

# English Proficiency Levels of College Students in Japan\*

——日本人大学生の英語熟達度に関する一考察——

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If Krashen's claim is true that acquisition and learning are distinct, and that learning will never convert into acquisition over time through practice, it would not be an exaggeration to conclude the following: that only a few Japanese learners of English will achieve a high level of proficiency, while the majority of the learners, despite acquiring a certain knowledge of grammatical forms that are of very limited practical use, will not acquire the essential or "working" features of the language. The same line of argument would lead one to conclude that the failure of the vast majority of Japanese learners to achieve oral proficiency in English is inescapable. I will explore in this paper the above premises in a model that features two axes of acquisition and learning continua that attempt to describe and explain relevant features with respect to English proficiency levels of college students in Japan. More specifically, the current paper is organized with the following themes: 1) the contrasting modes of knowledge representation, 2) a Model of Japanese College Students' English Proficiency Levels, 3) theoretical explanations for the types of Japanese college students' proficiency levels, and 4) future educational implications.

## **Contrasting Modes of Knowledge Representation:**

There are two opposing modes (the non-interface and the interface positions) regarding how to present linguistic competence, i.e., the knowledge system of second language learners. The first model of the non-interface position was proposed by Stephen Krashen (1982, 1985). According to him, there are two independent means of developing competence in a second language: acquisition and learning. The former is characterized as the subconscious process for developing implicit knowledge of a language; the latter, the conscious process for obtaining explicit knowledge. In non-technical terms, acquiring is "picking up" a language and learning is "knowing about" a language, i.e., the grammar of a language. In addition, Krashen strongly claims that learning never converts into acquisition no matter how much one practices the rules of a language.

In contrast to Krashen's dichotomy of representing linguistic knowledge, one can consider knowledge as presenting a continuum that ranges from implicit to explicit knowledge. With this line of thought Bialystok (1978) advocates the interface position that explicit knowledge can become implicit knowledge. Sharwood Smith (1981) also supports the interface

position, saying that some structures of a language can be planned, performed in class and can eventually develop to “automatized behavior.” A further support is made by a group of scholars (McLaughlin, et al. (1983) who propose the view of second language performance as information processing with the introduction of two variables: controlled or automatic and degree of attention. A sketch of their proposal is described below.

In the preceding paragraphs the two opposing views of the non-interface and the interface positions have been discussed,. However, at this moment, the author recalls a very important distinction made by Chomsky, that is, that of competence and performance in this disputed controversial issue. In other words, both Krashen and Bialystok are addressing the types of knowledge or competence while Sharwood Smith and McLaughlin are discussing the types of language learner’s performance. The author of this article has a keen interest about which

model can be a better instrument to explain several types of Japanese language proficiency levels, i.e., as the reflection of learner’s competence, rather than that of performance. Consequently, in this paper the concept of the non-interface position will be adopted with the concept of continuum for the development of acquisition and learning.

### **A Knowledge Model with Two Axes of Acquisition and Learning:**

Given the claims that acquisition and learning are distinct and learning never converts into acquisition over time through practice, it is no exaggeration to say that most Japanese learners of English have learned parts of English grammar that are highly likely to be forgotten eventually, just like formulas in mathematics or symbols in chemistry; in fact they have not acquired the language at all. In consequence they cannot speak English in spite of six or eight years of

Table 1  
Possible Second Language Performance as a Function of Information Processing

Attention to Formal Properties of Language	Information Processing	
	Controlled	Automatic
Focal	(Cell A) Performance based on formal rule learning	(Cell B) Performance in a test situation
Peripheral	(Cell C) Performance based on implicit learning or analogic learning	(Cell D) Performance in a communication situation

Source: McLaughlin, Rossman, and McLeod (1983)  
Cited in Gass and Selinker (1994: 156)

English education. Based on the above premise, a model will be presented with two axes of acquisition and learning continua that explains the English proficiency levels of college students in Japan.

One axis of the continuum is acquisition (plus or minus) of the language and the other axis of the continuum is learning (plus or minus). Box B is “+ acquisition and + learning,” an example of which is those who have achieved the level of educated native speakers of English, i.e., a full competence of acquired implicit knowledge of the language as well as that of learned explicit knowledge. Box A is “+ acquisition and - learning”. Such examples are some of the returnees who have been exposed to the language in the natural environment abroad. They have received “comprehensible input” sufficiently and frequently so that they have acquired some of the implicit knowledge but not explicit knowledge. Box D is “- acquisition and + learning.” A typical example of this is Japanese students who have studied English grammar intensively and have explicit knowledge of it. However, they may not have acquired implicit knowledge that is responsible for speaking the language fluently. Box C indicates an example

of no acquisition and no learning.

This model with two axes of acquisition and learning continua shows that most Japanese college learners of English can be classified into Box D. They may have explicit knowledge of the language at the time of entering their college, but they may lose some of it over time. Also because of lack of their implicit knowledge, they are not able to speak the language fluently.

### Theoretical Explanations for Various Types of English Proficiency:

The fact that the number of people classified in Box B is very limited, say five percent of the learners, is supported by Scovel (1969) and it is cited also in Gleason (1993) and later by Selinker, the scholar who coined terms, such as Interlanguage and fossilization (Ellis, 1997: 34). The former term is used to refer to the mental grammar of language learners, which is still distinct from that of the target language; and the latter term is used to refer to the phenomenon that most of the learners who are classified in Boxes A, C, and D fail to achieve the native level of language proficiency. This magic number of five percent is also supported by Hiraizum, the

Table 2  
A Model of English Proficiency Levels of Japanese College Students

	Learning Continuum	
Acquisition Continuum	(+)	(-)
	(+)	(+)
	(-)	(-)
	(-)	(+)
	(-)	(+)
	Learning Continuum	

man who initiated a controvertial debate with Professor Watanabe some decades ago. On the similar line of argument, Mr. Yasushi Akashi, Former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations claimed in the symposium organized by ESUJ on May 30, 2000 that it would be sufficinet if only ten percent of the students who had received higher education acquired the ability to use English.

These numbers, such as five percent or ten percent may be too shocking to some of the Japanese learners because it is indeed discouraging for those who are eager to attain higher levels of language proficiency. However, that the majority of the learners fall short of native like proficiency is well documented in research of Second Language Acquisition. Some of the reasons for the above phenomenon are related to the following concepts, such as, sociolinguistic factors (instrumental or integrative motivation), psycholinguistic factors (the critical period hypothesis), and linguistic factors (the accessibility to Universal Grammar), and non-pathological attrition.

### **Sociolinguistic Explanation (Motivation):**

The first question here is what is the target form learners attempt to aim at: American English or British English, or even Japanese English? There are two extreme positions: that of the variationist or that of the prescriptivist (Pennington, 1996: 8). The former position allows any variety that a learner may develop because of his or her social and psychological factors, and the latter adheres to the language with a prescriptive grammar: General American for North American English and RP (Received Pronunciation) for British English. Each learner's decision will be related to the learners's

motivation.

Next, two kinds of movitation will be introduced: Learners may want to learn English for some functional reasons, such as to get a job or to pass entrance examinations. This type of motivation is called instrumental motivation. On the other hand, learners may be interested in the people who speak the language and their culture and may want to become like them. Such type of motivation is called integrative motivation. Currently it is controvertial whether learners with integrative motivation tend to do better in acquisition than those with instrumental motivation. However, it is quite probable that the former learners may tend to try to make their speech similar to the target language, to a greater extent. According to Giles's accommodation theory (cited in Ellis, 1994; Gass and Selinker, 1994), people interact with each other and make their speech similar to that of the addressees to emphasize social cohesiveness (a process of convergence) or make it different to emphasize social distinction (a process of divergence). It seems that those who have a convergence orientation tend to aim at the target language more vigorously than those with a divergence orientation.

### **Psycholinguistic Explanation (Critical Period Hypothesis):**

The critical period hypothesis (cited in Ellis, 1994; Gass and Selinger, 1994; Lightbown and Spada, 1993) claims that there is a specific time period for language learning. The strong version states that children must acquire their first language by puberty or else they never learn it, despite subsequent exposure to it. An example that supports this version is Victor, the so-called feral child who was discovered in Aveyron. In

spite of the strenuous training given to him after the discovery, he was able to produce only two utterances (milk and Oh, my God.) The weak version says that language acquisition will be more difficult and incomplete after puberty. The example of Genie, an abused child found in USA supports the weak version: She had been put to a small room with minimal human contact by her parents from eighteen months to about 14 years.

This hypothesis was adopted in the field of second language acquisition with the claims that there must be two sensitive periods for the acquisition of phonology and syntax: five or six years old for the former and before twelve years for the latter (Long, 1990). However, these are not sudden cut-off ages, but rather the capacity to become full competence declines gradually and becomes incomplete by about the age of sixteen.

### **Linguistic Explanation (Accessibility to Universal Grammar):**

Regarding the accessibility of UG, there are four positions (Ellis, 1994) : 1) complete access, 2) no access, 3) partial access, and 4) dual access (Ellis, 1997). The claim that about five percent of learners can achieve a native-like level of proficiency can be said to be supported by the first position of complete access. On the other hand, most of the learners run short of the native level of competence and their mental grammar becomes fossilized on the interlanguage continuum, which can be said to be supported by the rest of the positions: the positions of no access, partial access, and dual access. Since my concern in education focuses on general learners who fall into the ninety-five percent area, it is necessary to elaborate the positions of

partial and dual access further.

The position of partial access claims that learners have access to part of UG but not others. In the case of the non-accessed part they need to depend on their general learning strategies. The dual position holds the idea that learners have both UG and general learning strategies and the latter blocks the operation of UG, causing them to fail to achieve full competence. The common factor between the two positions is that learners tend to use general learning strategies. In other words they are dealing with language learning as if it is just another cognitive activity, such as learning mathematics or some other academic subjects. If this claim is true, it is quite an acceptable fact that most of our students in their first year at university have their highest level of knowledge in English and tend to decline as time goes by during the rest of their years at university, just like they tend to forget almost everything that they learned in mathematics or other subjects.

### **Explanation from the Perspective of Non-Pathological Attrition:**

Regarding such a phenomenon as “forgetting”, some of the theories and hypotheses which are often discussed in the field of language attrition, focusing on non-pathological literature, have an explanation and convincing power for attrition on the part of the majority of Japanese learners: Ishiguro (1994) reviewed the Regression Hypothesis and the Threshold Theory, etc. The former hypothesis was advocated by Jakobson (1941; English translation in 1968) predicting the attrition order of some linguistic features will be the reverse order of acquisition and the latter was presented by Bahrck (1984) and Cummins and Swain, (1986) and was supported by

Ishiguro (1994). The theory is characterized by the independent variable, such as the preattrition proficiency level, i.e., attrition or maintenance is due to whether or not a subject has reached a certain level of proficiency prior to his or her attrition. Other theories are reviewed by Weltens (1987), also cited by Yukawa (1997), such as the Interference Theory, the Retrieval-failure Theory, and the Decay Theory.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that much of the knowledge obtained, including most of the grammatical knowledge regarding the English language, in academic subjects of high school education is likely to be forgotten, that is, a matter of attrition. In my opinion, that is so, particularly in relation to the grammatical knowledge of English; because the learner utilizes “general learning strategies” for the acquisition of the enormous body of knowledge, just as the same as for learning other academic subjects.

In summary, Only a limited percentage of people (Box B: + acquisition and + learning) may have attained the proficiency of a native speaker’s level, because of their exposure to the target language prior to the critical period, their accessibility to Universal Grammar, and furthermore, because of their formal instruction resulting in explicit knowledge of the target language. However, most of the learners of English in Japan may belong to Box D (- acquisition and + learning), treating language learning as if it is the same as learning other academic subjects: 1) memorize words and phrases just like mathematical formulas in math class, 2) understand grammatical rules and translating English paragraphs into Japanese, which can be similar to solving math questions with mathematical formulas. In both classes the emphasis may be on the development of

cognitive abilities, although it is very important to have such a training, to some extent. This kind of training in high school will be of a necessity for higher education, in particular, for those who want to major in English literature later on in college or those who want to study abroad to pursue further studies in academic institutions.

Another major group of learners in Japan may be made up of attriters. The learners of Box D may obtain much of their knowledge about the vocabulary, idioms, and more importantly the English grammar but may attrit the major part of the accumulated information, because they might have stored it, not in the long term memory, but in the short-term memory. In consequence, they may be initially categorized in Box D, but later move toward Box C.

The other groups of learners may express their desire of acquiring communicative ability, irrespective of whether or not they are committed to input and interaction with the target language. Those who do not commit themselves to exposure of a language may just succeed in falling into Box C “no acquisition and no learning”. Those who finish their formal instruction in Japan and further seek an opportunity to learn English in English speaking countries may be called “committed learners.” They can be classified initially in either Box C or Box D, eventually moving into either Box A or Box B.

### **Future English Education in Japan:**

Currently in Japan everybody receives three years of English education in junior high school as a required subject and then have another three years of English in senior high if they continue attending school. If one majors in English language or English literature, one

continues to study English for another four years. If one majors in some other fields, one may continue the study for two years.

The problem that exists in the above system is that everybody is forced to conform to the standard path of English education in Japan regardless of his or her interest in it. The Japanese learners of English should have more options about English education. If and only if they desire to take English, should they take instruction of English. In other words, those who are not interested in English should be free from taking it. Based on such a premise, along with theoretical discussions on language acquisition and my classifications of current university students with the acquisition-learning model, the following suggestions can be made for future English education in Japan.

1) The three-year education in junior high should be required and focus on “communicative skills.” This is the place where learners should learn some basic communicative abilities in both production and comprehension. Those initially classified in Box C can have the possibility to move to a further step in the acquisition continuum within Box C or toward Box A with radical progress.

2) Continued three year English education in senior high should be elective and two types of instructions should be available to learners: traditional grammar translation-based classes and communication-oriented classes. Learners could make a choice about which course to take after deep consideration of their purposes of learning the language.

If they want to major in English at university later, in the future for instance, they definitely need to take the grammar-based instruction. A shift from Box C to Box D, or from Box A to

Box B can be expected, depending on the level achieved during junior high school. If they want to improve their communicative skills further, rather than deepen their grammatical knowledge, they can choose the second type of instruction. Either a further shift toward Box A within Box C or a shift crossing into Box A could be anticipated. In an extreme case, if they prefer, they could choose to take no English courses. In order to make such a radical dream possible, we will have to come to a consensus about abandoning the current system of university entrance exams.

3) Two year English instruction at the university level should focus on “English for specific purposes”. Those who major in law, for instance, should be familiar with English used in the field of law. They should be prepared for the subsequent specialized field of study, rather than, for example, study a work of Shakespeare that they can partially cover during a school year. In the same way, those who major in other fields as well should be free from traditional readings in literature. If they want to become a person of culture and study English or American literature, they should study liberal arts in the Kihon Kamoku section, using the translated Japanese versions. Or they should major in English Literature, rather than do translation work in English classes.

Finally, in order to make these implications come true, the following radical suggestion is a necessity although it is the most difficult agreement to reach among educators and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology: An English test should be eliminated from university entrance examinations if one intends to major in a specialization that does not require much English as the English major. This suggestion would enable learners of English to

realize their true purposes for learning English and choose more appropriate programs in school for their own benefit.

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