

The How and How Long of English Language Teaching in Japan: A Teacher's Perspective

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Few teachers and administrators share their empirically-based views on how language is learned and what they expect of their students. One such outline is presented in this paper. Among the observations is that 'salience' – in the sense of importance or interest to the learner – is an essential and presently underrated element in all aspects of syllabus. Another is that the concept 'teaching English' hides distinctions that must be made in order to have a realistic view of language education.

"...language teachers, if they actually observe themselves and their students, can come to know as much as or more than research can currently tell them. Their mastery resides in that sort of observation; ... and in their willingness to think critically and at a conscious level about language, culture, and teaching/learning." James Paul Gee (TESOL Quarterly)

"...the experience and opinions of one teacher, however good, are simply not enough; they cannot be representative." Andrew Wright (The Language Teacher)

Introduction

TESOL, as a fully-fledged discipline and profession, sees most of its debate occurring within the ivory towers of academia. Classroom practitioners also have their say, but generally confine themselves to presenting techniques and lesson plans in newsletters or at conferences. Teachers and administrators rarely talk about their empirically-based views on language and how it is learned, and, based on that, how and with what expectations they organize their programs or classes.

That rich, untapped vein of informed observation might product new answers to two fundamental questions; how to go about teaching, and how long it should take students to reach a certain ability level. The following is written in the hopes of beginning such a process of sharing among practicing teachers. Comment and disagreement are encouraged. Everything below pertains to the teaching of general English skills in Japan (TEFL). How much relevance it has to other teaching situations remains to be seen.

Part 1: Theory

The following interpretations are chosen as the ones likely to produce the most impact

in the classroom. Sections are identified by number, and notes for each section can be found at the end of the paper.

What is a language?

1.1 A particular, pre-set (but evolving) way of seeing the world. "Language is not a neutral vessel, but an invisible mold that actually shapes the way people think and perceive." (Rheingold). When students learn any element of a foreign language, they are, at the same time, taking on the 'culture' of that language (in the sense of presuppositions about the world, rather than customs or art).

1.2 A language is so complex it may never be fully analysed. Grammar, functions, vocabulary and stress are examples of more easily-made distinctions that have been applied to language teaching syllabuses. There are uncounted other elements, gross and subtle, that do not appear in syllabuses, but which a student must also acquire to achieve mastery.

How do people learn a foreign language?

1.3 Exposed to language, the mind automatically acquires what is salient (or meaningful, in the sense of important or interesting to the learner). This is why 'communicative' does not deserve the status it presently enjoys as the all-pervading guiding principle in teaching. While communicative activities may be essential to achieve certain results, they will not do so unless they are at the same time salient to the learner. Students, of course, have different interests, which complicates the achievement of salience in the classroom. A hypothesis based on my experience is that student retention is directly linked to salience.

1.4 When students come to think in, and see the world through, a particular aspect of the target language, they spontaneously recall or produce that aspect of language in the relevant situation. Students can be said to have made that aspect of the target language their own; to have acquired it; to be fluent (and accurate) in it; to have automatized it; even, to have learned it. Whatever terminology is used, this is the goal of language teaching.

1.5 Things acquired are not retained in isolation, but in relation to other things. What you already know forms a network of associations for the new material, so the more you know, the easier and faster it is to learn.

1.6 Acquisition is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon: while a few things are learned indelibly after one exposure (the vulgar language syndrome), most elements are partially acquired, and repeated exposure can aid acquisition. Material reviewed in different con-

texts exposes students to more dimensions of usage, leading to deeper understanding. New contexts may also provide the necessary salience for certain students.

1.7 Students cannot reenter the small world of the child learning a first language. Compared to a child, an adult is both more intelligent, and has a different set of concerns. There is another important element to adults. They possess egos/identities, which they believe to be crucial to survival. In almost all cases, this identity is inseparable from the first language culture. Most learners will have an unconscious barrier to acquiring those elements of language that most mark one as a member of another culture (correct grammar and pronunciation, for example.)

Part 2: Practice

How should we teach?

2.1 While language is complex enough to defy full analysis, some of the more basic elements that have been identified (e. g. syntax, phonology, functions) can form a basis for syllabus. As our understanding of language becomes more sophisticated, however, there is a danger of trying to combine too many of these elements into a multi-syllabus. A workable syllabus might be constructed around only structural and functional elements, for example. After that, it is the richness and realism and salience of the language-learning situation that allows acquisition of those other elements of language, either as yet undefined, or too numerous or complex to be included fully in the syllabus.

2.2 In short, we have, in Gee's terms, to 'do (English)' in the classroom, with enough salience and in rich enough contexts for the students to acquire it readily and in all its complexity.

Beginners/False Beginners:

2.3 At this level, the most common and useful elements of the language must be mastered, which means items of basic grammar, vocabulary/routines and functions. A good deal of effort is required of students to do this, and it is slow going because there is little past learning to which students can relate the new material. If new items are related as much as possible to previous items, it helps students build a framework on which subsequent items can be 'hooked' to facilitate acquisition. Things must be kept simple so as not to confuse or overwhelm the students. At the same time, richness, realism and salience must not be forgotten. At this stage, students are largely dependent on the teacher, and their self-expression is severely constrained by lack of ability.

2.4 Traditional methodology holds that "the pathway toward fluency begins with mechanical drills and progresses to communicative drills and then to free communication." (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1989) While this seems sound, there is always the dan-

ger of lack of salience to students, especially in the earlier, mechanical, controlled stages of practice. 'Free communication' should be kept within the confines of what has already been acquired. During the free communication stage, rewards must always be given for both communicative ability on the one hand, and accuracy on the other (see 2.9 above).

2.5 Listening: Students need practice in comprehending language spoken at natural speeds, learning to guess, and tolerating ambiguity. Particularly useful are simple tasks based on already-acquired language, using authentic, or ersatz authentic taped material.

2.6 Reading: High and false beginners can begin reading the simplest graded readers, with instructions not to use a dictionary. No special reading skills training seems necessary for literate Japanese students faced with basic daily-life reading tasks.

2.7 Writing: Correct spelling, like correct grammar, won't be acquired unless reason is given to do so. Spelling tests should be given regularly. This may not be the most suitable level to teach such skills as paragraph writing and sentence combining, as skills training can be done with a minimum of pain at the advanced level when language is no longer a barrier. By that time, students may have already acquired many of those skills as a by-product of/integrated with other language learning tasks, and through osmosis while reading. Diary writing at this level is as misguided as 'free conversation' would be. Students are not yet equipped to express themselves correctly in the target language. Written assignments should encourage both accuracy and fluency, and should thus be based on the language forms already acquired.

2.8 Pronunciation: Once students are able to pronounce correctly in controlled situations, the challenge is to create activities that reward and penalize for correct pronunciation in real communication. Only that kind of practice will allow most students to automatize correct pronunciation.

Lower-intermediate Level (Toefl 370—450):

2.9 Students continue to progress through the syllabus. English is now a crude tool that they can use for their own self-expression.

2.10 Some teachers complain their students can communicate, but with poor grammatical control. (These same students 'know' the grammar, however, in the sense that they can produce correct responses in more controlled activities.) To avoid or correct this, communicative activities should have penalties and rewards that measure success in terms of both correct form and successful communication.

2.11 Vocabulary must be stressed at this level—but not in the sense of learning lists of

words. Words should all originate in a context, such as when the teacher says something simple or important to the students and they don't understand, or from a passage in a textbook or other source material, or from translations of words or expressions from Japanese that the students want to know how to say. Words should be learned in context, both to aid in the acquisition of prepositions and other collocations, and to allow students to acquire the unique properties of the word and the way it describes the world. Students should be as accountable for new vocabulary as they are for other course material, and so will usually have to be provided with lists of the contextualized vocabulary words that occurred in their class. At this level, words are usefully divided into active (remember) and passive (recognize) categories, with most attention being paid to the former. If a group of students is taught by more than one teacher, all teachers should be as aware of vocabulary introduced as they are of any other elements being taught by other teachers. Review of previously taught material, preferably in new contexts, is one key to successful acquisition.

High-intermediate Level (Toefl 450—500):

2.12 The last elements in the formal syllabus are covered at this level. The lid is off vocabulary: anything and everything should be learned actively or passively. By this time, students have a rich enough network of language that new items can be hooked in with relative ease. As often as not, there are prefixes or affixes or literal or figurative meanings already known to aid comprehension and memorization.

Advanced Level (Toefl 500—600):

2.13 This is the last level in a classroom with a teacher, mainly 'doing' English through exposure to authentic materials: newspaper articles, books, movies, discussion questions... Students expand their vocabularies, both new items and a more accurate grasp of previously known material, so they can more and more 'instinctively' pick the right word for the context. Vocabulary building and self-expression are the two main ingredients of this level, with academic skills added if attending an overseas university is a goal. This is also the level to teach whatever writing and reading skills are desired and found wanting.

2.14 Thereafter, fluent students will acquire in the process of using English, with little effort needed. This is the equivalent of native speaking junior high school students who acquire an average of 75 words per day "without any serious effort" (Diller), indeed, almost unaware of their doing so.

How long does it take to learn a foreign language?

2.15 In a full-time course (5 days a week, 7 hours a day, plus homework) it takes 12 months for false beginners with no communicative ability to reach 550 Toefl and 18

months to reach advanced level (600 Toefl). It might take two years to reach the automatic acquisition threshold.

2.16 Much mischief is done by talking about 'teaching English' in part-time situations, as if it were of the same ilk as what goes on in full-time programs. The seldom articulated truth is that there can be no appreciable progress towards fluency except in intensive programs. If this were known, students (and teachers) would not feel so mystified/guilty/hopeless over their lack of progress. Some telling symptoms of the real truth are drop-in conversation lounges, split-edition textbooks, textbook 'courses' produced without a test component, and flat sales for advanced-level texts.

2.17 We must distinguish between teaching English on the way to fluency (which implies fluency within a reasonable time-frame, say, two years at most), and teaching English in a situation that inherently precludes students ever reaching fluency. If we call the former 'teaching English,' the latter might be termed 'diddling around.' A name both more academic and less derogatory is probably called for, however, and I invite others to come up with one. It would have to include the idea of constraint or limitation, but preferably in a positive way. Limited language practice and learning has its own merit, and it should not be belittled by comparison to something with which it may have little relationship.

2.18 The present lack of distinction between the different goals of teaching English does not befit a serious profession. Beginning-level students entering a less than full-time program have little idea that the implied goal of fluency is in fact an illusion, and those in charge of language programs are in no hurry to disabuse them of their fantasies. Language programs should be as accountable as any other product or service. We know enough about language teaching and learning to be able to declare targets with fair accuracy after taking into account all the variables. Do that, and much of the mystery surrounding language learning would disappear for students and teachers alike.

2.19 What can be done for lower-level students in once-a-week classes (as in, for example, language schools or universities) is to practice simple English in limited communicative situations. Progress towards fluency is out of the question. But the higher the level, the faster the learning, so by putting together as much study time as possible (two or more times-a-week classes, weekend or vacation-time intensives), part-time intermediate and above students could enter the realm of real progress towards fluency. Advanced students alone can plan on progress to fluency in once-a-week classes plus homework.

Conclusion

As James Paul Gee said in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, language teachers can learn a lot by looking critically at their ideas and practices. But as Andrew Wright said, one teacher's experiences and opinions cannot represent everyone. I have set down my own ideas on language teaching in the strong hope that others will follow. If enough of us do so, we may, in time, reach consensus on those two crucial questions to which every teacher and student has the right to an answer: how should we teach, and long does it take to learn a foreign language?

Notes

1.1 Rheingold is quoted in 'Untranslatable Words', a review of Rheingold's book by John Abbott in *The Daily Yomiuri*, October 5, 1989, p. 7. Abbott attributes the original idea to Benjamin Whorf.

1.2 "We understand the nature of language so little (beyond phonology and syntax) that we (can) not directly teach one the way we teach physics or history." (Gee (1988), p. 219.) Gee gives an example of this complexity: just in terms of rhythm and intonation, "speakers are actually manipulating hundreds of variables at the same time."

1.3 Earl Stevick (1976; 1982, pp. 21–49) has written much on memorization and on meaning to the student. "(Some) scholars believe that what is important and emotionally charged tends to be more rapidly embedded than material which is emotionally neutral or unimportant." (1976, p. 27). He also, as early as 1976, warned against 'communicativeness' being used as the ultimate litmus test for materials. "My guess is that an increase in 'communicativeness' enhances retention and improves pedagogical effectiveness to the extent that it increases the average 'depth' of the experience, but only to that extent." (1976, p. 44)

Learner interest or 'salience' is currently a blind spot in curriculum. David Nunan in a recent article was able to assemble 17 statements 'derived from a variety of sources' characteristic of a good language learning task. Not one of these statements included any reference to the learner caring about or being interested in the task, or considering it relevant. (Nunan (1989), p. 113.)

There is anecdotal evidence to support the hypothesis of a link between retention and salience. Students usually remember the context in which they acquired almost all recently-learned vocabulary items. It is the very richness and salience of that context and/or the attention given to the word at that time that led to its being acquired. This is in stark contrast to words studied from vocabulary workbooks. No matter how highly con-

textualized the situations in these books, far less acquisition goes on, especially if virgin territory is being covered. After completing an exercise in a vocabulary workbook for homework, a student produced the word 'annual' correctly during communication. On questioning, he said he had met the word before but had thought it meant bi-monthly. The vocabulary text exercise had thus made a deep impression on him. By way of contrast, the same student was unable to recognize the noun 'defect' during communication a day after successfully completing exercises containing that word. On thinking about it, he did admit that the word seemed vaguely familiar. This student, a strongly motivated learner, realizes the drawbacks of his vocabulary workbooks in terms of effectiveness, but given limited teacher contact time, feels they are worth doing for homework. In sum, these books—and I believe the same applies for grammar workbooks—probably have more value for review rather than first-time learning.

1.4 For discussion of acquisition, automatization and fluency, see Gatbonton (1988) and Bamford (1989). For discussion of accuracy and fluency, see Brumfit's book-length treatment.

1.5 Stevick (1986, pp. 1–19) talks of these connections as nexuses, and explains them in detail.

1.6 Stevick has detailed these processes most notably in his various metaphors for memory. (1984, pp. 29–49.) The vulgar language syndrome is my term for the often-observed phenomenon of students remembering a word they only heard once. This most often happens with vulgar or slang words, or words connected with sex or toilet functions. Students undoubtedly remember such words because they are taboo and thus exciting. As Stevick has observed, "a new item needs only one intense experience in order to attain status in PM (permanent memory)." (1986, p.31.)

1.7 For discussion of adult/child intelligence and other age-related factors of language learning, see Diller, pp. 106-116.

On the matter of identity as tied to language, see Gee (1986). He observes that, "Teachers of English are not, in fact, teaching English...they are teaching a set of discourse practices... In acquiring a new set of discourse practices, a student may be acquiring a new identity, one that at various points may conflict with the student's initial acculturation and socialization." (p. 742.) In a related insight, Stevick notes, "Correct (grammatical) forms are...optional refinements (to communication), and anyone who holds onto these refinements does so for her own reasons." (1982, p. 104.) For further discussion of barriers to acquiring aspects of language which mark one as a member of another culture, see Stevick (1976), pp. 47-64.

2.1 For a full discussion of syllabus, see Brumfit, pp. 88-111. "Syllabus presupposes a design which specifically facilitates learning, not simply a random joining together of elements with no particular cohesion or system." (Brumfit, p. 98.) When there are too many strands being woven together into a multi-syllabus, textbooks do begin to look like a "random joining together." *The Cambridge English Course 1* falls into this trap, in my opinion, "with its multi-syllabus...based on a combination of eight different syllabus inventories...lexical, structural, phonological, thematic, functional, notional, situational, skills..." (Swan and Walker, pp. VI-VII.)

2.2 Gee (1988), p. 219.

2.4 Gatbonton and Segalowitz are here quoting Paulston and Bruder. They also give other illustrations of traditional methodology.

Although he doesn't say so directly, Harmer seems to have improved student retention in mind when he says, "One of the problems about drills is that they are fairly monotonous. Some way must be found of making controlled language practice more meaningful and more enjoyable." (p. 43.) While salience might be achieved if material is 'meaningful and enjoyable,' it should be noted that I am using salience in a wider sense than just these two elements.

Almost all beginning textbooks fall down in the area of salience. It is no coincidence that the best-selling textbooks in Japan contain this element of being 'interesting' to the student. Texts can be interesting in various ways : the *Streamline* series has much humorous content, while the *English Firsthand* series has interactive tasks that students enjoy doing.

2.5 See Bamford (1982a, 1982b, 1982c).

2.6 See Bamford (1984).

2.7 For discussion of the reading/writing link, see Krashen, who states that "a variety of studies indicate that voluntary pleasure reading contributes to the development of writing ability." (p. 4.) See also Hafiz & Tudor.

There are basic problems to setting writing assignments for homework at this level : students will sweat bullets, spending hours writing and erasing in endless pursuit of perfection. Such lop-sided attention to accuracy at the expense of fluency renders the assignment of questionable value.

2.8 An interesting possibility would be to use computer programs that recognize correct pronunciation, ruling out the grossest errors such as 'katakana English'. Interactive games created to include this might, however, not be communicative enough to produce unconscious mastery.

2.9 The Toefl examination is used here as it is the most widely known, objective benchmark of a student's English ability. An alternative would be the Toeic examination.

2.10 This problem doesn't occur with the rare student who has a true integrative motivation with weak psychological barriers to integration with the target culture.

2.11 A computer program could be made that would simplify the making of contextualized review sheets for classes. In such a program, when a vocabulary word was entered, it would call up one or more example sentences.

2.14 For discussion of vocabulary acquisition, see Diller, pp.127-137.

2.15 See Bamford (1987).

2.17 Limited language practice and learning might fall into the category of English for special purposes (ESP), for example, English for tourism.

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