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**REFLECTIONS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN
JAPAN: AN INSIDER'S VIEW**

ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to share some points the writer considers important about English language education in Japan, especially college English education. In relation to modern Japanese society where globalization or internationalization is often the focus of public attention, English education is one of the hot issues discussed among educators and people concerned. In this trend, this paper shall address some issues in Japanese English education, some ideological ideas to approach it, and especially a recommendable approach for Japanese college students to learn English from the writer's viewpoint who has engaged in it for a long time. In his words, creating an English learning environment enjoyable for individual English learners is a key to improving their English skills.

Keywords: College English education, Creating an English learning environment, Improving English skills, Learning English enjoyably every day.

Japan as an island country has looked fixedly overseas to advance its national strengths since the Meiji period when the national isolation policy was abolished (from 1858AD). Especially since the beginning of the 21st century, “globalization” or “internationalization” has been a focus of public attention in modern Japanese society. We can see this phenomenon in the fields of media, politics, economics, education, culture and so on. Japan, which is facing a low birth rate and an aging population with limited natural resources, must continue to find new business opportunities overseas in order to maintain its national power. Its economic scale in the future is likely to shrink if it depends only on the domestic economy. Some big corporations are trying to globalize through expanding their business internationally and using English as their official

language. The Japanese government basically agreed to TPP¹ in October, 2015, and it is very active in trying to attract foreign tourists by the joint effort of the public and private sectors. Japan takes part in global efforts to ease various conflicts and wars around the globe. More importantly for the topic of English language education, Japan is trying to produce young people who can play an active role not only in Japanese society but also in the world community. Under these circumstances, Japan invests time and effort to provide effective foreign language education, especially English education. In the past few years, in addition to junior and senior high schools, elementary schools started teaching English as compulsory language courses to 5th and 6th graders.

However, is it truly necessary for “all Japanese people” to master English? My answer is “no”. To do so is almost impossible, and the effort to make it happen may be unfruitful. The reason is that Japan has its own wonderful language, and a culture based on it, something which is praised these days as “Cool Japan”. Japanese people do not have to discard the Japanese language deeply rooted in its culture. To discard the Japanese language—where does this idea come from? It may come from the idea that in order for all Japanese people to be able to speak English, the creation of an environment in which only

¹ TPP: Trans-Pacific Partnership. Foreign Minister Kishida states, “The TPP Agreement would not only further promote trade, and investment in the Asia-Pacific region ... but it would also further strengthen relations with the countries in this region through building a new economic order, and thus has substantial strategic significance for sharing prosperity” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, October 6, 2015).

English is allowed is essential. As mentioned earlier, however, it is not necessary for all Japanese people neither to master English nor to discard the Japanese language altogether, even in the globalized world. In terms of language, it is easy to live in Japan if people can use the Japanese language. In other words, generally speaking, there exist people who think that English is necessary in Japan, as well as people who think otherwise².

Then, based on these suppositions, what kind of English language education is expected in Japan? Before discussing this question, one more matter needs to be addressed. That is, what kind of people are they who think that English is necessary and those who don't? In the writer's opinion, they can be classified into three groups: (1) those who do not have international interests at all, (2) those who have some interests in international matters, but who do not have any clues as to how to pay attention to them at the same time, and (3) those who have international interests³. If my presumptions about them are correct, there are also three measures to be taken.

² Many Japanese people think that they wish they could use English well. There are strong ideas that people who can use English well are cool, and that people can interact with people from different countries and expand their boundaries if they can use English well. These ideas do not necessarily lead to the situations in which people carry out English learning or they strive to master English without fail. These ideas are often just faint wishes.

³ To be clear, holding international interests do not always mean that people need English. There are of course many people who learn languages other than English (e.g., Asian languages, European languages and African languages). As the basic assumption in this article, however, we consider that those who think they need English have international interests.

For group (1) English language education is not a *must*. Basically, it is good enough for them to focus on their work, interests, and something into which they can put their passion⁴. Therefore, this group will be excluded from our present discussion.

Next, although English language education is necessary and profitable for group (2) and (3) in a broad sense, we should have different approaches to these groups. The future of Japanese English language education depends on how to approach these two different groups. The writer's own thoughts as to how to approach them will be presented in the following ways.

We should *create an English learning environment (ELE) enjoyable for individual English learners*. First, for group (2), motivating them towards English learning is essential. Concerning this issue, some thoughts will be given mainly in section 1 "Some issues in English language education in Japan" and section 2 "Several points to consider about college English education". Subsequently, section 3 "How to learn English" will be written aiming at both groups (2) and (3).

⁴ Of course, it goes without saying that they have freedom to choose to do so or not.

1. Some Issues in English Language Education in Japan

There are various issues in college English education (CEE) in Japan (for example, see Cripps 2015). However, the writer shall focus especially on two problems in this section to develop his arguments.

First, normally it takes a lot of time to master a language. In the case of the first language, a person is exposed to it continuously since his/her birth. That is why the person gets to use it sufficiently. On the other hand, it is not the case with a foreign language. The English teaching (class) hours in the six-year period of junior and senior high schools were approximately 840 hours in total in 2010 (Honda, 2010), and English classes are normally conducted in Japanese as the medium language. Moreover, it has been said for a long time that English education for Japanese students focuses mainly on their reading and writing skills and vocabulary building, if not translation, in order to prepare them for entrance examinations to universities. In response to these situations, recently, some English activities are introduced in classroom for students in lower grades in elementary schools, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) plans to teach English as compulsory language courses from the 3rd grade in the near future, in addition to the current English courses for the 5th and 6th graders. Communication skills get one of the main attentions in this plan. However, perhaps it will be some time later when this new education system starts getting some desired results. At any rate, if it takes

a lot of time to master English, there must be some good ways for English learners to engage in English for concentrated and extended periods of time in everyday life. This will be discussed in section 3 “How to learn English”.

Second, most Japanese people are not good at English. In Japan, the duration in which students can study English in the school education period until the graduation from university may be from 8 to 12 years, depending on their situations. According to an Internet survey conducted on job-hunting students, only 24.3 per cent of them answered affirmatively to the question: Do you have total/some confidence in your English skills?⁵ It means that the confidence about English that Japanese people have is not so high, even including their learning period provided by higher education institutions. To put it the other way around, three quarters of the students feel inferiority towards English in some way or other. Why is that? It is because there are not so many opportunities to use English in Japan⁶, and Japan is a country where people can live without using English. It is also because they do not often obtain confirmation and assurance in using their English properly/fluently even if they can actually speak it, in addition to their lack of work experience in English and their doubt as to

⁵ The survey collected data from 1,095 graduating students who wished to get jobs in April, 2012 (Business Media Makoto, 2011).

⁶ For a similar example, see Sugita (2008, p. 81).

whether they make sense or not in English. Then, how can Japanese people have confidence in using English? This question will also be discussed in section 3.

2. Several Points to Consider about College English Education (CEE)

Since the writer is currently teaching English at a Japanese university, English language education, especially in terms of CEE, will be scrutinized from this section onward. Nevertheless, as there is a lot to cover in terms of content concerning CEE, the writer will limit himself to discussing the following topics in this paper: understanding the purpose of studying English, differences in improving English skills, overcoming an awareness that students are not good at English, challenges in measuring the improvement of students' English, global human resources, and English teachers.

2.1. Understanding the Purpose of Studying English

CEE normally starts from the very first semester at college, and it is essential for students to understand the purpose of studying English — why they should learn English —, and to realize its necessity positively⁷. However, this is not always the case.

⁷ The college to which the writer belongs, tries to let new enrolling students know the purpose and importance of studying English through its English learning handbook and English program guidance sessions for them (approximately 900 students) at the beginning of the first semester.

In the current Japanese education system, high school students who wish to enter universities endeavor to study to pass entrance examinations⁸. Because of this, the questions as to why they study in the first place and why they should learn English are often temporarily put aside. Recently, the tendency of “late specialization” prevails among young people, which hinders them in finding an answer to the question as to what their specialties are, what they would like to do in the future, or what kind of job they would like to do. Accordingly, it may be understandable that they do not fully perceive the necessity or purpose to study specific subjects (e.g., English) at the stage of finding their career plans even after starting their college life. It is more important for them to determine their specialized fields and to design their career plans than just to study specific subjects. On the other hand, once they are able to lay out their career plans, they tend to have a high motivation to study not only English but also other specialized subjects. If that is the case, it is imperative to provide meaningful introductory courses in college education and to help them to make their career plans at the same time.

Furthermore, it can be pointed out as a characteristic of new enrolling students these days that most students come to universities with various interests and concerns, academically (and socially). There are those who think highly of

⁸ The following discussions are based on the writer's views written in a document, which later became part of an official college document regarding its academic affairs (College of Social Sciences, 2015, pp. 237-238).

English or other language studies as well as those who think highly of other non-language subjects and skills. Hence, among the latter, there are many students who wish to see their improvement in other knowledge and skills, not in English learning. Consequently, there is no need to let *all students* realize the purpose of studying English. Important points for CEE with regard to students are as follows: According to their needs, it should provide an effective English program to improve their English skills for those who think highly of English learning throughout the college education period. For students who think otherwise, it is good enough to take the required credits for English courses, in addition to tackle their own studies actively which are aimed at their career plans and interests⁹. Plainly speaking, those who need to understand the purpose of studying English are those students who think highly of English learning.

2.2. Differences in Improving English Skills

Once students understand the purpose of studying English, they generally try to equip themselves with English skills. However, some great differences can be seen even among them in terms of improvements in their command of

⁹ Among the students, there may be people who belong to group (1) (those who do not have international interests at all). However, though there are differences in the number of required credits, most students, if not all, must study English courses in spite of their interests, because, commonly, English courses are compulsory at Japanese universities. In such cases, the main purpose for these students to study English courses is to get the required credits and to be exposed to English to a certain extent.

English¹⁰. Why is that? In the writer's opinion, in order to improve their English skills, both "motivation" and "diligence" are necessary¹¹. As mentioned earlier, the clearer their interests and career plans are, the higher their motivation becomes. They may be more motivated when they are exposed to different cultures through international interaction and studying abroad, or when they start thinking about working at international organizations, global corporations, NGOs, or about becoming travel agents or cabin attendants and so forth. Naturally those who are highly motivated tend to improve their English. On the other hand, simply having motivation to study English more does not automatically lead to improving their English ability in reality. Since English is a language, the learners need diligence to study it every day constantly through repetitive work. After all, those students who study English with this diligence and actually use it most likely become proficient in English. This accounts for the differences in the improvement of their English ability.

2.3. Overcoming an Awareness that Students are not Good at English

There are some students who do not realize their English skills have improved, even when they are actually making good progress. Why is this? It is

¹⁰ For an example of this aspect, see Mori 2008.

¹¹ The following discussion also comes from the writer's views written in the forementioned document (College of Social Sciences, 2015, p. 238).

because they do not think that they have a good command of English, especially in communicative (speaking) skills¹². They think that they are not able to communicate fluently with native English speakers in English in their daily life. So they hold a strong awareness that they have poor communication skills. However, as they have studied English for a long time, they should try to use English actively and willingly with more confidence, even if they cannot speak fluently or they make mistakes. CEE should, in the writer's view, stress this point.

Looking back at the writer's own experience, there are many "perfectionists" among Japanese people, including himself, in using English. For instance, these people determine not to speak English until their pronunciation becomes perfect like native speakers. They decide not to use English until they can utilize their English grammar in a perfect manner. They determine not to initiate English conversations until they can obtain not childish words but sophisticated vocabulary. It is not "cool" when people talk in broken English. Probably many Japanese people think that way. Of course, it is best if they can speak English perfectly. However, we sometimes make mistakes even in speaking our mother tongue. It is even more so with English, for it is a foreign language for Japanese people. It is a natural matter that Japanese people

¹² On this point, also see the writer's view (College of Social Sciences, 2015, p. 238).

cannot speak English well. It is a misunderstanding that nobody cannot start speaking English until his/her English becomes perfect.

In relation to this, the writer often gives the following messages to his students: “Do not be afraid of making mistakes when you learn English”, “Rather, learn from your mistakes”, and “Improve your English skills even by being embarrassed”. It is the shortest way to become proficient in English by not repeating similar kinds of mistakes.

In addition, our globalized society can be considered as being situated in an era of “World Englishes”. There is not only one English, but there are many Englishes used everywhere on the globe with a variety of pronunciation and grammar. Accordingly, Japanese college students should use English willingly with confidence, not being afraid of making mistakes and not getting caught up in minutiae, in order to brush up their English communication skills in the exchange of opinions and transmission of information, and so forth. In short, they are expected to discard their awareness that they are not good at English.

2.4. Challenges in Measuring the Improvement of Students’ English

It is a very difficult issue in higher education in general to measure the educational effects of not only an English program but also of any educational program as a whole at each university. Other than English learners perceiving (sensuously) their improvements in English, how can we measure the progress

of their improvement in a tangible way? So to speak, it is the issue of “visualization”. MEXT and the business community recommend any methods to be acknowledged by the general public or methods to measure the advancement of their English levels numerically such as through TOEIC/TOEFL tests¹³. They consider that the methods used only in a closed community such as colleges are not good enough.

However, as mentioned previously, this is a very troublesome problem¹⁴. Especially the educational effects of English education must be evaluated not only by numerical (quantitative) methods but also by qualitative methods¹⁵. Also it is necessary to measure accurately the entry English levels of the enrolling students in order to see their progress in a later stage. To the writer’s knowledge, however, there are only a couple of methods to do this in the current college education system in Japan, such as placement (writing) tests which can evaluate their English skills partially, or the results of entrance examinations of English. Besides, as a partial measurement, it might be theoretically possible for teachers to analyze the levels of individual students in their English classes at the

¹³ The materials about the “Top Global University Project” initiated by MEXT in 2014, indicate such a trend as well (for this project, see footnote 20).

¹⁴ The following discussions come from the writer’s views written in the forementioned document (College of Social Sciences, 2015, p. 239).

¹⁵ Some examples are as follows: Interview survey on current students about language education, and research on the correlations between language education and great successes of OBs/OGs who studied it.

beginning of the first semester. It is doubtful, however, to do so sufficiently because of the class size¹⁶ or because of a tight class schedule to achieve the goals of individual English courses¹⁷. With regard to the students who have received passive English education until their entrance to universities, there are hardly any students who can rightly assess their English advancement after studying in CEE, with the accurate knowledge of their English levels at the start of the first semester.

On the other hand, even in such a situation, it is a fact that the college to which the writer belongs and some other university committees/divisions¹⁸, seek to comprehend the improvement of students' English skills and their sense of achievement in their studies as much as possible. For instance, their endeavors indicate the students' learning environments and progress assessments through the following devices: analysis of academic assessments of English courses, analysis of and responses to the number of failing students, analysis of the achievement tests such as TOEIC/TOEFL, implementation of students'

¹⁶ There are approximately 35 students per English class in the college where the writer teaches.

¹⁷ Moreover, there exist more challenges even if the level analysis of individual students is possible, for instance, some differences in teachers' teaching abilities and "norming" or "standardizing assessment" issues which may minimize some differences mentioned just above.

¹⁸ The writer's university consists of 13 colleges (as of 2015 academic year). In addition to some inter-faculty committees/divisions such as Academic Policy Council and Language Education Center, each college has its own Curriculum and Programs Committee.

questionnaires about their English classes at the end of each semester as well as of students' questionnaires about English programs in general, feedback from English teachers' meetings, research on students' study habits, academic counselling, reports of academic affairs and students affairs in each college, activities of students' bodies and so on.

Some of the results are indicative of the followings (which show some effects on students who take regular English courses): overcoming hesitancy to use English, more motivation to study English, increasing interest in globalization, eagerness to participate in overseas exchange programs and so forth. In fact, there appear those students who say: "Although at the beginning of the new semester we were at a loss in English courses conducted only in English¹⁹, we got to understand what our teachers say and instruct in the latter part of the semester." "We became able to finish our classwork/homework finally". Those students also appear who realize the improvement of their English skills by looking at the scores of achievement tests, or, in contrast, who deeply reflect on their study methods by knowing their declining test scores.

In this way, measuring the improvement of their English is not so easy. However, Japanese universities should continue to do this for their English education, because it is an essential factor to maintain an effective and attractive

¹⁹ The writer's college offers English courses, normally using English as the medium language.

English program. Particularly those universities which participate in the Top Global University Project²⁰ are being observed by MEXT and society, and they are expected to make changes in the following two areas: (a) In the numerical indexical arena: at least the one-fifth of their college courses to be offered in English, the reception of international students into their college education, increasing the number of exchange students who study abroad, joint research with overseas research institutions, increasing the number of foreign faculty members, improvements in the ranking of universities in the world, and so forth. (b) In the qualitative indexical arena: the internationalization of the campus, the changes on campus, including the changes in students and faculty members, which can be visualized, and so on (Nihon Hoso Kyokai, April 22, 2015). Nevertheless, at present, there appears to be almost no agreement as to how to evaluate such changes in the qualitative indexical arena.

2.5. Global Human Resources

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, “globalization” is one of the key words to understand the modern times. Especially in Japan, globalization is closely connected to CEE. Many universities have targeted the development of

²⁰ “‘Top Global University Project’ is established as a way to give financial support to 37 public and private universities aiming to promote comprehensive internationalization and become world-class research and education institutions” (Ritsumeikan University, September 26, 2014).

global human resources as one of their goals, and Japanese society, including the business community, expect universities to play such a role. In this situation, we know that global human resources do not simply denote people who are very fluent in foreign languages such as English. In fact, “global human resources” have a wide variety of definitions: people who are able to bridge two or more nations, people who are interested in international issues/problems and who can suggest some possible solutions for them, people who can rediscover some usefulness of their knowledge and skills somewhere in the world, and so forth²¹.

In relation to the development of global human resources at universities, the writer’s own views will be described concerning the motivation to learn English aiming at group (2)²². For them, it may cultivate a good motivation to learn English that a university may develop various operations and academic courses to help them to acquire international eyes/perspectives and to bring a paradigm shift (change) in their thoughts. Although a detailed discussion cannot be made here about such operations and academic courses due to space constraints, some essential points will be shared below.

²¹ According to the survey mentioned in footnote 5, many students answered “language ability”, “English proficiency”, or “communication skills”, to the question as to what kind of skills/qualities are necessary in order to be global human resources. In more elaborate terms, they mentioned “the communication ability to convey their intentions/opinions to other people clearly, in addition to (English) language skills”, “having no stereotype towards people’s identities in terms of their cultures, races, and thoughts”, and “having a positive spirit or spirit of challenge which enable them to try to do anything”.

²² Group (2) are those people (students) who have some interests in international matters, but who do not have any ideas as to how to pay attention to them at the same time.

First of all, the writer would like to define global human resources as *people who can play an active role in the international society, including Japan, based on sound self-understanding and sound understanding of others with a fluent foreign language*. As an approach to become such global human resources, the writer wishes to suggest (to his students): Let's have a "global vision" to widen our world (even) in Japan. Global vision here means the following three actions, which can be carried out even if students continue to stay in Japan.

- a) To recognize the standpoints of Japan and yourself in the world as well as to become knowledgeable about world affairs. In order to do so;
 - i) Know your own good points and weak points. This nurtures sound self-understanding.
 - ii) Know Japanese history, culture and academics (to understand them correctly, to recognize their significance, and to be aware of their potential). This nurtures a sound understanding of Japan.
 - iii) Know your interested country with its history, culture and academics (to understand them correctly, to recognize their significance, and to be aware of their potential). This nurtures a sound understanding of different cultures.
 - iv) Know various issues in Japan as well as in the world.
- b) Based on (a), to consider what contributions you can make to the local community to which you belong, or to the world as a connected and extended place of your community²³.
- c) Based on (a) and (b), to make a feasible plan by yourself and carry it out²⁴.

²³ In order to think of your possible contributions, it is profitable to research the past contributions made by others. For instance, the contribution made by Chiune Sugihara, a former Japanese Embassy officer to Lithuania, who saved the lives of approximately 6,000 Jews by issuing entry visas to Japan at the beginning of WWII. It is said now that their descendents number more than 250,000.

²⁴ A similar idea is pointed out in a business term, namely "ability to make a comprehensive business plan/concept" (Koshiishi & Saida, 2012, p. 3).

This does not necessarily require you to go overseas, or to make a great action plan. It may be sufficient to have a plan which can be feasible to do in the environment where you currently are²⁵.

If college students are able to have this kind of global vision, it will become a motivation to learn foreign languages such as English. Even if English is not spoken in the countries in which they find their interest, it is good to be able to use English because there are many research materials and information about those countries in English.

2.6. English Teachers

There are additional points to consider regarding CEE, and one of them is teaching in the classroom. Even if we set up a wonderfully ideal English program, it is essential that we have to recruit and keep the teaching staff with high standard who are able to carry out its goals, in order to actually make it work and get desired results. Also, it is important to assign different roles to English teachers, native and Japanese respectively, according to their attributes depending on their situations.

English educators who have high English teaching ability are, in the writer's opinion, those who can grasp the content of a college English program

²⁵ For instance, if you are a college student, you can have a talk with people who share the same concerns in/outside your college. Or, it is meaningful to have interactions between Japanese students and international students. It might lead to a good motivation to study English.

firmly and achieve its goals²⁶. In other words, that ability is indicative of the ability to assess the English levels and needs of their students; to make and perform effective lesson plans based on both the students' information and the goals of the English program; to motivate their students towards English learning; and to be creative in their teaching materials and class managements, aiming to improve the English skills of their students.

It is essential for universities to hire such competent English teachers continuously for their English education, and it is closely related to all university language education as well as to personnel policy, in addition to college/department policies²⁷. Needless to say, for the recruitment of English teachers, it is viewed as meaningful in terms not only of the number but also of its quality. For this, the screening process should be very careful at the time of recruitment, and some faculty development (FD) plans to help them advance their teaching ability after hiring should not be forgotten²⁸. If they perceive that they are treated just as “pieces” which make up the program, those good teachers may try to leave and find other workplaces. By respecting them as

²⁶ Regardless of their teaching skills, their ability cannot be viewed as high from the stand point of the program as a whole, if they teach only in their own fashion and they cannot make contributions to the goals of the English program in which they work.

²⁷ For this aspect, see the writer's views (College of Social Sciences, 2015, p. 239).

²⁸ Some of the examples are FD workshops or seminars to improve their teaching ability, and the establishment of teaching community to help build smooth communication and cooperation between teachers (College of Social Sciences, 2015, p. 240).

English educators and by helping them to become more professional in what they do, to hold the win-win relationships between the college and the teachers may be a key to maintaining a good English program.

There are English native speakers and Japanese teachers of English among the English teaching staff at Japanese universities. Although normally they are given the same role to teach English to their students, it is sometimes important to assign different roles to them according to their attributes in enhancing their educational effectiveness. In CEE, there are a variety of class types such as classes which focus mainly on translation work, skill-based classes, content-based classes, project-based classes, ICT classes and so on. Though sometimes the class types depend on teachers' specialties, whether English native speakers or Japanese teachers should be assigned to a certain class depends on these class types. For instance, translation-centered classes are taught by Japanese teachers of English in many cases. Or, there are cases in which students' English levels may determine their class types. For example, if their English level is high, the class may be taught by English native teachers, and if that is low, the class by Japanese teachers of English. Those classes may be set up according to the differences of their attributes to be mentioned in the next paragraph, but one criterion is whether the educational effect may be increased or not if the students are supported by the use of Japanese as the medium language in class.

Concerning the differences of their attributes between English native teachers and Japanese teachers of English, generally speaking, the former is good at pronunciation as well as at teaching English with a good grasp of the differences of the subtle nuances of English words or sentences (utterances). It is because Japanese teachers, who mastered English as a second language, may not be fully aware of such differences of subtle nuances in particular idioms or in particular speech situations²⁹. It is no coincidence that recently some English learning books are being published actively with such titles of “Native English speakers do not say so”³⁰. On the other hand, Japanese teachers can identify with the students who feel difficulty in learning English, for they themselves may have experienced such difficulty or struggle to learn the second foreign language such as English. Or, they may be able to convey their valuable experiences or methods to win the struggle. On this point, it might be difficult to understand such struggles for English native teachers who acquire English naturally. In this way, to assign different roles to native and Japanese English teachers respectively according to their attributes may be instructive in increasing the educational effectiveness.

²⁹ Recently, English teaching methods, from the perspective of Pragmatics which studies the use of language in particular speech situations, gradually gain some attentions. For example, see Ito (2004), Suzuki (2012), and Ishihara & Cohen (2015).

³⁰ For example, see Onishi & McVay (2005), Sakuma (2013), and Thayne (2015).

3. How to Learn English

So far, we have discussed “Some issues in English language education in Japan (section 1)” and “Several points to consider about college English education (section 2)”. In the light of these discussions, concerning a recommendable method and tips to improve the English skills of Japanese people, especially Japanese college students, the writer shall share some of the main points, as someone who has engaged in CEE for a long time. First he shall talk about the method he proposes, and then about some tips to improve students’ English skills.

3.1. Creating an English Learning Environment (ELE) Enjoyable for English Learners

For the purpose of improving students’ English skills, once again, it may be a good method *to create an ELE enjoyable for individual English learners*³¹. This environment is expected to be built by the collaboration of three bodies, namely students, English teachers and their college. Concrete examples are illustrated as follows.

- a) To offer and to take good compulsory English courses (including the instructions for self-study for those courses).
- b) To offer and to take attractive elective English courses.

³¹ The following suggestions are based on the writer’s monology in his profile (Ito, 2007, The message section).

- c) To recommend and take English courses offered by partner universities.
- d) To participate in a variety of study abroad programs (short term/long term).
- e) To participate in extracurricular activities.
 - i) E-learning
 - ii) Circle activities in relation to English
 - iii) Exchange/interactions with international students or foreign people living in Japan
 - iv) Living with English speakers (e.g., dormitories, shared houses)
 - v) English seminars/symposiums or international conferences
 - vi) Acquisition of various English qualifications (including TOEIC/TOEFL/IELTS/Eiken, etc.)
 - vii) To create an ELE through news (watching/listening) and hobbies such as movies, sports, and music.

Examples (a) and (b) are offered as curricular courses in various class types such as skill-based classes, content-based classes, and project-based classes. Example (c) indicates official exchange programs with a credit transfer system, and example (d) indicates private exchange programs. Example (e) mainly presupposes students' autonomous learning, but they can be offered by the college to their students as well.

The answer to both of the two questions/issues (see below) raised in section 1 is also to create an ELE. That is to say, with respect to the first issue (that if it takes a lot of time to master English, there must be some good ways to be in contact with English for concentrated and extended periods of time), it is good to do all kinds of things to secure the time to be exposed to English, using the

above examples as reference³². Moreover, in regard to the second issue (as to how Japanese people can have confidence in using English), they can start creating their own ELEs, try to spend enough time to use English as much as possible, and build their self-confidence in English in the process.

In brief, it is the writer's argument that one's English skills will be improved without fail if he/she is able to come in contact with English every day, probably starting with college English courses. Note, however, that it may not always be the case *only* if English learners create this kind of environment. In the subsequent section, including this point, some tips to improve students' English ability will be further described.

3.2. Some Tips to Improve Students' English Ability

As a method to improve the English skills of Japanese college students, creating an ELE has been proposed. However, it comes with two observations. The first observation is, needless to say, that nobody is able to conduct *every point* suggested above. Among the concrete examples, it is important, for English learners to find *something they are happy or comfortable to do* with

³² For instance, in order to successfully take English courses or to obtain various English qualifications, one can use his/her commuting time for listening and reading exercises.

their own strengths, and for English teachers to help them to do so³³. This point leads to the second observation.

The second observation is to create an ELE in which they can learn English *enjoyably* every day, and that is essential. Because of the difficulties of learning a foreign language, many people tend to give up in the middle of studying English. It is often troublesome, painful or hard to do. The more time they can come in contact with English, the higher the possibility of improving their English ability becomes. Nevertheless, the harder it becomes, the less time they have for English learning. In the end, some people in the worst scenario become to hate English. Hence, to learn English enjoyably may be a shortcut to become proficient in English. The word “enjoyably” here means literally to enjoy in an active sense, and not to mind or to be able to stand in a passive sense. They are to find such a way and to continue to do it every day³⁴.

At the end of this section, some tips to improve students’ English ability may be juxtaposed as follows:

- a) To get to like English itself, as well as the peoples and cultures of English speaking countries.

³³ Of course, there are instances in which sometimes English learners cannot choose something they are happy to do, such as English compulsory courses.

³⁴ In reality, people get a little tired even of their enjoyable methods as time passes. In such cases, it might be better to make arrangements here and there, or to take some other ways for good. Since four general English skills need to be exercised, it is good to have a variety of methods. In the writer’s case, as he was fond of Western pop/rock music, he made a music playing group with a couple of his friends in his young days, and used to sing English songs. He did not mind remembering the English lyrics because he liked the songs. So he could dip himself in an English atmosphere naturally and enjoyably.

- b) To make friends with English speakers (they do not necessarily have to be English native speakers).
- c) To use a dictionary of the target language (e.g., English-English dictionary) in order to build a strong vocabulary and to learn good examples of expressions.
- d) To pay careful attention to the Japanese language, because the mother tongue is also necessary to improve the skills of foreign languages. In relation to the use of the Japanese language, the higher the English level is, the better students learn English without Japanese. The lower it is, the better they use Japanese to find the meaning of words or to understand English sentences by looking at the translation.
- e) In the higher level, it is way better to understand (input), speak and write (output) English as it is, using no translating nor interpreting work in Japanese in their brains.
- f) To use English with pragmatic competence. When someone has pragmatic competence in English, he/she can understand the unspoken meanings by metaphors or irony. Often there are cases in which English learners can translate them literally, but cannot understand them at all.

CONCLUSION

It is essential to create an ELE in order for Japanese people to improve their English ability. For this, after discussing “Some issues in English language education in Japan (section 1)” and “Several points to consider about college English education (section 2)”, “How to learn English” has been scrutinized in this paper. Especially, to create an ELE enjoyable for individual English learners, in which they are comfortable to learn English every day, is the main argument.

Just so there is no confusion, everything written in this paper cannot of course be attributed to the writer. It is written based on what he has actually

taught at universities, what he has read, his research about English pedagogy, his experiences of studying abroad in the past, and so forth. Also, it is no surprise that all of his thoughts cannot be described due to space constraints. However, he would be grateful if his reflections/thoughts shared in this paper may become some hints to learning English, and make a contribution to Japanese English education, especially CEE.

Although globalization now becomes more vociferous in modern Japanese society, English is just a tool or instrument for communication, as far as English learners who do *not* seek to become researchers of the English language or linguistics are concerned. Accordingly, in such a case the question that English learners in Japan should ask is: How should I improve my English skills to use English? Obviously it is not: Why or how should I study English?

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