

Some Suggestions Pertaining to Teaching and Learning in Order to Improve Communication Skills in English as a Foreign Language in Japanese Middle and High schools

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1. Introduction

According to the Yomiuri newspaper on August, 17, 2007, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) asserted that the basic principle of curriculum guidelines in elementary, middle, and high schools was going to be changed from the pressure-free education system to a policy aimed at students' academic development. The goal of this new policy will be to foster language skills which help students explain their opinions clearly orally and in writing form. Because of the policy, the classroom hours of primary subjects will increase as well as those of the English class in middle schools. Foreign language curriculum guidelines in middle and high schools by MEXT continue to emphasize improving English language skills, especially in speaking and communication. They mention the importance of raising practical communication skills in English and positive attitudes toward communications and understanding English-speaking peoples' cultures through the language. This paper will examine English education, especially with regards to speaking and communications in Japanese middle and high schools using the theory of language acquisition described by Lightbown and Spada. Firstly the study will speak about cases of English education in Japan and after that, it will review Lightbown and Spada's theory. Finally, it will point out some suggestions and examples on how to teach and learn so as to develop English communication skills in Japanese middle and high schools by referring to the situations of English education in Japan and the theory of language acquisition.

2. Literature review : the situations of English education in Japan

Koike and Tanaka (1995) discussed the importance of English translation during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) in Japan and its impact on English education and the society in Japan. When the first middle schools were established in 1870, English was taught and teaching was based on the grammar-translation method. Learning and understanding advanced Western culture and technology was an essential factor to modernize the people in Japan at that time. Significantly, the use of English was crucial for gaining foreign information. To convey the information about advanced foreign countries to the people of Japan, the Japanese government recommended focusing on teaching translation from English into Japanese and especially emphasizing the

grammar involved. Training in understanding the original words and expressions, grammar, and contextual meanings is an absolute necessity in translation and mastery of translation techniques is crucial. From early on, the Japanese people had little direct contact with people of other countries due to few opportunities for direct communication. Understanding foreign situations and cultures in a written form was the primary means of transforming Japanese culture to fit a modern state. About 45 percent of the men and 15 percent of the women were literate during the Meiji Period. These numbers are almost the same as those of the most advanced Western countries then. Translation was the quickest way to spread information widely among the general public. Based on these situations the Japanese government required translation in the entrance examination to high level schools during the Meiji Period.

Koike (1993) pointed out the reasons why absorbing communication skills in English is difficult for the Japanese focused on geographic factors, racial factors, and linguistic factors. Geography is one of the most significant factors for learning foreign languages because the need to learn them is based on the density of contact with neighboring countries. Japan is isolated from its neighboring countries by being surrounded by water and is situated hundreds of miles from the Eurasian continent. In contrast, European countries share borders with many other European countries and it is easy for them to access to other cultures. Here, the territory is not linked to territories of other countries which creates a huge obstacle for the Japanese to become integrated and prevents them from acquiring other languages. Japan's remoteness from other countries very much contributes to the lack of engaging cooperative development with them.

Regarding ethnic factors, the Japanese people are monocultural, as compared to people in other countries in areas such as Europe, Africa, the Far East, China, and the like. People in such areas tends to speak more than one language in order to become familiar and cooperative with neighboring people and different values. They sometimes have conflicts with different groups within their own culture in assuming leadership and responsibility for their particular political, economic and cultural desires. Their environments offer many chances for people to 'pick up' other languages. The Japanese are homogeneous and all of their social systems including the cultural patterns of feeling and thinking are unitary by nature. This situation informs all Japanese that communicate with other people using different languages from differing cultures.

When it comes to linguistic factors, the differences between English and Japanese are the major factors in determining the level of language-learning difficulty. Because many Languages within the European contexts are similar to English, it is easier for European people to learn English than the Japanese. When we look at learning Japanese and learning Korean, Japanese learners of Korean and Korean learners of Japanese are the most successful in learning these languages because they are similar.

Brownell (1967) also explained the difficulty of learning English for Japanese people because English structure and Japanese structure are totally different. For example, while English is characterized by limits in inflection, or basic changes in form

without changing meanings, and varying relationship through word order, Japanese has a structure in which the constituent elements of words are relatively distinct and constant in form and meaning. For the Japanese the high or low pitch of a sound is more important than the force of the sound, but in English very much depends on stress and intonation patterns. There are five vowels and seventeen consonant phonemes in Japanese and the vowels are either long or short. One of the five vowels always follows a Japanese consonant. On the other hand, there are nine vowels, three semivowels, and twenty-four consonant phonemes, four pitches and four stresses in English.

Moreover, regarding word order, there is a big difference between English and Japanese. In the case of Japanese syntax, the qualifying words and clauses precede the word or clause qualified, the object precedes the verb and the noun its preposition with the verb being positioned at the end of the sentence. When it comes to English, the word order is basically subject-verb-complement.

There is no singular, plural, gender distinction, nor article in Japanese while English has all these characteristics. Japanese verbs change form not to designate person, number, tense, or mood, but according to the kind of words to be combined with them. On the other hand, English verbs change their form to designate person, number, tense or mood. Japanese adjectives and adverbs have no comparative forms but English adjectives and adverbs do.

In her work Reed (1997) explained her experiences of teaching English in a middle school in Japan. Reed discussed Japanese students' attitudes to learning English. Japanese students are pressured every day from elementary school until college because the entrance examination at every level is very tough to pass. English is a very important subject for the entrance exams. Every level of instruction tests mainly the students' vocabulary and grammar ability, but no level of testing addresses itself to how well the students can speak. Because of this, they are not interested in learning how to speak and communicate in English. They depend on private evening and weekend cram schools where they learn a much higher level of grammar and vocabulary for the entrance exams. They sleep in class or at least are not seriously involved when they have English classes in their regular schools.

3. The theory of language acquisition by Lightbown and Spada

Lightbown and Spada (1993) discussed three central theoretical positions such as the behaviourist, the innatist, and the interactionist views of language acquisition. Generally research on second language acquisition has described that learners pass through stages of acquisition which are very similar to those of first language learners.

The theory of traditional behaviourists is that language learning is simply a matter of imitation and habit formation. Children imitate the sounds and patterns they hear around them and get positive reinforcement for doing so. With the encouragement of their listening environment they continue to imitate and practice these sounds and patterns until they form 'habits' of correct language use. Traditional behaviourists

believe that the quality and quantity of the language children hear and the consistency of the reinforcement should have a strong effect on the child's success in language learning.

Actual language data information says that the child imitates new words and sentence structures until they become solidly grounded in his language system. After that he stops imitating them and goes on to imitate other new words and structures. Unlike a parrot imitating what a person says and repeating the same thing again and again, the child's imitation is selective based on what he is currently learning. When the child imitates, the choice of what to imitate is based on something the child already knows, not simply on what is 'available' in the environment.

The behaviourist explanations for language acquisition give us a reasonable way of understanding how the learner learns some of the regular and routine aspects of language.

The innatist takes the position that the child is biologically programmed for language and that language develops in children in just the same way that other biological functions develop. For instance, all children can learn to walk as long as enough nourishment and freedom of movement are provided without being taught. The process of language acquisition is very much like the process of children's walking development. Children are born with the special ability of knowing about the complex grammatical structures of their language by access to samples of the natural language than they could reasonably be expected to learn on the basis of the samples of language they hear.

Innatists also hold that language acquisition, like other biological functions, works successfully only when it is stimulated at the right time (critical period). Children should acquire their language by puberty; otherwise, language learning will be more difficult and incomplete.

A third theory, the interactionists' position, emphasizes the role of the linguistic environment, in interaction with the child's innate capacities, in determining language development. The interactionists' position says that language development is a result of the complex interplay between the child and the environment in which the child develops. Unlike the innatists, the interactionists claim that language modified to meet the capacity of the learner is an essential element in the language acquisition process. Exposure to impersonal sources of language such as television, radio, and video alone is not sufficient for the child to learn a particular language. One-to-one interaction gives the child access to language and the response of the adult also allows children to recognize when their own their own utterances are understood. The children who are exposed to language in the absence of one-to-one interaction do not develop it normally.

In summary, the behaviourist asserts that language learning is a habit formation, the consistency of the reinforcement being significant. The innatist points out that children biologically have the ability of acquiring the complex grammatical structures but it is more difficult for them to learn a language after puberty. The most important

aspect in acquiring a language is that it is not done in one way but through interaction in a modified way. It is not enough just to have children imitate the same expressions again and again to form habits of correct language use or to depend on their innate ability to learn a language. In addition to these ways, modified interaction is required to achieve successful language acquisition.

4. Analyses and suggestions

People often say that we should think in English while speaking in English. What then does thinking in English imply? If we think in Japanese, that is if we use Japanese grammar (Japanese word order and sentence structure) and Japanese expressions in our brain, when speaking in English, we can't actually speak English. Because English and Japanese are totally different (Brownell, 1967), we need to avoid using Japanese grammar and expressions but rather English grammar (English word order and sentence structure) and English expressions when speaking English. In order to speak in English under modified interactions that avoid repeating acquired English expressions like a parrot but rather follow the content of English communication intelligently offering answers that make sense, we need to automatically (without conscious awareness) and immediately choose the appropriate English expressions based on correct grammatical rules in our brains, shutting out our Japanese which is too different from English and may prevent us from constructing correct English forms. For example, it's like having two rooms (Japanese and English) in our brain and automatically and immediately choosing the English expressions and grammar which match the environment we have at that time in our English rooms. Throughout this time period we would ignore our Japanese rooms. When we speak in English, only our English rooms are working, of course, although our knowledge, experiences, and so forth unconsciously influence the English rooms. Lightbown and Spada (1993, 1999, and 2006) mention that the process of people's second language acquisition is very similar to that of their first language acquisition. How then should we train our English rooms mentally so as to improve our English communication skills?

The behaviorist mentions that language learning is habit formation. According to a dictionary, 'habit' means that something has become customary and is done without thinking. Actually, when speaking in Japanese, our native language, we can speak without thinking. Then what practices will help students form habits of correct English language use? Probably thorough practices of aural-oral English seem to be needed. For instance, first of all, we need to know a plenty of English expressions to speak English because our English rooms are almost empty at first. This requires us to memorize a variety of English sentences. It is overly hopeful that students from 7th grade to 12th grade will perfectly memorize all sentences of English textbooks in an aural-oral manner until they can repeat them without thinking. When repeating the sentences after listening to an English tape or CD, they should try to imitate the native English-speakers' pronunciations, intonations and so forth. Also when repeating the sentences, they should not look at the textbooks. Although repeating them without

looking at the textbooks is tougher, it helps them obtain stronger listening skills. Regarding oral practicing, one example is that a student writes down all English sentences of a chapter in the textbook on one side of his notebook and their Japanese translations on the other side. After orally reading a Japanese sentence in the notebook, the student puts it into English in oral form without looking at the English sentence. The same thing is going to be done when he works from English to Japanese. That is after reading an English sentence, he puts it into Japanese in oral form without looking at the Japanese sentence in the notebook. These practices need to be carried out again and again until he speaks the English sentences smoothly without looking at the textbook and until he quickly translates English into Japanese orally. This method seems to meet the traditional behaviorists' ideas about the quality and quantity of the language children hears and the consistency of the reinforcement. In this case, quality means the English tape and CD which has a native speaker speaking good quality English. Quantity connotes repeating after the tape or CD again and again. The consistency of the reinforcement given with the oral practices from English to Japanese and vice versa helps immensely. The purpose of this type of oral practice is not only to give the student the reinforcement but also to help him recognize the big grammatical differences between the two languages. The practices also aim to adopt a skill to flexibly use the two languages as the situation demands. For example, even if one speaks in English, he can switch from English to Japanese smoothly when needing to and vice versa. During the drills he accesses both his English room and his Japanese so as to cover these purposes. Afterwards he continues with his English room when speaking English.

In the class for instance, a teacher intones the Japanese sentences and students repeat the English ensemble. It is also advantageous that the teacher gives them the English sentences and the students put them into Japanese in chorus. This method can be used for a pair practice between students. One student speaks the Japanese sentences, the other one puts them into English and they change their roles.

The innatist's theory implies that there is a specific and limited time period (critical period) for language acquisition and it will be more difficult and incomplete after puberty.

Brown (1993) also explained how neurological (brain) development might affect second language success. As the human brain develops, certain functions are lateralized. For example, intellectual, logical and analytic functions belong to the left hemisphere. On the other hand, emotional and social needs are related to the right hemisphere. Language functions are controlled mainly by the left hemisphere. Lateralization is a slow process which occurs from around the age of two to around puberty. During this time children are neurologically lateralizing functions little by little to one side of the brain or the other. Even if the child up to the age of puberty suffers injury to the left hemisphere, he will be able to relocalize linguistic functions to the right hemisphere and thereby relearn his first language. These findings concede a relationship between lateralization and second language acquisition. The plasticity of the brain at puberty

enables the learner to acquire a secondary language on top of his primary languages. However, after the accomplishment of the lateralization process it becomes more difficult for people to acquire fluent control over a second language.

As far as the startup age of learning English in Japan, a student begins studying English in the seventh grade whose students are already 12 or 13 years old. The general period of the age of puberty is up to 14 years old for boys and up to 12 years old for girls. When we consider these aspects, the age one starts to learn English in Japan is late. The brain at age 12 or 13 years has almost accomplished its lateralization and it is difficult to acquire a second language.

Learning English grammar to obtain English communication skills is helpful for middle school students because they are too old to almost master English without the grammar. Furthermore, because English and Japanese are very different, as Koike and Brownell described earlier, the students' knowing the grammatical differences between the two languages helps the students understand English better.

In order to improve their communication skills in English students should practice English grammar orally. For example, "I have a book." Before practicing a teacher should explain its meaning, how to make it a query, how to answer, the rules of third person singular present, and so forth. After the students understand their teacher's explanation, the teacher would begin the following procedure.

Example :

T : Repeat after me. I have a book.	S : I have a book.
T : Question.	S : Do you have a book?
T : Answer with "Yes".	S : Yes, I do.
T : Answer with "No".	S : No, I don't. (I don't have a book.)
T : What?	S : What do you have?
T : Answer.	S : I have a book.
T : He, Pen	S : He has a pen.
T : Question.	S : Does he have a pen?
T : Answer with "Yes".	S : Yes, He does.
T : Answer with "No".	S : No, he doesn't. (He doesn't have a pen.)
T : What?	S : What does he have?
T : Answer.	S : He has a pen.

These practices should be repeated until the students say the English sentences smoothly without thinking. Because when at first the students don't speak them smoothly, the teacher needs to help the students based on the situation. A pair practice between the students is possible. One student takes a teacher's role and the other assumes the student's role. They then switch roles. Although this method may be the approach which is most often seen in the classroom, it will be the mere foundation of the next evolving practice session.

The interactionist view denotes that language develops as a result of the complex

interplay and one-to-one modified interaction is required after children imitate the same expressions again and again to form habits of correct language usage.

In order to help middle school students' modified interactions, for instance, the teacher says, "What do you have?" to a student. The student is going to answer based on her own situation. For example, if she has a bag, she will say that she has a bag. The teacher also says, "What does Student A have?" to another student. Then he is going to answer what Student A actually has. Because one-to-one interaction is important, a pair practice between the students is also useful. Since time is limited, it is difficult for the teacher to cover every student scenario. The pair practice makes it possible for the students to have the one-to-one interaction with their peers. In this case, the teacher looks around the class, advising the students when they need it. This type of practice should be carried out as many times as possible.

In high school students need to learn English grammar for the college entrance exam. Although the level is getting more difficult, they should continue to practice the grammar orally. The English grammar for the college entrance exam seems to contribute very much to helping students develop communication skills in English when they learn it orally. For instance, after explaining grammatical rules to students, a teacher starts to go as follows.

Example 1 : simple sentence → complex sentence

T : Repeat after me. He is too hungry to stand up.

S : He is too hungry to stand up.

T : Change the simple sentence into a complex sentence.

S : He is so hungry that he can't stand up.

Note : Vice versa (complex sentence→simple sentence) is available

Example 2 : direct style → indirect style

T : Where does she live?

S : Where does she live?

T : Say it with 'do you know'.

S : Do you know where she lives?

Note : Vice versa (indirect style→direct style) is available.

These practices will be repeated until the students answer smoothly. When students practice English grammar orally from middle school, they are able to handle this level of stringency. A pair practice between the students is possible as well.

After students use memorization, imitating a lot of English expressions and gaining mastery by changing them through grammatical rules, they need to practice speaking what they want to say based on the environment in which they find themselves.

High school students are aware of a greater variety of English expressions than middle school students, mastering more English grammar along the way. They would

better speak and explain what they want to say based on their environment. For example, after reading a story in a textbook with his students, a teacher gives out some questions in English covering the content orally. The students answer in English without looking at the material. (Here, the criterion is answering not with English expressions which are in the textbook but by those used in their own words.) It may be better to query using open-ended questions which start with “why” and “how” so that they elaborate their answers in a more complex way. This contributes in brushing up their speaking. If they have some opinions about the story, they can discuss it in English, too. If they like, they can have a debate about the content in the class. These practices will promote and work out a variety of modified interactions.

The interactionist talks about the importance of the environment into which children develop. This means learning about the culture of a country in relation to language is significant because the environment includes the culture. Lui (1994) as well described the importance of incorporating teaching of culture in second language instruction to help students develop their target language.

After absorbing the cultures of English-speaking countries, both middle and high school students need to understand the big differences between them and the culture of Japan, learning their communication style within the varying cultural backgrounds so to have smoother communication with English-speaking peoples. Actually, there are big differences, for instance, between the communication style of American students and those of the Japanese in the classroom. American students are good at asserting their opinions persuasively. They throw a lot of questions at their teachers and have good self-expression skills to attract attention. On the other hand, Japanese students rarely give their teachers questions in class and are poor at asserting their opinions clearly. The students should learn how to discuss in class, what it means to pose questions and how to express one's opinions persuasively. The English class is the best place to introduce this process. In order to cover these aims, the class style should be student-centered to give them enough opportunities to express opinions and to improve critical and cognitive skills in English.

5. Conclusion

We understand that mastering communication skills in English is very difficult for Japanese people because of linguistic, geographic and historic, and racial factors from the literature review. However, we need to help Japanese students overcome these barriers so as to develop their communication skills in English effectively.

As Koike (1993) and Brownell (1967) assert, English and Japanese are completely different linguistically. The European people such as the French and Spanish sometimes say that they can master English without learning its grammar. The reason why they don't have to learn it is that their languages are similar to English sharing about 70 or 80 percent of the grammatical foundations. On the other hand, Japanese students start from zero when learning English. It is very helpful for them to understand English grammar in order to master the English language unless they begin learning English

since birth.

Geographically Japan is an insular country and unlike the Europeans the Japanese didn't have a lot of opportunities to connect with foreign people directly historically. Because of this factor, English was taught based on the grammar-translation method. This seems to have fit the needs of the Japanese people in those days and is still now possible due to the necessity of translations. However, now we are in the 21st Century and in the midst of the globalization age where information technology is more developed. We often communicate in English, a global language, by e-mail and so forth. English education in Japan should fit the needs of the Japanese people now. In addition to the grammar-translation method, we should consider a grammar-communication method based on completely memorizing a plethora of English expressions through aural-oral practices.

Regarding racial and cultural factors, we don't understand them if we don't know English-speaking peoples' values and ways of thinking. If we don't understand their cultures we can't respect them. When we can't respect them, it is impossible for us to have smooth and good communications with English-speaking peoples. It is not just enough to know the English language only since the language is just a part of the culture.

We should learn balanced English skills which include listening, speaking, reading, and writing equally well. Middle and high school students should understand that English is a language to communicate with other people and that obtaining speaking skills is also significant. The 7th graders should have their English speaking skills correspond to their reading and writing skills as well as the 12th graders. It may be good to include a simple speaking test for the entrance examinations to higher education so as to assist the students in being interested in obtaining communication skills. Because English requires Japanese students to accumulate practice in its training little by little every day, it is a hard task to master taking a lot of time. Further research would be needed to improve Japanese students' smooth communication skills in the English language by uncovering our own methods in Japan and reviewing foreign countries' examples.

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