Why do Japanese have trouble learning English?

As globalization makes headway, calls for increased ability in an international language like English become louder and louder. Although English is a compulsory subject in junior high and high school in this country, Japanese still have a hard time achieving even daily conversation levels.

According to the most recent EF English Proficiency Index, the English level of Japanese is ranked 35th out of 72 countries. The top three are the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, which are all northern European nations. Among Asian countries, Singapore is placed sixth, Malaysia 12th, the Philippines 13th, India 22nd and South Korea 29th. Japan places between Russia and Uruguay.

Even though most Japanese learn English for at least six years in school, why are we still not reaching sufficient proficiency? This of course is not a new question. It has been asked for years and there is a bank of standard answers.

Usually, the poor achievement is blamed on the way English is taught in schools. It is said that there is too much classroom emphasis on grammar with very little time devoted to actual conversational practice. The emphasis is mainly on the silent skills of reading and writing. Listening is rather passive as opposed to being an active part of a conversation. The focus is on accuracy and avoiding grammatical mistakes. Students spend a great deal of time copying out what was written on the blackboard and memorizing it in preparation for tests. They often describe English lessons as boring. The teachers themselves — most of whom were taught in the same way as they now teach — do not have adequate enough English communication skills. In fact, more than 70 percent of junior high school English teachers have a TOEIC score lower than 730.

Another commonly given excuse for poor development of English communicative skills is the Japanese culture or “character.” It is said the cultural norms mean that Japanese are not willing to speak up in front of others in case they cause a disruption. Plus, they are too afraid of making mistakes and feel they must speak perfect English. In a sense they impose silence on themselves.
Yet another explanation is that Japan is an island, which is isolated and doesn’t have many immigrants, so there is no need to use any other language in daily life.

No doubt there is some truth in all of the above. But are these the only reasons or are there other factors to be taken into consideration?

Let’s take a look at data about language learning difficulty for native English speakers, compiled by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in the United States. The data shows how many hours of study are required on average for English-speaking State Department officials, who must be well-educated and highly-qualified people, to be able to achieve the daily conversational level in any particular language.

The result differed among four groups of languages as follows: Group 1, including French, Spanish and German, required 480 hours; Group 2, including Greek, Hindi and Indonesian, required 720 hours; Group 3, including Russian, Hebrew and Turkish, required 1,320 hours; and Group 4, including Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Arabic, required 2,400 to 2,760 hours. In fact, out of the 62 languages examined, Japanese was listed as the most difficult language to learn.

Japanese tutors at English Tutor Network who have a TOEIC score above 900 say that they, on average, spent 4,000 to 5,000 hours studying English to reach that level. A similar result was found in research carried out by Dr. Donald Arthur Norman at the University of California, San Diego on the number of hours needed for native English speakers to become fluent in a second language.

So how many hours do Japanese study English in junior high and high schools? In junior high, students have four 50-minute lessons per week for 35 weeks a year. That is a total of 350 hours. In high school, the students have five 50-minute lessons per week for 35 weeks, for a total of 437 hours. The grand total adds up to 787 hours. This is far from sufficient. It is less than a quarter of what the fluent tutors at ETN say they spent. Just for comparison, the FSI research shows that after 720 hours of studying Japanese, native English speakers can only expect to achieve basic survival level.

The government has decided that beginning in 2020 all high school graduates must achieve a level of English equivalent to B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR).

What is this B1 level? People who have achieved that level are expected to be able to, for example, understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure and so on; deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken; produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest; and describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Oh, my goodness! To be able to achieve that level, students must be exposed to the language for a minimum of 2,500 hours. Remember the number of students per class in Japan can be as many as 40 with just one teacher. Sure, English education will start in the third grade from 2020, but from elementary to high school students will still only be exposed to English for less than 1,000 hours — despite the expectation of results more indicative of over 2,500 hours of exposure.

So, the outcome is already very clear. Only the students who are lucky enough to have more exposure and experiences in an English-speaking environment will achieve the level of B1. Again this means socio-economic differences will be reflected in educational differences, and ultimately life opportunities in a globalized world.

Well, I guess we just have to wait until automatic interpretation machines hit the market.

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