

English Conversation Restoration

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英会話教育の再生

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1 Overview

On March 15, 2017, the author presented a speech on English education in Japan to the Hiroshima Japan America Society. This paper is an adaptation of the speech which proposes a two-pillar approach to improving English education in Japan. The first pillar is for educators to formulate suitable learning environments. The second pillar calls for collaboration between two of the major stakeholders of English education in Japan—native-English-speaking educators and their Japanese counterparts. Instituting an improved system of English education could be Japan's English Conversation Restoration.

2 Introduction

What do you call someone who can speak two languages? That person is bilingual. What do you call a person who can speak three or more languages? That person is multilingual. What do you call a person who can speak only one language? That person is an American.

Most Japanese people have not heard this joke of self-deprecating humor used by Americans when trying to laugh away their inability to remember their two years of high-school French. But, despite being a joke, it rings true. Perhaps unbeknownst to the average Japanese person, Americans are infamous for not being able to learn a second language. One reason for this lack of ability could be attributed to lack of willingness at the national level. As pointed out by Sigbee (2002) “In the United States, foreign language learning and its concomitant cultural understandings have never

been high on the nation's educational agenda" (p. 46). Standing on top of that lack of educational foundation is the average American who, prior to foreign travel, often states, " 'I am sure that they speak English over there,' as a reason for not wanting to become familiar with or learn the language of the country" (Mantero, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, the national and individual lack of desire to study a language creates a country where "Less than 1 percent of American adults today are proficient in a foreign language that they studied in a U.S. classroom" (Friedman, 2015, para. 5).

The only reason that indigenous Americans can speak English is that they were born in an English-speaking country. This inaptitude for language teaching/learning also crosses the pond to the British. Therefore, the reason that Japanese people cannot speak English after six years of formal teaching in Japanese schools is because they are asking Americans and British people how to learn a language. A joke? Perhaps. But, the Japanese should stop assuming that simply bringing a native speaker into the classroom will be enough to make the Japanese populace fluent in English.

3 Educational Circumstances

In fact, Japanese people should have pride in their teaching ability. According to the UK online magazine the Independent, Japanese schools are ranked in the top 11¹⁾ schools in the world (Willams-Grut, 2016). Accordingly, Japanese education is not as bad as some Japanese people have come to believe. The number one school of the 11 is Finland. However, this does not mean that Japan should jump to emulate the Finnish education system, either. In a speech entitled *The Curriculum Battleground* given at the University of Bath in July 2016, Dr. Tristian Stobie points out that there is no one solution to education that every country should adopt as "best practice." Specifically, he states that "culture in curriculum and pedagogy and education is hugely important and often undersold. People talk about school cultures and the important of culture, but I don't think that they really, fully understand the implications of engaging local culture" (timestamp, 2:42). Therefore, Japanese educators should make use of their own culture toward creating an educational framework for English. Those who would point out that the Japanese cannot speak English after having studied for six years, should note, "Oral competence is the most difficult skill to develop in Second Language Learning because it is informed by emotional, social and psychological factors" (Molina-Sevilla de Morelock, 2010, p. 212). Additionally, they should look to the Japanese remarkable ability to make amazing advances and 180 degree turns. One

example of such an advancement is the beginning of the Meiji Restoration. Michio Nagai (1969) points out that despite starting later than England and France, “the country was consistently efficient; the industrial revolution was completed by 1910” (p. 396). Thereby, the post-World War I growth of Japan “astonished the world” (p. 397). Perhaps the most drastic 180-degree change was after World War II when Japanese transformed from a society driven by imperialistic military conquest to a peaceful country without a standing military. Naturally, some would say that this only came as a result of their defeat in the war, however, it is rare for a country to change so drastically even in a defeat. Accordingly, Japan should use these powers of restoration to create the ideal circumstance for English education.

What is the ideal circumstance for English education in Japan? The author has an idea which rests on two pillars, but he is not so bold as to think it is “the answer” because one thing discovered after working in management or teaching for over 30 years is that as soon as the solution to a problem presents itself, something proves the solution wrong. Rather than being defeated by this reoccurring situation he looks to the words of Albert Einstein for solace. “The more I learn, the more I realize I don’t know. The more I realize I don’t know, the more I want to learn.” So, the author will continue to study better ways to learn and to teach. Nevertheless, here are two pillars that could help Japan to start an English Conversation Restoration.

4 First Pillar for English Conversation Restoration

— SAFE Learning Environments

The first pillar is creating SAFE learning environments. These four letters represent the four learning environment elements. The S stands for “Supplies many opportunities to practice in many ways.” The justification for this element comes from the book *Make It Stick* by Brown et al. (2014). They suggest using interleaved practice, which means scattering the types of problems studied rather than blocking them in the same type. When studying in blocks, students feel a greater sense of accomplishment than when studying using interleaved practice. However, “Mixed up problem types and specimens improves your ability to discriminate between types, identify the unifying characteristics within a type, and improves your success in a later test or real-world setting” (p. 206). The A stands for “Allows students to ask questions and feed their curiosity.” It is difficult for a teacher to know what his students don’t understand. Therefore, the students need to have a platform to ask questions—all their questions.

The more they ask, the more curious and interested they may become. The F stands for “Fosters learning from mistakes.” Mistakes are a consequence of trying something beyond our abilities. Students need to be given the freedom to make mistakes and also the guidance in how to reflect on those mistakes so they can find their own ways to correct and overcome them. Lastly, the E stands for “Embodies real-world application.” Students need to feel that they have a legitimate reason for learning the materials. The most convincing reason is to see that what is being taught inside the classroom can also be used outside the classroom. Teachers would do well to think about these four elements during every step of teaching—from the curriculum formation to classroom management.

There are two caveats regarding SAFE learning environments. The first is these four precepts are only the tip of the myriad ideas about what constitutes a suitable learning environment. Teachers and teaching institutions should find the precepts that work for the culture in which they teach. The word culture directs attention to the second caveat, which is this a Western way of thinking. To adapt this teaching philosophy to Japanese learning sensibilities, there should be open dialogues between all the stakeholders of English education in Japan. This leads us to the second pillar of an English Conversation Restoration.

5 Second Pillar for English Conversation Restoration

— Collaboration

The second pillar is collaboration between the English education stakeholders—specifically educators who are native speakers of English and local Japanese need to find ways to collaborate. Many educators tend to shy away from collaboration because they wish to avoid tension. However, Hill et al. (2014) in their study on Trans-National Education found that, “Tensions are part and parcel of any collaboration... Collaborations endure if these tensions, especially between the parties to the collaboration, can be managed effectively” (p. 959). Therefore, educators from both sides of the language aisle need to understand there will be tensions and focus on an agreed upon goal of improving English education to create the collaborations necessary. If the tensions are not properly balanced, efforts may seem to lack continuity which can cause more damage than just a failed collaboration. This damage may negatively affect the students as indicated in the following quote by Hill et al.

Continuity must be evident in the way in which academics behave, not complete uniformity in the way in which they deliver material or teach but in the way they represent the university and the message that they deliver. While there is potential for conflict amongst academic colleagues, there is considerable scope for students to bear the brunt of this inability to harmonize the message (p. 958).

There will be some who still insist that a native speaker of English is much more desirable when teaching English than their Japanese counterparts. However, Japanese teachers can be the best judges of what students are experiencing in their daily lives. They are thus positioned to be better qualified to create curricula “employing their existing cultural and linguistic experience to engage creatively with a cosmopolitan world” (Holliday, 2014, p. 3). This sentiment mirrors that of the importance for local cultures held by the above quoted Dr. Stobie. Through proper collaboration, the rich and nuanced aspects of cultures from both sides of the table can be utilized to create a better system for teaching English in Japan.

6 A Japanese Testing Environment

As a thought experiment, let’s compare a teaching and testing setting in Japan to the first pillar of this English Conversation Restoration plan—the SAFE learning environment. The test in question is infamous among expatriates from various countries, and the failing of this test has, in fact, become a badge of honor for many. The author took the test five times, and has heard several people brag of taking it more than 15 times before passing, or in one case giving up, not wanting to spend another 2,400 yen for another try. This test, for those who have not figured it out, is the practical driving test. The following is the author’s antidotal account of his test experience.

After pulling to a stop and turning off the car at the end of my first attempt at the driving test, I was informed by the test administrator, “You did many things wrong. However, I will only tell you one of them, go home and practice, and when you have mastered it, come back and take the test again.” The thing I did wrong—50 meters before a left-hand turn, I failed to pull my car to the left slightly to indicate I was planning to turn, which was apparently not made clear enough by my turn signal.

I had taken my original driving test when I was 17 years old in Chicago, Illinois in

1987. I failed my first time then, too. However, the administrator gave me a checklist of all the things I had done wrong and told me to practice them all and come back in a month. I did as I was told, studied the checklist, practiced often and passed on my second try. I am not sure how long the Japanese test administrator expected me to take to learn how to execute pulling to the left 50 meters before turning, and I was too angry to ask. "I don't need a driver's license, anyway," was my mouthful of sour grapes.

However, several years later, a change in situation made it necessary for me to get a license. So, I tucked tail and went to a driving school before my next attempt. At the driving school, my first instructor became angry with me when I suggested that signaling 50 meters prior the intersection would be dangerous considering that there was another intersection 20 meters ahead. This was Chicago logic, directly from the checklist I received when I was 17. "Wouldn't a driver waiting at the first intersection on seeing my turn signal assume I was turning there, thus feeling at liberty to pull out, causing an accident?" The instructor slammed on the brakes and turned to me and, in a voice less than civil, told me "This is not about your opinion. Just follow the rules." I learned that neither Chicago logic, nor opinions, had any place in the practical driving test in Japan.

I also learned the rest of the rules at the driving school. Check your mirrors for oncoming traffic before starting the car. Check your mirrors for oncoming traffic after starting the car but before putting the car in gear. Check your mirrors for oncoming traffic after putting the car in gear, then slowing let off the break, making a last mirror check just in case there were to be any cars pulling into my blind spot on the closed driving course. After my second session with a different driving instructor, I felt ready to go back to the Prefectural Driving Center. I failed my second time for failing to check if any pedestrians were jumping the fenced off area of the closed driving course to walk in front of my car as I rounded the last corner. I can't remember why I failed the other two times, but as mentioned above, the fifth time was a charm. I officially became a Japanese driver.

How does this experience stack up to being a SAFE learning environment? With enough resources a person could go to a driving school thus have many opportunities

to practice, the many rules. Therefore, the S could be covered. However, the angry response of the driving school instructor showed that questions are out of the question. Therefore, the A is deficient. The F is also severely lacking in so far as the test administers only tell one mistake per visit. Lastly, the E could be considered questionable. The reason for getting a driver's license is to use it in the real world. However, the closed course aspect of the test makes it rather less than realistic. Very few Japanese drivers pull to the left before a left turn. Therefore, overall the Prefectural Driving Center practice driving test in Japan is not a SAFE learning environment.

However, it may be just right for Japan. According to the 2015 WHO statistics on *Road traffic deaths and proportion of road users by country/area*, Japan is ranked 18, and the United States of America is ranked at 61 (World Health Organization). So, though it may not be a SAFE learning environment, it does seem to make the roads in Japan safer than the ones in the USA. Perhaps the author's American point of view is missing the nuances of the culture surrounding the driving test. Perhaps if he wants to criticize the system he should study more about it.

7 Conclusion

It is time for an English Conversation Restoration in Japan. Even if the driving test is proving statically effective, English education in Japan is not. To create an environment conducive to English education through collaboration between Japanese and non-Japanese educators who are controlling tensions might just be the thing that the system and the students need. It will not be easy, but neither was the Meiji Restoration. Japan should make the turn toward an English Conversation Restoration before they face a linguist defeat as other countries excel at English before them.

NOTE

- 1) Eleven rather than the usual top ten because of three-way tie in the ninth place.

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