

# Recollections of My Learning and Teaching English

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a review of my memories of learning and teaching English since I started learning English in Japan. The recollections are basically discussed according to the three following domains: physical, cognitive, and affective since we perceive things by these three domains.

### I-1 Physical Domain

Learning foreign language requires the use of different muscles in writing and speaking. Japanese letters consist of Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji or Chinese characters while English uses an alphabet. When it comes to pronunciation, we have to use different muscles of our tongue and lungs. Learning to spell and pronounce requires repetition day after day. In this sense, the audio-lingual method of teaching offers effective ways of training for improving pronunciation in the physical domain.

### I-2 Cognitive Domain

The language processing abilities of the learner have been discussed in the studies of the second language acquisition. Learner's errors have been considered in the process of learning the target language in interlanguage hypothesis advocated by Selinker in 1972. The learner develops the *creative* interlanguage on his/her own in the context of use. Richard-Amato (1988) summarizes the cognitive domain of the language

acquisition. She discusses Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and says, "The individual through interaction progresses from what he called an *actual developmental level* to a *potential developmental level*" (p. 32). The learner develops his/her English through *interaction* with others in English. However, the learner will not acquire the language if he/she is not ready to acquire according to the Monitor Model. In Krashen's Monitor Model (Krashen & Terrell, 1988), language processing abilities are divided into conscious and unconscious process of learning: Learning and Acquisition distinction. According to the Monitor Model, there are two competences to acquire the language. Krashen claims that the acquired knowledge is not the same kind; one is called, "acquisition" knowledge and the other, "learning" knowledge. We sometimes experience these distinctions by intuition. We remember phrases or sentences through interaction with others in the language and use them when we are in a right context. This is an example of the "acquisition" knowledge that people unconsciously acquire the language through interaction with others in the language. "Learning" according to Krashen is a conscious knowledge in which we usually learn the structures of the language in school. It also came out when I was in a right context in interaction with others in the language according to my experiences. The key to the acquisition of the second language, according to Krashen, is comprehensible input in which the level of the language should be a little bit higher than the learner's current level ( $i+1$ ). If the learner understands the contents given in the language, he/she may acquire the language.

Richard-Amato (1988) also introduces Cummins' theoretical framework of language proficiency and bilingual proficiency. Cummins distinguishes language proficiency between BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) and CALP (Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency).

BICS represents face-to-face conversation skills in which the learner can use a lot of contextual clues to understand the meaning of the conversation and also negotiate the meaning. On the other hand, CALP is the language proficiency that requires the learner to understand the cognitively demanding and context-reduced materials such as reading textbooks in school. The language proficiency is considered to develop from BICS to CALP. Cummins also theorizes by using the concept of CUP (Common Underlying Proficiency) that first and second language academic skills are transferable. "The interdependence or common underlying proficiency principle implies that experience with *either* language can promote development of the proficiency underlying both languages, given adequate motivation and exposure to both either in school or in the wider environment" (Richard-Amato, 1988, p. 388).

### I-3 Affective Domain

We know that we are apt to be affected by our psychological condition in our everyday life. It is recognized that there are some psychological or affective variables to influence the acquisition of the second language. Richard-Amato (1988) summarizes that "Learners with high motivation and self-confidence and with low anxiety have low filters and so obtain and let in plenty of input" (p. 315) regarding with the Krashen's Monitor Model. This statement can apply to anybody across the culture. Anyone who is motivated to learn English can be successful to acquire the language. However, it may be hard for the learner to have self-confidence with a low proficiency of the language in the beginning. It is also true that anyone may be afraid of making mistakes. It is, however, a matter of degree, which is based on his/her cultural background.

Storti (1999) argues four fundamental dimensions of culture in human experiences: Concept of self, Personal versus societal responsibility, Concept of time, and Locus of control. I would like to consider two out of four dimensions of culture here: Concept of self, which is the distinction between the individualist and the collectivist, and the locus of control. Generally speaking, the locus of control is internal among the people from the individualistic culture whereas it is external among the collectivists. The individualist greatly values independence and self-reliance. Therefore, “you are responsible for what happens to you” (Storti, 1999, p. 68). You are the one who makes the decision on your future. Here, the locus of control is internal.

On the other hand, the collectivist values group harmony and the interdependence of the group members. “There are limits beyond which one cannot go and certain givens that cannot be changed and must be accepted” (Storti, 1999, p. 68). There is a Japanese phrase, *shikataganai* (That’s the way it goes). This phrase represents a Japanese mind as collectivist very well. You are willing to know the group decision or consensus before you make your decision. That way, you can avoid making mistakes and keep your face to the group members. In this case, the affective filter, as Krashen states, tends to be rather higher with the people from this collectivistic culture than the ones from individualistic culture.

## II. HIGH SCHOOL DAYS

I started to learn English when I entered a junior high school under the curriculum nationally regulated by the Ministry of Education and Science like most other students in Japan. Thanks to *romaji* (the Roman

alphabet) that we learned at the elementary school, the alphabet had already looked familiar to me. I was able to spell them and distinguish between capital and small letters. The advantage of learning the Roman alphabet is to spell names of people, places, etc. in Japanese pronunciation; for example, the vowels are pronounced with only five ways: [a], [i], [u], [e], and [o]. We can even use the Roman alphabet to write a letter in Japanese way. On the other hand, the drawback is the rigid combination between a letter and a sound; therefore, the strong Japanese accent may remain when we learn to read-out English text.

In my case, Mr. Sato, an English teacher of my first year of the junior high school, used his hand-made pictures to teach how to use grammar of English such as verbs and adjectives. Students were required to explain what was going on in the picture to the teacher in English. I could understand his English by looking at his non-verbal cues and the picture. This way, I learned the distinction of the pronunciation between the Roman alphabet and English. Mr. Sato taught how to read and write English based on the oral conversation skills. He taught listening and speaking before reading and writing, which follows the principles of the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1988).

When I entered high school, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, English classes focused on only two skills: Grammar and Reading. I depended on my memory to learn grammatical rules and tried to use the memorized knowledge to translate English into Japanese in the English textbook. Teaching English at my high school days mainly used the grammar-translation method, which corresponded to the styles of entrance examinations to Japanese universities. Thanks to this knowledge, I was one of the best students at the English grammar class offered in University of Oregon when I studied abroad afterwards.

### III. UNIVERSITY DAYS

I entered Nagoya Gakuin University (NGU) in 1966. I heard that there would be an exchange program between NGU and Alaska Methodist University (AMU), which is the present Alaska Pacific University (APU). Since 1967, the late Dr. Masaya David Yamamoto came to teach the Study of Religion (Christianity) at NGU, and promoted and prepared for the exchange program with AMU. He established an intensive English Language Institute Program in December of 1967 to prepare willing students for the exchange program. (Arai, 1970) It was held in winter, spring and summer vacations. I participated each session from 1968. The NGU participants lived together with the Yamamotos, Professor McMullen, a Methodist missionary (?) from the United States, and exchange students from AMU. In the morning, an exchange student came to do drill practices in the textbook, *English 900*, which was organized on the principle of the Audio-lingual Approach. The aim of the drill is to automatize the English structures orally by repetition and substitution. I still remember the sentences that I practiced subjunctives orally by this method at that time. In the afternoon, Dr. Yamamoto gave us the seminar of Japanese history using the book, *Japanese Inn—A Reconstruction of the Past* written by Oliver Statler in English. In the evening, some American missionaries came to introduce games using English and show some videos in English. We sometimes had discussions with them, too.

Dr. Yamamoto once told me about the major philosophy behind this program. Through this program, he was trying “to help in the ‘building of bridges’ (across the Pacific Ocean)—bridges which would be meaningful and useful” to understand each other among the people of the

North Pacific. (*Dr. Yamamoto and exchange program, 1970*) They are bridges of intercultural understandings across the Pacific Ocean.

#### IV. STUDYING ABROAD

The first time I went to study abroad was in 1969 when I was a junior of NGU. I was one of the three exchange students from NGU to AMU for the first whole academic year program. I still remember how exciting it was when we arrived in Anchorage International Airport. In the beginning, the speed of conversation sounded to me too fast to understand the contents. In the formal training at school in Japan, the contraction and reduction of the colloquialism were not introduced as often as nowadays. It took me a few months to get used to the speed of English which native speakers spoke.

I took Micro and Macro Economics besides English and other liberal arts classes because I wanted to transfer these credits to NGU for my graduation from NGU. Since my major at NGU was Economics, I studied some about Economics at NGU and also brought the references on Micro and Macro Economics written in Japanese. Even though the level of my English proficiency was not so high enough for the lecture and discussions in class, I earned the credits in both classes. Looking back on these days, the principle of the Cummins' CUP is true in my case. As my level of English proficiency improved, I could transfer the knowledge of Economics that I gained through textbooks and lectures in Japanese into the classes in English at AMU.

The second time I went to the United States to study was 1972 after I graduated from NGU and worked for a while. This time, I wanted to become an English teacher and changed my major into English and later

into Linguistics. I started taking the introduction of English and American literature for my second B. A. at AMU. This was the first time for me to take a literature course at a university level. It is true that I really had a hard time in classes, but thanks to the help of my American friends, who I met at AMU Karate club and dormitory, I gradually became to be able to handle the class requirements.

As Cummins' hypothesis, the improvement of the BICS must be important to be able to function in an academic situation. I was lucky to be in a good peer group, who helped with my English at the dormitory and classes. One thing I noticed was that I could make a lot of friends if I were recognized to be superior in one field: I started taking Karate at AMU and won the first place at the AMU Karate championship and also at the first Southern Alaska Karate championship in the white belt division.

After I earned the second B.A. in English, I started working at the Consulate of Japan in Anchorage as a clerk. I worked at the Consulate for four years and started to study Linguistics at the University of Oregon (U of O) in Eugene, Oregon. I wanted to know more about language and its function. Again I changed my major to Linguistics and started taking the introductory courses since this field was totally brand new to me. Thanks to my experiences of living in the United States for several years and studying at AMU, I could handle the materials in English in the course even though they were new to me. After I gained another B. A. in Linguistics, I transferred to the University of Southern California (USC) and finished my Master degree of TESOL (Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages), where I met Krashen and took his class at the graduate courses. I remember that I was very impressed by his Monitor Model in his lecture. I learned how important the concept of the



comprehensible input was for the second language acquisition. The input of a new language must be comprehensible to the learners of that language.

#### IV. TEACHING AT OUC

I started teaching English at Otaru University of Commerce (OUC) in 1987 after I came back from the United States early in that year. I used English from the beginning and expected students to interact with me and other students in English at my classes, but found out that they were not ready for this kind of teaching style. I still remember that one of the students at my English class expressed his frustration and told me in Japanese, “Speak in Japanese, or I don’t understand at all.” That was the first time for most of the students to see Japanese teachers using only English in class. I explained why it was important to use English in an English classroom, and continued using English in class.

According to my observation, students hesitated using English with a Japanese teacher at that time, though things have changed a lot nowadays. After a while, I set a limit to use English only when we were doing exercises in class. The instructions and classroom managements were done in Japanese afterwards.

Another hindrance to motivation for students to use English among Japanese people was the English program at the university: English conversation was designed for a native speaker to teach in the program, though this system has been modified now. The goal of learning English was considered to become like a native speaker among students and even among teachers. The idea enhanced the disposition of perfectionism among students, which caused them to hesitate to use English among

Japanese people. Considering the cognitive domain of the second language acquisition, the learner is considered to develop his/her own inter-language or his/her English through interaction with others in English. The problem was how to encourage students to interact with each other. I remember that I spent a lot of time to prepare various kinds of tasks for the class activities. When the students were not interested in the tasks, I was disappointed and felt really tired afterwards.

From the point of view of the affective domain, Japanese students tend to be reluctant to initiate conversation and to give their own opinions. They may ask questions after the class is over but not in the class when they feel the questions may be important to them. They want to keep harmony as a group and refrain from giving opinions and asking questions in the classroom. It is sometimes difficult to break through this kind of “reserve” as in the collectivistic culture.

Since 2003, I have accepted international students into my seminar and comparative culture classes. The main language of instruction was English since the international students came to study on the one-year program that did not require the ability of Japanese language. In the beginning, the gap of the English level was very serious between international students (some of them were native speakers of English) and Japanese students. Some international students complained that Japanese students in their group were very reluctant to give their own opinions. However, as time passed, students in each group tried to communicate and cooperate with each other to accomplish their group assignments. I stressed how important the comprehensible input was and sometimes explained the effectiveness of “foreigner’s talk” to the native speakers of English if it was needed. The topic of the discussions in class was intercultural communication and I focused on the students’

own culture. The international students seemed to be interested in the topic of Japanese culture and gave examples of their observation in their daily lives in Japan. It was an advantage for Japanese students to deal with their own culture on the other hand. Thanks to the participation of the international students, Japanese students gradually learned how to interact with each other in English.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Looking back on my experiences of learning and teaching English, the physical domain such as repetition practices and the cognitive domain as in gaining language skills depend a lot on skill training. However, the affective domain such as intercultural communication has something to do with the issues on learner's culture and identity. There are some obvious differences in the traits between individualism and collectivism in the interaction of daily lives. According to Stori (1999), people from the individualistic cultures tend to be self-reliant and "the locus of control is largely internal, within the individual" (Stori, 1999, p. 68). On the other hand people from the collectivistic culture tend to consider the needs and feelings of others for keeping harmony in the group. Therefore, "the locus of control is largely external to the individual" (Stori, 1999, p. 68). The affective domain relates deeply to the learner's own culture and identity. This cultural difference explains why many Japanese students refrain from giving their own opinions in class.

The basic idea of intercultural communication is to understand each other. When we interact with the people from other cultures, the self-assertiveness sometimes becomes an important key to communicating with each other. We need first to know our own cultural traits to

ensure our own identity with self-esteem, and learn how to communicate with people from different cultures.

After all, actual interaction in the language is important in learning and teaching English if the goal of learning and teaching English is communication. From my observation in teaching at OUC, Japanese students learned how to communicate with international students as peers. I was assured of the importance of learning and teaching intercultural communication in English education. I wish I could continue building “the cultural *bridges*” that the late Dr. Yamamoto once told me about when I was a student at NGU.

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