

The Shift from Examination-oriented English Teaching to Communication-oriented English Teaching

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試験指向の英語教育からコミュニケーション指向の 英語教育への転換

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Abstract

In this paper we are eagerly concerned with tackling some serious problems of English teaching in Japan and seeking for a possible solution to them. As is commonly acknowledged, since English is one of the most important required subjects for the entrance examinations both at high school and university level in Japan, we feel obliged to study it whether we like it or not. This is the very source of every kind of problem and mythology with English teaching in Japan. To overcome this situation, we can have recourse to the Internet since it is dripping with a lot of useful and beneficial resources for Japanese ESL/EFL students. In particular, it is strongly recommended that we make the most of the Internet chat for the purpose of learning and teaching English because it gives us a full array of virtual experiences of communication that would be definitely impossible without the immediate and worldwide spread of the Internet in the 1990s and in the new millennium.

Keywords: global standard language, English teaching in Japan, the Internet chat, Japanese ESL/EFL students

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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that English has completely established itself as the global standard language up to now. Accordingly, more and more Japanese have been burdened with the demand that proper command of English be necessary even in daily situations, as well as under the business and academic circumstances. It is regrettable, however, that a lot of Japanese are severely criticizing

themselves for not being good at speaking English in spite of their relatively long periods of time of learning it. Beginning to study English with the compulsory entrance into junior high schools, we usually continue studying it for approximately 10 years all together. But still, we are generally poor speakers of English, believe it or not. So, what in the name of heaven is happening? The aim of this paper is to answer this question, thereby to propose a new way of learning and teaching English.

2. Examination-oriented Knowledge of English

In the preceding section it is pointed out that the Japanese commonly acknowledge themselves as a very poor speaker of English. However, this does not mean that we are not interested in the study of English, nor does it mean that we have an insufficient knowledge of English. What it does actually mean is that we have not been properly trained to make use of English as a means of communication on the foundation of a wide range of vivid grammatical knowledge.

As is commonly admitted, since English is one of the most crucial required subjects for the entrance examinations both at high school and university level in Japan, we are supposed to study it whether or not we feel like studying it. Needless to say, not only in the United States but also in Japan, the better high school and university we are to be enrolled in, the better career path we will be destined to proceed along. That is, elite universities definitely promise us a brighter future. It follows, then, that we study English not because we want to take full advantage of it as a tool for communication, but because we just want to pass the competitive entrance examinations to prestigious academies like former imperial universities.¹ As a result, the whole educational system in Japan is devotedly concerned with teaching students how to get high marks in the imminent English examinations of any kind rather than providing students with really systematic and applicable knowledge of English. My main claim here is that this is the very source of every kind of confusion, mythology and failure in the English educational system in Japan. I really hate to say that the situation is already too pathetic and dangerous.

Noam Chomsky, who initiated the overwhelmingly predominant linguistic theory² in 1957, maintains that languages are astonishingly identical at the deep and abstract level, even though they exhibit a wide range of superficial diversities. This noticeable property of human languages is explained by postulating the existence of a set of abstract principles and axioms common to all languages. He convincingly claims that these principles and axioms are genetically determined, and they are collectively referred to as Universal Grammar (UG). As for the methodology of foreign language learning and teaching, he once wrote as follows. Notice that the pedagogical situation of English teaching in Puerto Rico is no different than the situation in Japan.³

I was once invited to Puerto Rico by people at the university. They wanted me to talk about linguistics but also to look at the language programs in the schools. Well, in Puerto Rico everyone speaks Spanish, but they have to learn English. Now at that time every child went to school for twelve years. They were taught English five days a week for twelve years, and when they came out, they couldn't say "How are you?" In fact, I might say that the only people that a non-Spanish speaker could talk to in Puerto Rico at that time were older people who hadn't been to school. So, what was happening?

Well, my wife and I were taken to some of the schools to see what was happening, and we found that they were teaching English according to the latest scientific theories. These latest advanced scientific

theories at that time said that language is a habit system, and the way you learn language is by just learning the habits. So it is kind of like catching a ball or something like that. You just keep doing it, over and over again until you get good at it. They used a system that they called pattern practice. You have a certain linguistic pattern, and you just repeat it over and over again. Well, the thing that is most obvious about these methods is that they are so boring that they put you to sleep in about three minutes. So when you go into the classroom you see that the children are looking out of the window or throwing things at the teacher or something like that. They may be paying enough attention so that they can repeat what the teacher wants them to say, but it's clear that they are going to forget it three minutes later. Well, that goes on for twelve years, five days a week, and the results are predictably close to zero.

The truth of the matter is that about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material. Then the other 1 percent has to do with your methods. And that's not just true of languages. It's true of every subject. We've all gone to schools and colleges, and you all know that you have taken courses in school where you have learned enough to pass the exam, and then a week later you forget what the subject was. Well, that's the problem. Learning doesn't achieve lasting results when you don't see any point to it. Learning has to come from the inside; you have to want to learn. If you want to learn, you'll learn no matter how bad the methods are.

The most significant linchpin of this passage is that Chomsky is severely criticizing behaviorism, which was most comprehensively advocated by B. F. Skinner.⁴ Namely, the mere repetition of a pile of boring exercises, Chomsky asserts, will absolutely make students sick of learning English. When it comes to learning languages, it is important to have recourse to the linguistic intuition of each person at every step of it, even in L2 learning.

Another serious problem with the traditional English teaching method in Japan is that it has put too much stress on the precise word-for-word translation of English into Japanese.⁵ The obvious result is that, even when we read simple and plain English, we have been led to think in Japanese, not in English. Quite unfortunately, we have not been properly trained to read English as it is, and to think in English directly.

Let me put it another way; taking even a cursory look at Japanese current educational system of English teaching, we are quickly astounded that so much emphasis is placed on improving students' reading and writing ability. I would argue that this is being done at the expense of nourishing students' speaking ability. In fact, ESL/EFL students are not actually tested on their ability to communicate using English, but on their scrupulousness of translating English into Japanese.⁶ Teachers are certainly to blame. Most of them are as traditional as ever, and do not hope to shift with the change of various kinds of requirements from real society. All they do in a classroom is to teach their students how to translate English into Japanese by means of every detail of English grammar, and to have them choose one correct answer to each question as quickly as possible. Moreover, they seldom request their students to pronounce clearly and correctly. In other words, they are completely neglecting communication-oriented English teaching method based on the clear pronunciation of each English word.

Now I remember that I once read a very funny joke somewhere about a centipede and a grasshopper. The humorous story goes as follows. One day a grasshopper was watching a centipede walking along the alley. He was completely astonished to see so many feet of the centipede moving forward seemingly at the same time and finally could not help asking such a silly question.

“Which foot do you move first and which one after which?” The centipede was so puzzled and embarrassed by such an unusual question that he dropped into deep thought and he could not make a step at all. The instant he put one foot forward finally, he became so confounded that he stumbled, fell into a filthy ditch, and got soaked to the bone.

I often feel that this centipede closely resembles those Japanese ESL/EFL students who are permanently vexed by every fine detail of prescriptive grammar when they write or speak English and who wind up being completely stuck for words. Granting that, for anyone learning any foreign language, it is certainly necessary to learn a certain number of fundamental rules of prescriptive grammar. If we rely too heavily on a knowledge of such grammar, however, we will definitely end up not seeing the forest for the trees.

Let me give you a very simple example. If we come across the following two phrases at different occasions, i.e. “go to the jail” at some occasions and “go to jail” at other occasions, it is recommended that we avoid thinking too much which is correct and which is incorrect. Instead of taking time to think, we should keep on telling ourselves that both usage may be on the right track, and should try not to brood it over too much. In other words, it is desirable that we humbly admit both specimens and go on learning English.

To put it another way, we never seem to learn when to use the definite article “the” and when not to merely by reading a prescriptive grammar book. Instead of trying to memorize as many grammar rules as possible, I would strongly suggest that ESL/EFL students read as various kinds of books and magazines as possible and try to learn as many specimens as possible which contain the proper use of the definite article “the” in a given context. It is predominantly through sufficient amount of exposure to the English language of any kind that we will get to develop a keen insight into English which will convert our book-based knowledge of English into our actual speech and writing.

Since we have been so coherently and robustly conditioned to give or select only one answer to each question in order to earn high marks in every type of English examination, we just can't help feeling that there is only one correct answer to each question in this world. But this is not the correct way to study English. It goes without saying that English is one of the human languages, and that a human language is undoubtedly a living thing. It varies from one situation to another, one occasion to another, and one person to another. Why do we not observe it as it changes? Why not accept it as it is? Why not learn it as it is? Actually, there is a good way to do so. The best bet is to get on-line with those people sharing the same interests and concerns with us.

The computer network-based language teaching and learning might be a great help to any language learner. It includes the use of the Internet, local area networks, or other forms of electronic communication, which have developed immediately and immensely in the 1990s and in the new millennium. It could safely be said that we can especially take advantage of the e-mails and the Internet chats for the purpose of learning and teaching English. We get to make friends with a lot of English-speaking people through these electronic media. Just getting acquainted with foreigners is extremely important for the Japanese simply because we have been completely surrounded by the ocean and have been doomed to be isolated from other nations or races from the viewpoint of communication. We can also get a chance to learn

English as it is through a virtual experience of communication with foreigners on the network. Undoubtedly, this will have a lot of significant pedagogical implications for English teaching in Japan. In the next section of this article, I will go into details about the useful points of the Internet chat.

As a concluding remark for this section, I would strongly like to encourage Japanese ESL/EFL students, saying as follows. "Let the study of English grammar greatly serve you! It will necessarily give you a breakthrough in the process of acquiring English. I sincerely hope that you will not let it intimidate yourselves so much that you will remain as a stumbling centipede in the episode just mentioned."

3. The Internet-based English Learning and Teaching

In the preceding section it is indicated that making use of the e-mail exchange and the online chat⁷ is extremely beneficial for the English language learning and teaching, especially if students have very few opportunities to use English in daily situations in such a country as Japan, which is surrounded by the sea. I will persuasively present some additional justifications for making the most of chat websites and some other resources on the Internet in which we can bask now to a great extent.

It is commonly acknowledged that, with the immediate and worldwide expansion of the Internet in the 1990s and in the new millennium, there have been increasing opportunities to have a better command of English via a wide variety of Internet resources. The most crucial characterization of the Internet in the light of language education is that it has no country boundary, so this is especially of great use for people like the Japanese because we are completely surrounded by the ocean and have been destined to be separated from other races or nations in terms of communication. The Internet always enables us to get a chance to learn English through a virtual experience of communication with foreigners all over the world. There is no doubt that this has and will have a lot of tremendous pedagogical implications for English teaching in Japan, not only vis-à-vis the higher education but also vis-à-vis the education at junior or senior high school.

So, what shall we begin with? One of the Internet activities people have found predominantly useful for English language students is the new type of real-time communication called the Internet chat. All you do is type a message that can simultaneously be read on other computer screens. To make a confession, I myself often recommend my students to get on-line to have the Internet chat in English. As a matter of fact, there is a broad array of websites at which to have a chat on the Internet for people with different interests and concerns. You name it, the Internet has got it. Some of these websites are specifically targeted for people studying English as a second or foreign language, providing opportunities for them to communicate in English. Online real-time chats are generally recognized to be more beneficial for language learners than e-mail exchanges in the sense that they require quick and instant responses, just like real face-to-face human interactions. In what follows, I will occupy myself with positively discussing the significant parts that human interaction plays in language learning and teaching.

Through analyzing the various kinds of researches and theoretical treatments of the role of human interaction in language learning, I have come to a conclusion, basically in accordance

with Ellis (1986), that the combination of language input and human interaction exercises great influences on second language (L2) learning. Below is the listing of the eight characteristics of language input and human interaction which are likely to promote the rapid L2 learning:

1. A high quantity of input directed at the learner
2. The learner's perceived need to communicate in the L2
3. Independent control of the propositional content by the learner (e.g., control over the topic choice)
4. Adherence to the "here and now" principle, at least initially
5. The performance of a range of speech acts by both the native speaker/teacher and the learner (i.e., the learner needs the opportunity to listen to and to produce language used to perform different language functions)
6. Exposure to a high quantity of directives
7. Exposure to a high quantity of "extending" utterances, (e.g., requests for clarification and confirmation, paraphrases and expansions)
8. Opportunities for uninhibited "practice" (which may provide opportunities to experiment using "new" forms)

Therefore, human interactions undoubtedly play crucial parts in language learning. It is generally acknowledged that the more ESL/EFL students get human interactions, the more they have opportunities to learn languages, and that the more ESL/EFL students learn languages, the more they will entreat language inputs so that they can learn more languages. So this is truly the chain reaction effect of human language learning. However, for ESL/EFL students in a country where the target language (i.e. English) is a foreign language, there is little opportunity to have human interaction of any kind. Moreover, it is a shame that language learners in a foreign language situation may have difficulty viewing English as a means of communication. In other words, the main aim of ESL/EFL students' language production is to get high marks in the imminent English examinations of any kind, not to clearly express their views and ideas. Believe it or not, even language students who live in a country where the target language is actually spoken may find the face-to-face interaction stressful or intimidating. Online real-time chat, therefore, should be regarded as a significant source of human interactions for ESL/EFL students unfortunately placed in these situations.

For any ESL/EFL student who wish to make the most of human interaction to make better their language proficiency, the Internet provides an extremely important opportunity to do so. Roughly speaking, there are two types of online chat website. The first type might be properly referred to as unadulterated chat websites, namely, chat websites that are used only for chatting. Some of the famous examples of such a website include:

- <http://www.eslcafe.com/>
[ESL Chat Central at Dave's ESL Cafe]
- <http://www.thescec.com/aloud/home.htm>
[Aloud! - Free online practice site for English conversation.]
- <http://chat.englishclub.com/>

[English CLUB Chat - English chat room for EFL/ESL students and teachers. Group chats or person-to-person.]

The good point with such websites is that they are easy to get used to and make use of. All you have to do is just type the words you want to say in a box, and you are all set.

The second type of chat website is called a MOO, which can be characterized as a text-based virtual world since its connection is usually done via telnet. In addition to chatting, we can revel other activities at such a website. One serious problem with using a MOO is that we need to learn the commands in order to have a chat, get around on the website, and so forth. However, once we get into it, there is a even greater variety of things to do in a MOO than at a website that is used exclusively for a real chat. The most famous example of such a website is SchMOOze University. Interested readers are referred to the following websites for further information on SchMOOze University:

● SchMOOze University

- <http://schmooze.hunter.cuny.edu/test.html>
- <http://members.tripod.co.jp/schmooze/JPN/index.html>
- <http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej16/m2.html>
- <http://www.linguistic-funland.com/language.muds.html>

It goes without saying that it is generally planned for people studying English as a second or foreign language and any other people who are earnestly interested in languages and cross-cultural communication. Since it is designed as a university campus, it is likely that you will have an access to language games, an on-line dictionary, virtual stockbroker and many language games as well as opportunities for one-on-one and group conversations.

4. Conclusion

As a concluding remark, I would like to summarize what I have convincingly claimed in this article; namely, the online chat is a tremendously splendid opportunity for ESL/EFL students to avail themselves of brisk human interactions to improve their command of English. It gives them a full array of virtual experiences of communication that would be definitely impossible without the immediate and worldwide spread of the Internet in the 1990s and in the new millennium.

Notes

1. As is well-known, there are seven former imperial universities in Japan, i.e., Tokyo University, Kyoto University, Nagoya University, Osaka University, Tohoku University, Hokkaido University, and Kyushu University. The competition in their entrance examinations is very

- cutthroat and their graduates are generally acknowledge themselves as elites in society. Therefore, these universities might be tagged as Japan's Ivy League universities. Some other big-name brand universities in Japan include Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Waseda University, Keio University, Tsukuba University, Hiroshima University, etc.
2. As is widely known, this particular theory of linguistics is usually referred to as generative grammar. It started when Chomsky's seminal and revolutionary work called *Syntactic Structures* was published in 1957. Although its theory has changed very drastically in these 45 years, there is absolutely nothing comparable to it in terms of its strong impact on the methodology of English teaching at Japanese schools especially in 1960s and 1970s as well as its theoretical insight and sharpness. See Chomsky 1957 and his other numerous works following it.
 3. This is cited from Chomsky (1988). This book is practically a lecture note with which he delivered a series of lectures at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in Managua, at the invitation from Rector César Jerez, S. J.
 4. Ever since Noam Chomsky's devastating critique of B. F. Skinner's behaviourist account of language acquisition, linguists have generally rejected behaviourism in favour of mentalism. For further information, see Chomsky (1967).
 5. Note that here I am not neglecting the precise word-for-word translation of English into Japanese. I myself think very highly of the precise word-for-word translation, so my advice in the text is specifically intended for those students who are completely entangled by the seemingly complex structure of English.
 6. Proper evaluation of students' ability of English is very difficult and complicated. It takes time to give effective solutions to this problem. Therefore, I will not go into any more detail on this matter here.
 7. Needless to say, this means the real-time communication via the Internet.

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平成14年（2002）10月3日受理

平成14年（2002）12月25日発行