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# Teaching English as a Global Language

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Thanks to the globalization of trade and commerce, English has become an important language worldwide. It is said that about 1.5 billion people, including non-native speakers of English, can speak English.<sup>1</sup> One might say that English has become a common world language. There is an unprecedented boom in East Asia of studying English to find a job or for making a success of one's life.

As a matter of fact, primary school kids in China and South Korea have started learning English. The mass media has recently reported that some parents in Korea and Taiwan accompany their children to join summer camps in the U.S. to brush up their English skills. The parents are very generous in spending money for their children's education. It seems that parents in general want their children to be good at English from an early age. In other words, parents don't want their children to go through great hardships in learning English because they couldn't master the language even after having put forth a great in studying English. Parents want to cushion their children from the trauma that they themselves faced when they grappled with the complexities of English during their own school days.

It is generally admitted that middle-aged people are good at reading, writing, and grammar, but not at speaking and listening. However, are they really poor at speaking and listening to English only because they mainly studied English reading and grammar? This is not true at all. As far as general experiences go, adults can develop substantial arguments even though they speak heavily accented English. Who do you think is the better speaker of English, Indian spiritual leader Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948) or a returnee high school student? Some learners of English might say that the English of returnee students sounds fascinating to the ears of learners because they speak English fluently. However, the content of what returnee students talk about is sometimes very childish even though they speak fluent English; they are good at talking about music, sports, and the latest fashions, but not good at discussing politics and economics, cultural issues etc.

When it comes to debate or discussion, they do not have much to offer in terms of "give and take" in the classroom. Some data show that primary school children in European countries give their opinions on politics and international affairs even though they speak "offshore" forms of English.

The fact remains that many Japanese learners of English have a negative view of speaking accented English in the global society. Many teens have the idea that they want to speak and behave like Americans or the English because speaking with a British or American accent looks sophisticated among youngsters in Japan. What does authentic English mean to us?

Noam Chomski insists that the intuition of native speakers is

infallible;<sup>2</sup> so if learners of English have some questions to be answered, they have to trust the intuitions of native speakers. Such an idea is still dominant in the English education society of Japan. One might say that the main Japanese concern is how to bring their English close to native speakers' of English. It is too late to start learning English in Junior high school in order to speak fluent English like Americans. Linguistically speaking, it is ideal for learners to start learning foreign languages during the critical period of language acquisition which is from infancy to puberty for most people.

Theoretically speaking, the maximum of the critical period for learning another language perfectly is said to be twelve years old. In other words, it is too late for most Japanese learners of English to begin to study the language in junior high school. However, there are some brilliant speakers of English, though they began studying English in junior high school. This indicates that the idea humans must have a critical period in the process of language learning might not be infallible. As a matter of fact, there is no scientific data to indicate that there exists a critical period in the human mind.

However the fact remains that the idea of the critical period still has much influence on the English education society of Japan. Having been possessed by the idea of "the sooner, the better" in learning English, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology introduced English as a subject into the curriculum of elementary schools in 2003. The purpose of teaching English to primary school children is to let them grow accustomed to pronunciation, intonation, and rhythms of the language. Teachers do not teach grammar and reading in the class because grammar and

reading become a heavy burden to pupils.

There are several problems they have had so far. There are not so many qualified teachers to conduct the classes in English. Those who graduated from English literature departments are generally in charge of English classes. However, they do not have very clear teaching methodologies to teach pupils English at the beginning level of learning.

Second, some pupils feel bored with the class, as the lessons advance. The difference between high-achieving children and poorly motivated children becomes conspicuous as they reach higher grades in elementary schools. One might argue that learning English is something like learning how to play the violin or the piano. Children need a strong motivation to start learning a new skill in elementary school. However, children's motivations to learn English are varied. Third, elementary-school students have other important things to learn to be more mature; to join volunteer groups to clean the city, to visit nursing homes to communicate with senior citizens, to visit historical sites studying Japanese history and so forth. Nobody argues why English above all other subjects is so important in elementary schools.

Fourth, why do teachers choose English from among many other languages? Geographically speaking, it is ideal for Japanese to learn Mandarin Chinese or Korean to share a sense of solidarity as Asians. When English is taught to children in primary schools, English has much influence on children's value systems because children have a very receptive mind in primary school. Adults should rather let children notice that there are many languages and cultures on the earth; every language is equal. It is very sad for children to have the idea that

there is superiority or inferiority among the world's languages.

There is no denying the fact that English has become a dominant language in the global community. However, there is no discussion of why English takes priority over other languages in schools of Japan. Does learning English produce internationally minded people? The answer is absolutely not. One might say that many Japanese have had the yearning for Western cultures since the dawn of the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The governmental officials unanimously insisted, at that time, that Japan should stay out of Asia and stay close to the West in order to civilize herself. Such a negative feeling toward Asia has been maintained in Japanese society for a long time. This might be one of the reasons that some Japanese are very eager to learn English before anything else. In a sense, one's competence in English determines their future career; this is really strange in English-speaking countries. The most important thing is one's professional skills and knowledge together with one's good personality.

This paper shows that the teaching English in elementary schools does more harm than good. The best time to start teaching English is in junior high schools. One reason is that students are mature enough to think flexibly, which is very important for beginning a new thing. The second reason is that they have enough knowledge of Japanese to compare Japanese with English from objective points of view. Take an example; why they have to inflect verbs in English; why they can not leave the subject out in English, though they can do so in Japanese.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has posted excellent teachers to junior high schools all over Japan in order to meet the demands of highly motivated students

who really want to master English. Previously teachers had controlled the floor in classes. Teachers, however, have come to realize the importance of making students feel at ease in classes. Instructors have to remove anxiety for learning from students in their classrooms. They are expected to have much verbal interaction with students during their classes. The focus of the dialogs should be easy and center on things such as the weather or sports.

It is advisable for teachers to be tolerant of some grammatical mistakes of students while they are talking. As is often the case with English teachers and in junior and senior high schools, teachers often blame students for making some small mistakes in writing and speaking English. For example, teachers never let it pass whenever students say "He *go* to school" or "He has *went* to school". Oral correction by the teachers is not advisable because such direct correction heightens students' anxiety while they are speaking. In such a situation, negative feedback is appropriate because such input goes a long way toward helping students master English over the long term.

Repetition or clarification as a part of feedback is much more effective in helping students realize their mistakes. Teachers might say, "Would you say that again?" or "What you mean is that he/she has gone to school, don't you?" The irregularity of verbs in English occurs more frequently than in other European languages. Japanese students have a hard time mastering the inflection of irregular verbs. This is the reason that instructors should not blame students for their mistakes. It takes a long for them to reproduce what they want to say in English.

Asians, in general, might be in a weak position to learn English in the global society, because the linguistic distance between English and Asian languages, as a whole, is very large. In other words, Japanese learners have to make much more of an effort than their European counterparts to learn English. The fact remains that most Japanese learners of English can not speak fluent English even though they have studied the language about ten years. Even if all Japanese began studying English in elementary schools, many of them would not be able to speak fluent English in the global society.

It is meaningless that if they could only baby-talk in English after having started learning English in elementary schools. The most important thing is whether one can talk about one's views even in clumsy English. The correctness of grammar and pronunciation is of secondary importance in learning English. It is appropriate to argue that beginning English in junior high schools is ideal for Japanese students because their knowledge of Japanese is sound enough to learn other languages and to have a flexible thinking.

#### Notes

1. See David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: University Press, 1997)
2. David Cogswell *Chomski* (N.Y.: Writers and Readers Limited, 1996) pp.54-62.