatively to number 14 and three to number 15 (two of the above answered affirmatively to both numbers 14 and 15).

The questions relating to the skills of writing, reading, speaking and listening were answered as follows:

- # 16: writing- 1 (future doctor)
reading- 2 (university teacher; retired junior high English teacher)
speaking- 5
- # 17: reading- 8
- # 18: reading- 1 (university teacher)
speaking- 6
listening- 1 (retired junior high English teacher)
- # 19: reading- 3 (junior high English teacher; university teacher; housewife)
listening- 1 (housewife)
(This question is not relevant to the other four.)
- # 20: speaking- 3 (retired junior high English teacher; two housewives)
listening- 2 (Shinto priest; junior high English teacher)
(This question is not relevant to the other three.)

Two of the participants do translate when using English if it is necessary for comprehension; the other six do not. Reading, speaking and listening were factors which helped them to acquire this skill.

With regard to the amount of reading done, only the university teacher and the medical student read professionally; all but two read somewhat for relaxation. Individual strong-points were rated accordingly: reading- 5; grammar- 1; listening- 1; speech imitation- 1. Their individual weakpoints were: speaking- 5; listening- 1; composition- 2.

Questions 25 to 28 are basically the same but were asked to determine if any difference is perceived between what is taught and what is learned. Numbers 25 and 27 received the following answers from the same subjects when read horizontally.

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| No. 25: | No. 27: |
| reading (3) | reading (3) |
| grammar | grammar |
| translation | no answer |
| spelling | reading |
| grammar | reading |
| reading | vocabulary |

Numbers 26 and 28 were answered as follows:

No. 26:

reading
 listening
 speaking
 speaking
 speaking
 speaking
 speaking
 students cannot apply their
 knowledge of English

No. 28:

reading
 listening
 listening and speaking
 students think that English is difficult
 speaking
 listening and speaking
 students hesitate to use English
 students cannot think in English

Since most of the above answers for numbers 26 and 28 pertain to listening and speaking, it is no wonder that all the participants regard the government's hiring of foreign teachers as a step forward. These foreign teachers not only provide students with the opportunity to communicate in English and to know the pleasure of studying it, but can also serve as consultants to the Japanese teachers of English. One of the subjects did stress, however, that their academic background should be in English literature or in a language-related field; it would be an added plus if they had a sufficient knowledge of Japanese. Another felt that a teaching certificate should be a requirement.

What then does English mean to these eight Japanese who have sufficiently mastered it? One housewife declares it is her "comfort--to hide from life's daily troubles". For three others, it is a tool to communicate with and understand others. The retired English teacher now regards it as a "hobby only". It is "very practical" for the medical student as a means to "understand scientific information and get it more rapidly". The university teacher sees it as the purpose and means of his career--the language of English literature. To the junior high English teacher it is a "pleasure; when reading English books, I feel I can get an experience of other places".

Four of the subjects are or have been English teachers. Two of the women felt it was one way to be a professional, to achieve a certain social status. One combined her desire to teach with her preference for English and the fourth became a teacher because of his love for English literature. Though all four felt they have taught according to their ideals, two felt that examinations place a limitation on creative activity in the classroom.

What, then, can be done to improve the teaching of English in Japan? A variety of suggestions were given: teachers should have on-going education courses since their attitude toward learning influences and encourages students to learn more; various media should be used; more native English teachers should be hired; the number of lessons per week should be increased from three to five; the number of exchange students should be increased thereby giving them chances to go abroad and use their English; speaking and listening should be emphasized in the classroom and the examinations should be changed to include these skills;

translation should be stopped and extensive reading should be begun.

Each of these eight subjects had a firm foundation in English throughout the formal years of study. What is evident, of course, is that for most of them the basics leaned too heavily toward the printed word. As one participant remarked, "English is one subject you can't do anything with". Although a few loopholes can be found with this statement, it remains essentially correct for the average Japanese. You can use your knowledge of math; you have a need for history; art and music are self-sustaining. But English? No. Even English teachers themselves will admit that they could almost spend an entire career in the classroom without ever actually having to use the spoken language. The reason for this has, of course, been the importance of the English score on entrance examinations.

However to change the entire educational system in relation to these tests will surely take a great many years. Before that, certain measures can be taken to aid both teachers and students alike in their mutual study of English. Some have already been stated earlier in this paper but a few more should be mentioned.

One way is to rotate teachers more frequently in order to ensure that a class does not have the same teacher throughout all the years in a particular school. Although there are many good reasons for not changing, very few teachers, no matter how creative they are, can sustain that for years with the same pupils. This rotation has its basis in the statements made by a few of the subjects regarding the teacher's personality and methodology as factors for liking or not liking English.

Another solution would be to give each teacher a class in each year--that is, if a teacher has five classes, he would teach at least one first-year class, one second-year class, and one third-year class. It would seem that teaching the same lesson to four or five classes could not help but be boring for the teacher as well as for the students.

It is again relevant to highlight some suggestions made by the subjects regarding this point. The retired junior high English teacher admitted that her study of English, with the exception of a few teacher seminars, virtually stopped after graduation. The importance then of on-going courses for teacher education and training must be recognized. Time should be allotted for this purpose and professional reading material provided at all levels. Teachers themselves must be conscious of their methodology and constantly renew not only their interest in the subject but their lesson plans. If each lesson proceeds the same way, if the teacher is bored, what can be hoped for from the students?

Consequently, if the student learns that he can get by without ever hearing or speaking a word of English in the classroom he will quickly lose one of the most important motivating factors of all for language study--communication. Most young people are able to keep alive their dream of someday traveling and meeting non-Japanese professionally or privately. The teacher must then prepare for that day by using and giving the students opportunities to use English two or three times a week. If foreigners are invited to the schools, then

students will not be hearing their "English" voices for the first time. It hardly seems necessary to state that before foreigners enter a classroom additional preparation must be made to insure that all students can participate in and benefit from this encounter. Hearing and speaking English early in their study will help to show students that English is not that difficult. Furthermore they should be taught the way to study a language and cautioned about the inevitable pitfalls connected with mastering any skill. They should be constantly encouraged and challenged but not frustrated with minute points of grammar.

If two definitive conclusions can be drawn from this study, they are that each of the eight subjects was constant in his desire to speak English and most continue their study of it on a regular basis. Since none had a foreigner with them at all times, this regularity took the form of daily picking up an English book or daily turning on the English radio or television program. A little each day seems to be more instrumental in mastering this skill than long stretches at a time at even longer intervals.

It is worth noting here that the most fluent of the subjects attributes his ability to reading. Rarely does a day go by without reading at least a few pages of English. A book can be a constant companion and although the skills involved in reading and speaking are different, they do overlap and reinforce each other. Another of the subjects markedly improved his speaking ability by reading medical journals, about twelve a month.

Such determination must mark us as teachers also; we cannot do otherwise with our subject matter. As teachers we must strive to keep students in the springtime of desire and curiosity and excitement. It requires determination but it is possible. It also then becomes possible for future classes to have greater numbers of students participating actively in English.