

Some Problems Faced by Japanese Students

LISTENING

All Japanese students of English have the same problem. They have difficulty listening to spoken English. In more technical language, they suffer from a complex auditory processing deficiency.

Of course, students can hear. They play the piano. They listen to the Beatles and Beethoven. The "deafness" occurs when they listen to English speech and cannot follow or understand or "process" what they hear.

There are several reasons for this "deafness", the most obvious being found in the differences between the two languages in pitch and loudness and stress. The result of these differences is that the Japanese student, listening to "I am going to the airport in the morning to meet a friend" will hear only "...going ...airport ...morning... friend."

All this is in addition to such problems as the well-known confusion of L/R.

READING

The problem in reading is that students read slowly. The slowness results from reading English as if each word is isolated, as if it were a syllable or an ideogram. Unlike Japanese, English is mostly based on phrases, groups of words, which are read as a unit. Because they take a sentence word by word, students complain that they have a "vocabulary problem" when in fact they have a "phrase problem".

Absorbing the phrasal pattern of English is made more difficult by the fact that the structural words controlling the phrase are unstressed and difficult for the student to pick up. Because Japanese is such a visual language, it is difficult for students to understand that when native speakers read, they are in fact listening. The educated native reader takes in phrases, or rather, the "shape" of phrases and translates them instantaneously into sound. (At least, I think this is what happens. What goes on in the brain is difficult to demonstrate.)

English is read, not word by word, but rather phrase by phrase. The phrase has meaning, the word doesn't.

SPEAKING

Accuracy of speech depends on accuracy of hearing. As with a computer, it is a matter of GIGO: garbage in, garbage out. Any professional voice instructor will always test hearing because if students hear wrongly, they will speak wrongly. They say what they hear. Thus, any improvement in hearing will result in a parallel improvement in speaking.

Apart from audio processing, a second problem lies in the slowness of speech which results from separating words as if they were syllables. English is approached as if it were a random collection of individual words, each word given the same stress, rather than an organised pattern of words grouped as phrases. Thus, when the native speaker says, "I'm GOING t'the AIRPORT in the MORNING", the students says. "I AM GOING TO THE AIRPORT IN THE MORNING", each word pronounced with the same weight.

Physical problems of pronunciation result from differences between the two languages in lip and tongue movement and breathing control.

WRITING

Even for native speakers, writing good English is difficult; for Japanese students, it is a nightmare.

All the fundamental input problems of listening and reading become apparent as soon as students put pen to paper. GIGO rules.

Most obvious, and most irritating for students, is the constant confusion or omission of the articles, "a" and "the", resulting from listening difficulties but also from the absence of articles in their own language. Not far behind is the slow improvement in the use of English syntax which results from seeing English as a collection of individual written words rather than hearing it as a pattern of phrases.