

## Language Learning History

### 言語学習歴

**From a learner of English at school to a learner as an English user and teacher**



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Until the point of my compulsory retirement last spring, I had been teaching English at a public senior high school for more than 30 years. Now I am still working using a re-employment system because I still have an interest in teaching English to young learners and I would like to help them improve their English proficiency and broaden their horizons and possibilities.

As a non-native speaker of English, I feel, as many other non-native speakers of English who teach English in Japan probably do, that there are two important aspects to my connection with English. I am a learner as well as a teacher of English, and learning is a lifetime work.

My initial contact with English was when I was at the age of 15. Like most young people in Japan, English was the subject for me to learn at junior high school for the first time. English attracted me because it was quite different from my native language, Japanese, and I found it interesting to study various things about the new language. Also, to me, English was like a window open to different worlds. One of my favorite books then was (and still is) "Anne of Green Gables." Although the book was written in Japanese, it inspired me to study English hard in order to travel to different

countries. Although I cannot remember exactly how I learned English at that time, I can recall the scene where my classmates and I read the textbook aloud in class. Reading aloud is a way of learning known as "ondoku." I studied hard not only in class but also at home, so I got a good score on the tests and English became one of my favorite subjects. How was my listening ability then? I remember one unforgettable episode in particular. One day after school, I had a chance to listen to an English song. While listening, I noticed I could not sing along with it though I was looking at its lyrics. A long time after that, I understood the reason. I needed more practice because English has its unique characters of sound. However, shock alone stuck to my mind.

In senior high school, I felt that English learning became more difficult, but I still liked it and studied it hard. Through studying English, I could continue to know about people and culture whose backgrounds differed from mine. In addition, studying English was crucial for me to pass the university entrance exam. I remember how we students learned in two main types of class: "Reader" and "Grammar and Composition." In the former class, the teacher read us an English passage we were expected to study, explained some grammatical matters, and asked us to put each sentence into Japanese one by one. After the meanings of all the sentences were confirmed, my classmates and I read them aloud after the teacher. When I reflect on his way of teaching reading, it was very simple. After I became a teacher, I realized that such a "yakudoku" approach has been a common approach in EFL classes in Japan for a

long time. We were not taught other effective ways of reading such as grasping the main ideas of a text. That teaching way may be what could not be helped.

In the “Composition and Grammar” class, I acquired fundamental knowledge about grammar. The teacher was an attractive young woman who spoke English very fluently. The contents of the textbook were arranged focusing on grammar items. We were expected to understand the explanations about them, memorize sample sentences including the target grammar items, and work through different exercises. The main part of each exercise was to translate Japanese sentences into English ones. We did not practice writing any essays. However, later I found this class was very helpful in my English learning history. The teacher encouraged us to memorize five key sentences as our homework and in the next class gave us a quiz. Even now I can recall some of the sentences that I learned. I spent a lot of time learning at home in order to prepare and review classes and studied more by myself using materials made for students who wanted to enter university. I was able to improve my abilities high enough to enter a national university. My reflection on learning in my senior high school days let me notice that my learning was unbalanced in developing four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. My classmates and I were rarely given a chance to use English in situations as in the real world. However, my English learning at senior high school as well as at junior high school built the base of my knowledge about grammar. I really appreciate that because since then I have often recognized that what I gained then remains firmly in my mind.

After graduating from senior high school, I entered a national university to become an English teacher. However, soon I recognized my choice of major was wrong. I had chosen to study education,

but in order to get a license as an English teacher. I was studying with students whose major was English. Almost all the classes I was allowed to attend were lectures through Japanese, but there was a class which was quite different. There I was taught by a native speaker of English for the first time in my life. In those days, he was probably the only native speaker of English at the university. I remember the day when I first attended his class. I could not listen to him and say anything at all except for some simple expressions. After the class, I trudged my way back to the dormitory as I had completely lost confidence in my English proficiency. My roommate in the same dormitory advised me to develop my listening and speaking by listening to an English conversation program broadcast by NHK. I bought a radio-tape-recorder and began listening to it. However, gradually learning English was becoming very stressful to me with tough studies in my major. In my senior year, I repeatedly wondered what job to choose, and eventually I became a police officer because juvenile delinquency was another interest of mine.

After graduating from university, I had a seven-year career as a police officer, which was a really valuable experience. However, a few years after I got the job, I recognized that because of a personnel matter it would be impossible to work in the field related to juvenile delinquency which I wanted to get involved in. In addition, I recognized that I was more interested in teaching. After some more years of consideration, I finally decided to change jobs and become an English teacher. This was a turning point in my life. As I was not keeping in touch with English very much after I graduated from university, I started to learn English again to be an English teacher. I had difficulty in recalling the vocabulary I had learned in my school days, but I persevered and I even studied by using textbooks for junior high school students. My knowledge of

the grammar I had learned long time before turned to be very helpful in learning English again.

I became a teacher in the early 1980s and soon I recognized that situations around English teaching and learning were beginning to change—to greater emphasis on English as a tool of communication in English education. The trend has continued, and all the time I have been making efforts to be a better English teacher—attending seminars, watching TV or listening to the radio, reading books or magazines for English teachers and/or learners, and so on. At the same time, I myself have been learning English in various ways trying to be a better English communicator with well-balanced skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Despite all my efforts, I sometimes feel that I am not spending enough time on developing my English because of different challenges in my professional and personal life. That makes me feel that I need a stronger will to keep on learning.

In turn, my ways of learning English for myself have a lot to do with my teaching in class. English pronunciation is quite different from Japanese pronunciation. It is important for teachers to be able to show good pronunciation to their students. I joined an English teachers' group whose aim was to help teachers to gain English pronunciation articulate enough to teach in class. There, I started my learning by practicing abdominal breathing, and my English sounds became good enough as a non-native speaker. The experience in this group has been very helpful to me as a teacher. As a non-native speaker, I understand what difficulties Japanese learners have in making English sounds, and based on this knowledge and the training I had, I have been teaching English pronunciation to my students.

Various English programs through media such as NHK have also proved very useful to improve my listening and speaking skills. Among

various programs, I like Mr. Toyama's program best because the contents of its textbooks have a rich and attractive variety. Moreover, he is always cheerful and encourages us to continue learning, saying "Keep listening, keep practicing and keep on smiling!" He teaches us listeners the joy of language learning. He also teaches me as a teacher the importance of creating a relaxing atmosphere in language-teaching classes. If learning is not enjoyable, it will not last long, and we know that language learning requires a large amount of time in school days and in the following days.

Information and knowledge from books and magazines for English teachers and/or learners are important resources as well. For example, one day I learned about "shadowing", which is one of the techniques for people who want to be an interpreter. Some high school teachers were already using it in their classes. I tried it at once and since then it has been one of my important ways of English learning. In my English classes, I sometimes encourage my students to try shadowing too according to their proficiency. Another piece of information I got from publications is the effectiveness of extensive reading. Until then, I had usually read texts intensively and rather slowly. However, I recognized the importance of reading easy, interesting texts at a rapid pace and reading a lot of them. This way of reading showed me another way of how to interact with English texts. I later introduced extensive reading into my classes though it was done at a small scale. My students enjoyed choosing and reading easy texts. As for writing, I learned mapping as one way of how to organize ideas, then began using this technique in my English writing, and also introduced it into my classes.

These experiences are some examples of how I have tried to improve different English skills,

mainly focusing on listening and speaking skills, for myself as an English user and teacher. What I will focus on next is not related to such skills, but related to learners' managing learning on their own. Once I attended a certain seminar for people who wanted to get a higher TOEIC score. There, there were some English teachers as well as many business people and some university students. The seminar leader showed us how to train ourselves and pointed out the importance of self-training. I was a little surprised because what he emphasized more was the idea of learners' developing their motivation and learning autonomously. His concern was adults' learning, but it reminded me of reports about practices by some high school teachers. They also insisted on the importance of their students' self-studying. This made me begin to understand that the concept of self-training and self-studying is related to autonomy, which I learned about later and now recognize much more as significant.

Although I had been attending different seminars in order to improve my teaching, I felt the necessity of studying current theories of language and second language learning and teaching so that I could think further about and reflect on my practices considering such theories. Therefore, I entered Teachers College Columbia University Japan Campus. At that time I was in my early 50s, but I thought I was never too old to learn. At TC, I attended various kinds of courses related to TESOL, spending a lot of time in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking about things critically, which resulted in improvement of my language proficiency. Since I began studying at graduate school, I have come to be able to see both practically and theoretically how I have been learning English.

When I look back at my language learning history as a whole, learning as a student in the first

stage was rather unbalanced in terms of improving skills though it benefitted me in that it gave me the basis of grammatical knowledge. In the second stage, taking the point of view as an English teacher has been added to my language learning. I have introduced various ways which I used in my learning and thought effective for my students' learning into my EFL classes after adjusting such ways for them.

In the end, I would like to reflect on why I have been learning English and I will keep learning it in the future. As a teacher of English, I have three important reasons for doing so. One is that I would like to be able to use English more accurately and appropriately in order to make my teaching better. I will be able to help my students interact with me and the classmates more effectively, make more suitable materials, and so on. Another is that in class I can show them a better model of an English user as a non-native speaker. I hope that they feel that they will be able to become good users of English in the future. In addition, by keeping on learning I can show them a model of what it means to be a life-long learner. It is apparent that it takes a lot of time for language learners in EFL contexts such as Japan to become good communicators. Therefore, teachers play an important role in encouraging their students to learn not only at school but also after graduating from school. As a non-native English teacher in Japan, I believe that my attitude toward learning will have a positive effect on my students. In the future even after retiring from my teaching job completely, as just a user of English, I will keep on learning in order to expand my possibilities and enjoy my life more. So my language learning in many different senses is endless.