

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: Suggestions for Study

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Perface

Although most Japanese study English for at least six years in school, they are, for the most part, unable to carry on a conversation with any degree of fluency. This is because their school English education is based on a grammar-translation approach to language study and ignores the hearing and speaking aspects of English.

Increasingly many Japanese find it necessary to learn to speak English. With Japan's expanding role in international trade and business, more and more Japanese are coming into contact with foreigners. In most cases the foreigners can not speak Japanese, and English is the necessary medium of communication.

How then can a Japanese develop good hearing and speaking abilities in English? I will try to give some practical advice for those who would like to improve their English but aren't sure of the best way to go about it. I will also propose several changes in current language teaching methods. The tips I offer are based on interviews and conversations I have had with scores of people who have successfully learned English, on the latest acquisition-learning research in the linguistic literature, and on my own experience in studying five languages besides my native English.

Tapes

The first thing I would recommend to someone who would like to learn to speak English, or any other language, would be to buy a cassette tape recorder — or better yet, buy several.

Before the days of tapes and records, the acquisition of a foreign tongue was a task limited to the few who had the resources to study abroad or have someone to tutor them for several years. Both of these methods were usually limited to a very privileged few. In the present "audio age", however, the opportunity for exposure to a foreign language, and a variety of native speakers' voices, is within the reach of virtually all Japanese.

For those at the elementary levels these are any number of taped comprehensive courses which are very satisfactory at training our ears to the sounds of English and giving us a good foundation in aural comprehension. One important factor in choosing a text and tapes is the inclusion of a Japanese translation. All of the time spent figuring out the meaning of sentences is time away from hearing. I would therefore not recommend a "global" textbook which has no Japanese translation. A student using such book would probably have to spend a considerable amount of time "deciphering" the English.

For those more advanced in their hearing ability, there are a growing number of news and interview tapes in the bookstores. Generally, I don't find them very appealing. It would be nice to have a larger variety of interesting lectures and entertainment programs. One man I know had the smart idea of recording radio programs while on a trip to England. He now has a library of several hundred hours of good, informative and entertaining language tapes — and they are not the contrived variety so often found in the bookstores.

Most of the taped languages courses instruct the learner to play the tape several times until sentences can be repeated with ease. I do not agree with this method. In fact, it is probably better not to repeat the material at all. Over fifty years ago, the well-known linguist Palmer observed that young children in learning their mother tongue comprehend considerably more than they can express. Palmer believed that there is a "silent period" in language acquisition, during which new material is passively absorbed and integrated. Also, there have been a number of studies of children who acquire a second language after moving to a foreign country. Researchers have noted that these children go through a period of two to three months during which they say very little. They may quickly grasp a few "survival phrases", but, for the most part, they are constantly watching and listening — silently. Only after this silent period do they begin trying to express themselves in the new language.

I recently read about a five year old boy whose family moved from Taiwan to the United States. For the first couple of months he said very little. Finally in the third month he started to talk — his progress was unbelievably rapid. By the fifth month he was able to speak as fluently as an American child of his age. He had acquired English without any study; acquisition occurred as a result of his association with other children in a play group. It is important to note that he wasn't forced to perform for the first couple of months. This "hearing only" stage was, I believe, a most important phase in his language acquisition. Adults mistakenly equate language performance with progress. If we acquire language in a natural way, however, there is little visible progress in the early stages. In the forced practice study so often found in language classes students are soon able to master and perform a number of phrases and expressions. This gives a false impression of competence; internalization of the basic struc-

tures of the language has not occurred.

The process of silently acquiring new vocabulary and language structure continues throughout childhood in first language learners. All children absorb new and more difficult language gradually. Oral expression doesn't usually occur immediately after hearing new phrases but is delayed for a considerable length of time. The common practice of requiring oral expression concurrent with hearing in the beginning stages of learning a second language is not consistent with the natural pattern of language acquisition.

The value of a "silent period" was recently reported by a teacher at the training school for the U. S. Diplomatic Corps. The teacher was in charge of two different Russian language classes. One of the classes was a course in oral-communication in which the students had extensive practice in speaking Russian. The other class was a class for training students to transcribe Russian radio broadcasts — a kind of dictation. These students had no practice in speaking Russian, only hearing and writing what they heard. At the end of the courses the teacher had a party and invited several Russian diplomats to socialize with the students. To the teacher's surprise, the transcription students, who had never practiced speaking, were better able to carry on a conversation with the Russians than the students who had had intensive speaking practice. Not only that, but the pronunciation of the transcription students was notably better than that of those students in the oral-communication group.

Speech consists not only of words and phrases. Each language has its own unique flavor — subtle differences in intonation, rhythm, pitch, volume, and a host of other ingredients. The "silent period" is a time for opening our ears and minds to these sounds and, after a period of time, absorbing and integrating them into our own linguistic system. Children do this quite naturally in a foreign environment. Adults,

however, with rational thinking and different needs, usually feel they must perform and practice the new language immediately. What they are doing, however, is practicing before the new sounds have been fully recognized, differentiated and integrated. Their production is therefore poor. This is one of the reasons that adults often have poorer pronunciation than children in a second language.

Listening, rather than practicing, seems to be of prime importance in language acquisition. The person who starts speaking right away will at first appear to be the more successful language learner. However, he will, in a short time, lose to the student who has, through diligent hearing practice, been able to attune his ear to the intricacies of the foreign language. In the long run, extra time spent listening will result in better speaking and pronunciation. It is for this reason that I earlier recommended buying several cassette-recorders. I would keep one in my car, one on my office desk, one or two in my house (next to my bed or in the kitchen etc.) and a portable one for when I'm working in the garden or taking a walk. It is in these places that we can, at odd moments, listen to English.

For the elementary and intermediate level student it is probably best to first listen to the lesson while looking at the English and Japanese scripts. Next, listen to the lesson without a book — anytime and anyplace. Occasional reference should be made to the text to be sure of catching all the phrases correctly. The student should continue listening to the tape over and over again until he feels that he has almost “ digested ” the lesson. One hundred percent comprehension is not necessary and will slow down progress. If the student can comprehend 90 % then it is time to move on to the next lesson.

Should you memorize the dialogs ? In most cases it is not necessary. Children have very short memories and yet they are able to master

a language system rather easily. It is probably better to strive for a sort of “ gut-level ” recognition of meaning. Such comprehension depends more on hours of exposure than on any conscious mental efforts trying to memorize or practice. Especially in the early stages of acquisition, it is best to try to develop a feeling for the language. Trying to memorize will only slow down our efforts in such development.

Besides tapes, there are a number of other possibilities for exposure to native speech. Some students get a lot of practice and pleasure by listening to short-wave radio broadcasts. There are also radio and TV English conversation programs broadcast daily on NHK. I have met several people who could speak quite well after having listened to these programs for a number of years. Regular listening to these programs can be very helpful.

With video-tapes and satellite broadcasts we can look forward to seeing more TV programs from abroad. Especially for the advanced student, these may be very useful. When choosing any material for study one should try to find matter that is just a little above one's present level. It is in gradual steps that we reach a higher level. The neophyte piano student doesn't try to master Tchaikovsky after 3 months of study. Such an attempt would not result in any great improvement in his overall playing ability, but would be more of a lesson in frustration. He would do better to select pieces just a little above his ability-level and build up gradually. As a general guideline, I would tell an English student that if he can't catch around 70 % easily the first time he listens to new material, then it is probably too difficult and he had better do something else.

One disadvantage of TV or movies is that speaking is not always emphasized. Often the visual action and the sound effects are dominant and the speaking is secondary. This is especially true in “ action ” or police dramas. Better for

learning would be family dramas or "soap operas" in which conversation is the focus. Speeches, interviews and general news are also good.

Records

Another study tool I would highly recommend to language students is songs. Combining the spoken word with music seems to somehow make a deeper impression in our mind than words alone. I have met a number of people who have acquired English through their interest in music and without any other special study. One thing that has impressed me is the excellent hearing and superior pronunciation of these people. For improving pronunciation I think there is no better way than listening to music. What kind of music is best? I would take care in selecting my music. Many of the hard rock songs are full of too much slang and fragmented speech. Some of them are even hard for native speakers to understand. I would stay away from them.

For the elementary learner folk music is very good. Many of the tunes are simple and quite easy to learn. For the more advanced student, there are a large number of "easy listening" type singers who sing beautifully and use excellent English. Of the male vocalists I would recommend Andy Williams, Frank Sinatra, Pat Boone and Perry Como. Among female vocalists Doris Day, Joan Baez, Patti Page and Nancy Sinatra come to mind. These are only a few. There are many more very good singers. Look for one you like.

Usually a solo singer is better than a group for hearing practice. There is too much blending and sometimes distortion of sound with a group. One singer comes through much clearer.

Most records have an accompanying set of lyrics. Be sure to read the lyrics the first time you listen. After that, listen again and again. You have to really "get into" the song — not just the

words, but the feeling. That's how to make English go to your soul and not just your head.

Large Group Study

A number of high schools and colleges now offer English conversation classes in addition to the traditional grammar and literature classes. Are these classes effective? Are the students able to converse in English after completing from two to four years of study? Talking with graduates of such courses, I have not found the degree of fluency I would hope for, considering the large amount of time spent in classes. It is often said that small groups are best for language study. Teachers of large classes often share this feeling. I have often heard teachers say that it is of little use to expect much progress in a group where there is little opportunity for personal association and interaction. Students in large classes are often disappointed and ashamed that they aren't able to achieve fluency in spite of their long hours of class attendance.

Is the large class really hopeless or is our approach to teaching the large class misdirected? This problem should be seriously considered by educators. Perhaps it is time for a re-examination of our language curriculum and of our idea of how language is acquired.

Most foreign language teachers have assumed that language is something which we learn consciously through practice and habit-formation. Practicing correct language again and again should then result in a high degree of fluency. It seems like a nice, logical idea. However, in reality we find many students who have spent years practicing in language classes, but who are not able to carry on a simple conversation.

In Canada there are two official languages: English and French. For a number of years, educators there have been concerned with teaching both languages to large numbers of students. They first approached this task using the popular

“ audio-lingual ” teaching method. English speaking children started studying French from the first grade of elementary school; instruction was in classes of about 30 students. Students received daily instruction from native speakers who focused on teaching hearing, speaking, reading and writing, in that order. After six years of studying French it was hoped that students would, through intensive practice with a native speaker, achieve considerable fluency. In reality, however, results proved disappointing. Many students had difficulty in carrying on a simple conversation. Generally, comprehension, as measured by interviews and test results, was poor. Even after 6 years with a native speaker these children remained unskilled at using the language.

As a result of this poor performance, a new approach was adopted. Again, study was in large groups commencing with first graders in elementary schools but, instead of teaching French as a foreign language, the teachers taught math, science, geography, etc. using French as the medium of instruction. The teachers spoke only French and used pictures, objects and drawings to demonstrate meaning.

In just a few months the students were able to understand and respond to the teachers instructions, and, after 6 years, they were all nearly bilingual. French had never been the focus of instruction. Students had not “ practiced ” French in the usual language class fashion. Nonetheless, they did acquire French, and were able to use it fluently. Acquisition had occurred without the usual conscious preoccupation with learning the correct language habits. A similar program in California with English-speaking children who were in a Spanish language program showed results consistent with these two studies.

Success of these programs indicates that in learning a language it may be better not to focus on the language and its correct form, but to use the language as a “ medium ” of studying some-

thing else and in the process unconsciously acquire the language.

When studying German at college I was able to internalize the language most not in the classes in which I practiced how to speak properly, but in the German literature classes.

In particular, I had one professor who lectured using German only. Of course we couldn't catch everything he said, but usually we could understand 75 % quite well — and make a good guess at another 20 %. By the end of the term, we had all very definitely improved our hearing and speaking abilities. The focus of his lectures, however, was not at all concerned with hearing and speaking practice. His lectures were concerned with the literature — and he never worried about whether or not we spoke correctly. In fact, when we asked him questions in German, he never bothered to correct our faulty usage; his focus was the literature and not teaching correct language habits. From his lectures we grew to love and appreciate German literature. At the same time we became very comfortable hearing and thinking in the language. We had, without conscious effort, acquired a feeling for the language as a living medium for expressing ideas.

The theory that we best learn a second language through practice and habit formation is questionable. Practicing is useful in giving a learner a certain degree of demonstrable language control. However, this type of study alone does not produce fluent speakers who have a “ feeling ” for the language. This kind of fluency is picked up unconsciously. Attempts to master a language only through conscious study and practice succeed only to a limited degree. Language teachers should look for ways of exposing students to a foreign language without focusing too much attention on the forms of the language. In practice this could be accomplished by reducing or eliminating “ conversation classes ” and offering in their place

a wide variety of courses in which English is the "medium", and not the focus of instruction. Such instruction can be satisfactorily accomplished in either a small or large class. As a first step literature classes should be taught using English only. Further measures will require major changes in curriculum, but if taken, would result in significant upgrading of large-group language instruction.

English Conversation Schools

Most medium-sized cities in Japan have one or more English conversation schools; in large cities there are dozens. These schools vary in size from one-man operations to huge enterprises with many schools. The English ability of instructors at these schools also varies from school to school and even within a school. Some schools have teachers who speak English beautifully. Other places have instructors of mediocre ability. As there is no licensing system, it is difficult to know whether a particular instructor is really a good speaker or not. Some schools employ Caucasian teachers more for their foreign appearance than for their good English. I know of a man from Finland who, although his English is very poor, found a good job at a conversation school, probably because of his attractive fair hair and blue eyes. His students think he is Canadian.

If you think you would like to study English at a conversation school you should be very careful in finding one with teachers who are really able to speak good English.

Instruction also varies from school to school. Most schools, however, emphasize quite structured text-based language study, using audio-lingual techniques. Japanese students are usually very concerned with speaking correctly. They want their teacher to tell them whenever they make a mistake. Thus, correcting mistakes is one of the functions of a language school teacher.

I was once giving private instruction to a

Japanese businessman in Osaka. At the time I thought that correcting his mistakes would help improve his English. In practice, however, I found that the more I corrected his mistakes the harder it became for him to speak. One day I decided to stop correcting him completely. Very soon he was able to relax, and he started to talk quite easily. As a teacher, however, I felt negligent: wasn't it my job to correct his mistakes? The next lesson I secretly recorded our discussion during a free conversation period. During the discussion we talked about a variety of different topics. He spoke quite fluently, but with a lot of small mistakes. I later played the tape for him and asked if he could find any mistakes in his speech. To my amazement, 95 % of the time he could not only recognize his mistakes, but he could correct them himself. I had been assuming that he made mistakes because he didn't know correct from incorrect. His ability to recognize and correct his mistakes, however, showed that though he "knew" correct English, he was unable to apply this conscious knowledge when engaged in a conversation. Perhaps if he analyzed each sentence before he spoke he would be able to speak with fewer errors; but that is not possible in a normal conversation. In Japan, students study English in preparation for entrance examinations. Compared with students from many other countries, Japanese score very high on tests of English grammar. It seems, however, that in a natural conversation, no matter how much conscious syntactical knowledge one has, this knowledge is not available without deliberation. I often encounter students who, when asked a question, stop and ponder for several moments trying to form the correct response. Such pondering is fine for entrance exams, but it is a cumbersome way to carry on a conversation.

Another assumed role of the language teacher is to correct and teach proper pronunciation. Most schools devote considerable time to

pronunciation practice. Also, teachers are always on guard to alert students if they mispronounce something.

One major conversation school in Kobe has a special course in pronunciation. They have developed a text with eighteen lessons and twenty tapes. The book covers all the sounds of English. It is illustrated with diagrams of the vocal organs and explains how to manipulate the tongue, lips, etc. to produce each sound correctly. The course is taught in combination with a 3-year comprehensive course. This course is one of the most thorough courses available anywhere in Japan.

What have been the results of this course? After all of this study and practice shouldn't we expect to find students who have learned to speak clear, native-like English? The following is a quote taken from the preface of this text:

What results can be expected from a pronunciation course such as this? It is hardly necessary to answer that it will not turn the students into native speakers of English. Making allowance for different degrees of aptitude, it will not even establish the habits of correct pronunciation in the majority of students. On the other hand it should enable the majority of students to produce and perceive most of the important sounds of English, while they are consciously focussing attention on them.

Pronunciation practices and correction by teachers seem to result in improvement only when attention is drawn to a particular problem. In the complexities of real-life communication such conscious attention is impossible and students will continue to perceive and produce a problem sound incorrectly.

Good pronunciation is more a result of hearing correctly than of conscious efforts aimed at oral production. Teachers should not be overly concerned with making their students speak perfect-

ly. Such correction only "appears" to improve pronunciation. Real improvement will result only from learning to be a better listener. In adults there is a gradual decline in hearing ability from age twenty. As we age it becomes harder for us to perceive the subtleties of speech. Young children, with their very acute hearing, are able to perceive and produce new sounds easily. The adult who is concerned about his poor pronunciation should resign himself to the fact that because of his age he can never expect to be a perfect speaker. As long as people can understand what he says he should be satisfied with his speech.

Another feature of most conversation school classes is, as I previously mentioned, strict adherence to textbook-based lessons. Japanese elementary and secondary education are book oriented. Many Japanese have an awe of the printed word. A lot of students feel that finishing a book will automatically result in competence. Time and again I have met people who have spent several years at language schools and have studied and completed book after book, but are, nevertheless, only able to carry on conversations in which half of the time is spent pondering away over how to speak correctly.

Obviously, children learn to speak their own language quite well without ever reading a book. Storybooks are an important part of language acquisition in children, but their role is quite different from the role we assign to conversation texts. When a mother reads a storybook she doesn't ask her children to listen and practice. If the children were asked to practice the sentences in the storybook they would probably have a very hard time. Most likely they would stammer and stumble — and become thoroughly frustrated. (This often happens to language school students.)

Textbook study can result in the learning of a number of useful expressions and phrases.

While these are quite useful, they do not constitute the "whole" of the language. The unconscious control by "feeling" of a language can not be learned by reading and practicing lessons in a language text; such control is achieved mostly through exposure to language in real-life situations.

All in all, most conversation school instruction is aimed at conscious control and production of language. In the process students do, of course, get a certain degree of exposure to the sound system. However, since classes meet only once or twice a week such limited exposure has little effect. The few people who really have achieved a high degree of proficiency from conversation school study have usually done this by regular additional study outside of class using tapes, records, etc.

One can not learn English by studying only once a week at a language school. Language study can be accomplished much faster (and cheaper) by listening to tapes or TV courses. There is, however, one beneficial aspect of language study at a school. This is the opportunity to meet and associate with people who speak better English than oneself. A class in which the teacher is a drill leader only doesn't offer such opportunities and should be avoided. If, however, you can find a class where conversation, debate, joking and just having a good chat are emphasized it might prove worthwhile to join and begin to acquire a feeling for English.

Circle or Study Group

Another way to get a lot of exposure to English is to join an English circle or a study group. Usually, these are groups of up to 10 people who meet regularly to discuss, study or debate certain topics in English. Most of the time they are rather informal, but sometimes they are associated with a language school. I know of a group of housewives in Nara who have been meeting reg-

ularly for several years to read and discuss English and American literature. They employ a foreigner as a discussion leader. I know of another group in Tokyo who meet weekly to discuss interesting topics and news articles. They do not focus on learning correct English, but concentrate on familiarizing themselves with current news events. Members don't worry about perfect grammar, but are more concerned with communicating information and opinions. I talked with several members of this group and they seemed to agree that they were acquiring much more English through this type of study, than through language-focused study at a conversation school.

For such groups it is ideal if there is a native speaker to contribute to the discussion. The possible level of language acquisition in any group is determined by the level of the best-qualified person contributing to the conversation. Thus, a group of only poor speakers with no teacher cannot expect to progress beyond the ability level of the best of their lot. No matter how much time they spend discussing, their improvement will not exceed the ability of the best member. Such a group should therefore find a foreigner or a Japanese who is a good English speaker.

This type of group may not sound too different from a small language school class. There are, however, several differences I would like to point out. First, is the role of the teacher. In a conversation school the teacher's role can be compared to that of an army drill instructor — he leads the students in drills, listens for errors and corrects. In a circle, however, the instructor becomes more of a friendly uncle. He journeys along with the students in exploring and discussing various topics. He does not spend a lot of time correcting mistakes in grammar and pronunciation. Improvement in speaking is acquired naturally through exposure during the course of the group discussions.

Another major difference is the type of

materials used for study and their role. In the conversation school class the role of the text is to introduce particular language forms and grammar for practice and mastery. The content of the material is secondary. Practicing is concerned with using the language correctly and not with communicating ideas. In contrast to this, the role of the text or other materials in a circle is to inform and teach something, not language, using English as the medium of instruction. The content of the material depends on the ability and interest of the particular group. Current news events is a popular subject for study in many of these groups. Other groups are more interested in literature. There is, however, no reason that study circles limit themselves to these common topics History, geography, music, art — the possibilities are endless. The group need not limit itself to a book, either. Records, maps, paintings, magazines, newspapers, etc. all can be used for study and discussion.

In addition to studying, most groups will want to spend some time socializing and chatting with each other. Free conversation has been around for a long time. Most language schools stick it in the middle of class and call it a “rest time”. Many people think that “free conversation” is idle time or time to go to the toilet. It is my opinion, however, that free conversation is one of the most important parts of language acquisition. Most of our conversations in daily life are of this type. Unfortunately, language school “free conversation” is often not the spontaneous type speech of daily life. Too often the students and teacher feel a compulsion to say something in order to “practice” English. Many teachers ask questions that nobody really cares about, just for the purpose of language practice. In a circle, however, the teacher doesn’t ask any questions that he wouldn’t ask another native speaker in the course of a real-life conversation. Members are not concerned with perfect grammar so much

as with communicating. Free conversation is thus not forced and artificial. There is no pushing or compulsion. If no one particularly feels like talking about personal matters, the conversation switches to one of the topics for discussion. Free conversation need not have a special assigned time. Perhaps it is better to just let it come up naturally in the course of a discussion about something else.

One other major difference between a language school class and a study circle concerns their function and purpose. Most conversation classes’ main function is in preparing and rehearsing for the day when the students will meet a foreigner. Unfortunately for most Japanese these occasions are rare. I wonder if all the time and money spent for language rehearsal is really worth it. On the other hand, the language circle is concerned with “here and now” learning and discussion. While the conversation school class is looking forward to the future, the study circle is largely an end in itself. Students are able to engage in intellectually rewarding study and conversation using English as the medium of communication. While learning and getting a wider knowledge of various subjects, they secondarily acquire the language skills necessary for any future meetings with foreigners.

Conclusion

Most of the time when I’m speaking my native language I am not consciously thinking of “how to say it correctly”. Instead, I am concerned with communicating a message. I just speak and most of the time my message comes through in an understandable and grammatically correct way. When I speak and hear English I am aware if the speech is right or wrong by feeling. Sometimes I reflect on the rules and realize — “oh yes, that’s grammatically correct”. Most of the time, however, this process is unconscious.

People often say they would like to “master

English". Mastery, however, is a kind of conscious control, and the vastness of a language system, with thousands of complex rules and exceptions to rules, can not be mastered to any great degree by the conscious mind alone. To acquire a language means not that we master the language, but that we develop a kind of passive relationship with the language, in which we open and expose ourselves and gradually allow it to seep into our unconsciousness. In a sense, we allow the language to master us. In this way our use of the language becomes almost automatic.

The important role of the unconscious mind in acquiring language has been largely ignored by educators. Most efforts have been directed at conscious language control. It has been assumed that we can master a language by memorizing it in "bits and pieces". Teachers and students have thought that eventually all of the "bits and pieces" would somehow fit together as a "whole". Unfortunately, this does not happen. The "bits and pieces" remain separate units in the conscious mind, and when the person who has studied them tries to engage in a conversation he invariably ends up struggling to put the "bits and pieces" together in correct order and form.

Parents don't usually worry about teaching their mother tongue to their children. They know that the child will acquire their language naturally through exposure. Second language acquisition might likewise be more easily accomplished by directing conscious efforts away from "language study" and concentrating on using the language as a means of communication.