

THE PROBLEMS JAPANESE STUDENTS HAVE

"We came to England last summer. We went to a language school in Oxford. There were four Japanese girls in a class of 12 students. The other students were European. They were mostly Italian and Spanish. At the end of two weeks, all the other students moved on. We stayed behind with a group of new students. They were all younger than we were."

WHY?

SOME LINGUISTIC REASONS FOR THE DIFFICULTIES

No matter what our nationality, few of us make quick and easy progress when we set out to learn another language. But, of all the nationalities I have taught, Japanese students often have the greatest difficulty in making effective progress towards fluency. Here I outline some of the linguistic obstacles they appear to face.

The structures of the two languages, Japanese and English, are so different that it is impossible to translate in any literal way from one to the other. Any attempt to speak English by reference to Japanese word-order, the verb-forms or particles, will result in confusion.

Secondly, the forms of the words, the syllables, are completely different: syllables in Japanese are open, in English they are mostly closed; Japanese has no equivalent of the very large group of closed monosyllables found in English (bat, pop, not, said); English, moreover, has large numbers of consonant clusters (edge, graph, attempt, complete); except for -n, Japanese has no terminal consonants.

Thirdly, Japanese enjoys a much simpler phonetic system. In large measure, fortunately, it corresponds to the English equivalent, but it has, for example, no L-consonant, some long vowel sounds, the neutral vowel and compound vowels found in English.

SUCCESSFUL ENGLISH IS NEUTRAL ENGLISH, SPOKEN FLUENTLY

These days, in the global village, many of us live and study and work in countries abroad. For such internationalists, the global language is neutral English. Their top priority, whether they travel for business or study or pleasure, is to speak it fluently. Neutral English is a form of standard English, or received pronunciation (RP). RP is the language of business and professional people, radio news readers, politicians and stage actors. Like RP, neutral English is crisp and clear and, if possible, correct and pleasant to listen to. Such English can also be referred to as functional or mid-Atlantic or International English. Nowadays, it is commonplace to find “foreigners” who speak an English superior to that of most of the “natives”, British or American.

Fourthly, as a result of the simpler phonetic system, the use of the organs of speech – the tongue, jaw and lips – is restricted. The five vowel sounds all take place in the middle of the tongue, the jaw opens only partially, and lips move hardly at all. Since all syllables end in a vowel, it follows that the articulation of the final consonants of common English words is likewise physically limited. As long as this restricted movement of the organs of speech persists, Japanese students will find their English muffled or nasal.

These four reasons are well documented, and apparent. However, there is a fifth, much more significant, reason why Japanese nationals find it difficult to speak fluent English: they have a severe listening problem.

HOW CAN HEARING/LISTENING BE A PROBLEM WHEN OUR MUSICIANS ARE AMONG THE BEST IN THE WORLD?

Hearing and listening should not be confused. As married couples know all too well, we often hear, but rarely listen. Thus, only if you are composing or interpreting music will you be up against the complex problems involved in listening to or processing speech.

Listening to spoken English, Japanese students find it difficult to distinguish between the definite and indefinite articles. From the flow of speech, they have problems catching prepositions and pronouns and conjunctions, short adverbs, plurals, and the forms of the auxiliary verbs. The difficulty worsens when, for example, the final consonant of one word is the same as the first consonant of the next. Structural words may only be picked out after hearing the same sentence several times. Even then, after repetition, students may still not accurately pick up between 10 and 20 per cent of the "little" words.

WHY DO STUDENTS HAVE SUCH EXTREME DIFFICULTY LISTENING TO ENGLISH?

The answer may perhaps be found in the fundamental difference in the way each language is learnt by children. Japanese children spend long years learning to write the language. Their script is so beautiful. When English children learn their language, they are absorbed in its sounds. When they come to writing, they write as they hear, and ask their teacher, "Does this sound right?" They would never bring their written work and ask, "Does this look right?" As a result, English children spell badly, and their (my!) handwriting is ugly and unreadable.

When you are learning a language, good listening is the single most important factor. Someone who is better than you at learning the language is said to have “a good ear”. Just as you may see something in the mind’s eye, so you can listen to something with the mind’s ear.

Two things are involved in having an ear for the language. Firstly, it requires the listener to hear, not the keywords only, or the “gist” or “sense” of what is being said, but all the words, the “noise”. For example, one can ask a student (not a beginner) if he would like tea or coffee, and he will answer, “Yes, please.” Secondly, it requires the listener to hear the keywords accurately: one of the first things any English language teacher learns is to confirm appointments made with students for Tuesdays and Thursdays because when listening is not accurate, Tuesdays and Thursdays become interchangeable.

THE MISTAKES YOU MAKE IN LISTENING WILL BE REPEATED IN YOUR SPEAKING AND WRITING

Here is an author discussing the technique of writing in English. His advice emphasizes the importance of the ear in learning English. He says:

“Truly knowing about grammar... is not a matter of book learning. It is not a matter of knowing the names for the parts of speech. It is not a matter of remembering rules you were given in school. It is quite simply a matter of music.

When I want to write the past tense of “ring”, I don’t say to myself: ring? Isn’t that one of the 200 irregular verbs with odd forms in the past tense? I simply write ‘rang’ because it sounds right and ‘ringed’ doesn’t sound right. That’s what I do and that’s what you do...

But if you constantly make these grammatical mistakes, you have not developed a true ear for the language... you must go back and take a course in grammar, but this time learn it with your ears, not with your eyes."

Gary Provost, *Make Your Words Work - Techniques for Effective Writing*, Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, 1990

The English language learner needs an active ear. He needs to be trained to observe, not with the eyes, but with the ears. For this purpose, television is useless. Worse than useless. It puts the ear (and the brain) to sleep. Radio news programs are little better: you hear only what you have heard before. Cinema, too, anaesthetizes the ear.

Everyday conversation is not much help, either. Precise listening is not required. The subject material – last night's TV, tomorrow's weather, next month's holiday – will hold few surprises. On the other hand, a lecture, or business negotiations, will be full of surprises. Precise understanding of the argument is essential. The mind must hold on to spoken premises, examples and conclusions. The mind's ear must be active: receptive, analytical and retentive. It listens.

English, then, is picked up through the ear, not from the printed page. The more precisely it is heard, the more effectively it is assimilated. However, if hearing is sleepy or inadequate, for whatever reason, then the process of "picking up" cannot take place. The language goes in one ear and out the other. It does not stop anywhere in between.