

Challenges of Learning English in Japan

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In 1996, I was on sabbatical leave from my university so that I could come to Japan and study Japanese oral communication teaching methods. I lived in Sendai and worked at Kawaijuku Bunri. My purpose was to observe English classes, assist the teachers, and promote oral teaching methods. I was in Japan over 4 months and visited several classes and worked with students from different parts of Tohoku. During this time, I learned a lot about Japanese methods of teaching English.

This paper discusses the challenges of teaching English in Japan, primarily at a “juku,” a cram school. After looking at the people involved (learners and teachers) and the physical and social contexts for English language learning, I will comment on the efforts to implement the new curriculum for oral English.

Learners and Teachers

Many countries envy the accomplishments of the Japanese school system. Students are well behaved and demonstrate excellent recall skills. The standardized test taking ability of Japanese students is well-known. Students cannot only attend regular schools, they can go to cram schools for additional training. In fact, many junior high and senior high school students are in school from dawn to dusk.

The Japanese school system offers a lot of freedom for elementary aged students. They are not required to wear uniforms to school and the curriculum is flexible enough to promote various areas of scholastic and personal development. By the time a student goes to junior high, things change. School uniforms are required and student learning begins to focus on the all important university entrance exams. Long hours of study and memorization are the hallmarks of a good high school student. (The study habits of college students are another matter.)

Jukus, or cram schools, provide additional schooling so that students may

score well on the entrance exams. Jukus serve two populations of students: 1) those who are in junior high or high schools and 2) those who have graduated from high school but did not score well enough on the university entrance exams. The first group attends the juku after school in the late afternoon and early evening, while the latter group (called “roamers”) attends classes throughout the day.

The teachers in the regular schools are truly “sensei.” They are close to their students, feel a personal obligation to educate them well, and have contacts with the student families. The teachers at the jukus are different. They are hired to teach class and present materials especially geared toward passing the university exams. They do not get close to their students and they have little, if any, contact with parents.

Physical Context of a Juku

Japan has many cram schools. Kawaijuku Bunri is one of the top three in size and quality. In Sendai, Kawaijuku Bunri has three “campuses.” Actually, there were three multistory buildings in different parts of the city. I worked in all three buildings. Most of the classrooms are setup with theater style seating (straight rows of desks). Up front, the teacher conducts class on a raised platform in front of a full expanse of chalk board. The teachers do not have offices. Instead they congregate before and after classes in teachers’ lounges which have library style tables with several chairs around them. When a teacher comes in for the day, he or she “lays claim” to a part of a table and that becomes his or her space for the day.

Social Context

Whereas teachers can wear whatever clothing they wish, many of the juku students show up in their school uniforms. The students arrive in class “before the bell.” They take a seat and prepare to take notes by opening their pencil boxes and lining up their writing tools and their erasers. Pencils are used more than pens because errors are easier to correct in pencil.

The teacher arrives “after the bell” not before. By this time, all of the students are obediently in place, ready to go. The lecture can now begin. The teacher is held in high esteem. And in some cases, they are seen as infallible. In the presence of such a person, the well behaved student knows to remain quiet and attentive throughout the class period which lasts for 90 minutes. Since the class meets only once a week, the material must be copied down and understood as it is presented. If students have questions, they do not ask questions during class, as this would be disrespectful. Instead, they wait until after class and follow the teacher to the

teachers' lounge and wait to be invited to the teacher's table to talk with the teacher. Sometimes the female students would patronize the young male teachers by being overly attentive and responsive to every clever word spoken by the teacher. This would produce a lot of laughing and giggling. Such activity could never occur during class.

Pressing on for Change

More than three years ago a new curriculum was put into place. It included a new requirement of oral communication. The purpose of this mandate was to encourage the development of English speaking and listening skills in our students. Such change has not occurred. Why? Japanese teachers tend to teach English in Japanese! In the schools, I overheard a lot of Japanese language in English classes. Furthermore, I heard the teacher talking much more than I heard the students talking. These are not the most fertile conditions for learning English speaking and listening skills.

Whereas the new curriculum provides books and prerecorded audio tapes for oral activities, the teacher typically turns on the tape recorder and sits back with the students to listen to the lesson. Then the teacher will turn off the recorder and translates in Japanese the instructions on the tape. In my mind, this divorces the teacher from the lesson. The teacher becomes a translator more than a teacher.

What can teachers do to change this? First of all, they need to speak more English themselves. Students will hardly be motivated to speak English if their teachers don't do it. Teachers also need to tell students that they should ask questions and that they must ask questions during class. Students should ask their questions in English, and if they do so, they could earn additional points. Students should not be encouraged to follow teachers after class to the teachers' lounge.

Teachers also need to trust their own speaking abilities more. Many Japanese teachers think that their pronunciation is so poor that it is better to have students listen to prerecorded tapes made by professional speakers of English. Teachers should give the lessons live in their own voices. Live speakers are always more animated than a tape recorded voice. Also, live speakers use nonverbal gestures (facial expressions, hand movements, etc.) which is how natural listening takes place anyway. Students can watch the teacher's lips as he or she says the words. This helps listening comprehension. During any class session, the tape recorder should be used no more than one-third of the time.

Teachers need to create interactive classes, wherein the students and teachers talk. Silence is not golden when language learning needs to take place. Creating an interactive classroom means that teachers cannot cover as much material as in the past. Teachers shouldn't worry about getting through all of the exercises for a given

day. Using fewer of them will allow more interactive time. In addition, English should be taught in classrooms that are equipped for interaction. Too many classrooms have fixed chairs placed in rows facing the teacher toward the front of the room. More portable furniture is needed.

The frames of mind of the teachers and students need adjustments as well. Teachers should be willing to step off the platform up front and move about the room while they are teaching. Some Japanese teachers do this already. Others still stay on the pedestal up front, taking on the more formal role of teacher. Students, likewise, need to take an interactive mind-set. They need to feel that they can ask questions in class. In fact, they should expect to do so.

Finally, Japanese teachers of English need to get over the “correctness” syndrome. Japanese teachers are often too concerned about the “right answer” or “correct pronunciation.” When they speak English in class, they will speak it with a Japanese accent and some of the words will not be perfectly pronounced. But, most of them will be properly articulated! Just because there may be some mispronunciations, students should not be deprived of listening to spoken English. It might be the prevalence of British English in the materials that encourages teachers to be more formal and concerned about proper English. I don’t know. What I do know, though, is that the Japanese English teachers I met knew the rules of English better than me, but did not speak it as fluently. If they would spend more time speaking English with each other and with their students, they would become more fluent. I believe more fluent teachers will produce more fluent students. Change, though, must start with the teacher!