

Successful Language Learners and Pedagogical Suggestions for Effective Learning

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Abstract

There has been growing criticism of English language education in Japan from the business world and English teachers feel it necessary to update their ways of teaching. The purpose of this article is to provide basic information which English teachers are expected to know. For that purpose, it will first explain five characteristics which quite a few successful language learners have in common. The five characteristics will be discussed in detail respectively. Among the five characteristics, teachers can influence only two of them. These two areas are: to increase learners' motivation with motivational strategies and to encourage them to learn English in an effective way. This article will then make three pedagogical suggestions which are likely to bring about effective learning. They are: Content-Language Instruction, the PCPP sequence and Sustained Silent Reading. In making recommendations, it will quote the results of practical studies done by the author. In conclusion, it will be argued that English teachers should reflect on their teaching based on instructed second language acquisition research findings, and not on their own subjective assumptions and beliefs.

1. Introduction

The ability to use English for communication is growing in importance and quite a few English teachers in Japan are now having difficulty in improving their ways of teaching. Traditionally in Japan, teachers have been using their first language (L1), or Japanese, in teaching English. English teachers the author met during his junior and high school days rarely used English in the classroom. They used their L1 in class and spent a lot of time on English-to-Japanese translation and grammatical explanation. Although the author sometimes practiced oral reading in class, the opportunities to engage in meaningful use of English were rare. Although such traditional lessons have the effect of increasing learners' language awareness and encourage them to pay close attention to each linguistic form in sentences, they are not likely to help learners develop the ability to use English for communication.

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the goal of English education in Japan is to develop learners' communication abilities such as

accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas, etc., deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages.¹⁾

English teachers in Japan are now facing the challenging task of how to help their students move from an initial state, where target forms are not known at all, to an end-state, where they have some command over the system of English and some capacity to use that system for communication. This article intends to provide the basic information which English teachers are expected to know. For that purpose, it will first explain five characteristics which many successful language learners are likely to have in common. Among the five characteristics, three of them are beyond the teachers' intervention. Only two of them are susceptible to pedagogical intervention. They are: to increase learners' motivation with motivational strategies and to encourage them to learn English in an effective way. The author will then make three pedagogical suggestions for effective learning, referring to the results of practical studies done by the said author. They are: Content-Language Instruction, the PCPP sequence and Sustained Silent Reading. It will finally refer to Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA). The main purpose in ISLA is to establish how classroom language learning takes place by addressing questions related to the degree to which any form of external manipulation (e.g., explicit grammar instruction, shadowing, input manipulation, etc...) can affect language development.

2. Five Characteristics Common to Successful Language Learners

While some language learners are successful, others are not. What factors bring about the difference? Research into individual differences answers this question. According to Shirai (2012), there are five characteristics which successful language learners are likely to have in common.

- (1) They are young.
- (2) Their LI is similar to the target language (TL).
- (3) They have high language learning aptitude.
- (4) They have high motivation to learn the TL.
- (5) Their language learning method is effective.

While teachers can increase a learner's motivation to learn English with motivational strategies, they cannot change a learner's age. Although it is possible for teachers to employ an effective teaching method to bring about better learning, there is no way to increase a learner's foreign language learning aptitude. Unfortunately, Japanese and English are greatly different in their syntactic constructions and phonological systems. It is quite natural to assume that Japanese learners of English would have more difficulty in learning English than German learners of English, for example, whose LI is similar to English.

Among the five characteristics mentioned above, teachers are powerless to change items (1), (2) and (3). They are beyond pedagogical intervention. As for the items (4) and (5), however, teachers can make a difference through pedagogical intervention. The author would like to explain each of them briefly to clarify the fundamental information of which English teachers are assumed to be aware.

2.1 Learners' Age

Kuhl (2010/10) describes babies all over the world as “citizens of the world.” When they are born, they have the ability to discriminate all the sounds of all languages. It goes without saying that adults cannot. Although they can discriminate the sounds of their own language, they may not be able to discriminate those of foreign languages. In Kuhl’s terms, they are “language-bound listeners.”

When do the citizens of the world turn into the language-bound listeners? The answer is: before their first birthdays. Although all babies are completely equal in ability at six to eight months old, they start to acquire their own language two months later. When they hear adults speaking, they take statistics on the language they hear and develop the sound distributions in the language. That is, they are preparing for the language that they are about to acquire.

Babies and children are considered to be better language learners than adults. When do they lose their ability to acquire a language without conscious effort? It is generally considered that they keep this skill until about seven years of age. After turning seven, however, they start losing the skill. After puberty, it is virtually impossible to make use of this skill.

In Japan, they start learning English when they enter junior high-schools, which means that they need to resort to cognitive skills to learn the language. Cognitive skills refer to the abilities to gain meaning and knowledge from experience and information. They also include the ability to think about new information, process and speak about it and apply it to other, previously learned information. As children mature, they develop the ability to think on higher levels, process information more skillfully and make connections to other information more easily.

2.2 Similarities Between Learners' L1 and the TL

People in the Netherlands and Germany are usually more likely to have a better command of English than Japanese. One of the reasons for this is that their L1 is similar to English. It is basically easier for people to learn an L2 which is similar to their L1 than to learn an L2 which is greatly different from their L1. Unfortunately, the Japanese language is greatly different from the English language. It is quite easy to point out differences between the two languages. While the former takes the object-verb word order, the latter puts the verb before the object. While the former employs postpositions such as “*de*” and “*ni*,” the latter uses prepositions such as “*in*” and “*at*.”

The author teaches writing courses at a university and has noticed that quite a few Japanese learners of English are likely to do word-for-word translation from Japanese to English. They initially think about what they want to convey in Japanese and then translate it into English. If their LI has a similar word order to that of the TL, it could be a good strategy to a certain extent. As was mentioned above, Japanese and English are so different that the English sentences generated by Japanese learners of English through word-for-word translation often deviate from the norms of English and are not understood by those who speak languages other than Japanese.

It should be stressed that the ways in which things are perceived are often different between English and Japanese and these differences may be reflected in the word order of each language. The differences between the two languages are summarized in Table 1 (Ando, 1986, p. 57).

Table 1
Structural Difference Between Japanese and English

English	Japanese
preposition + noun (at a distance)	noun + postposition (離レタトコロニ)
conjunction + sentence (As I was tired last night, ...)	sentence + conjunction (昨日ハ疲レテイタノデ, ...)
auxiliary verb + main verb (Tom will come.)	main verb + auxiliary verb (トムハ来ルダロウ)
noun + relative clause (a car which has been used for years)	relative clause + noun (何年モ使ッタ車)

As was discussed above, English and Japanese are so different that Japanese learners of English need to make more effort than, for example, German learners of English to master English. Word-for-word translation from Japanese to English is not likely to help Japanese learners of English develop the ability to use English for communication.

2.3 Language Learning Aptitude

Language learning aptitude alludes to the prediction how successfully an individual person can learn a foreign language in a given amount of time and under given conditions. This aptitude is considered to be relatively stable once a person matures. The Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) was designed to measure a person's language learning aptitude by Carroll and Sapon in the 1950s. The MLAT consists of five sections, each one measuring separate abilities. Let us look at each of them briefly (Carroll & Sapon, 2002).

1. Number Learning

This section is designed to measure the participant's memory as well as an auditory alertness factor which would affect the participant's auditory comprehension of a foreign language.

2. Phonetic Script

This section is designed to measure the participant's sound-symbol association ability, which is the ability to learn correlations between a speech sound and written symbols.

3. Spelling Clues/Hidden Words

This section is designed to test the participant's vocabulary knowledge of English as well as his/her sound-symbol association ability.

4. Words in Sentences

This section is designed to test the participant's sensitivity to grammatical structure without using any grammatical terminology.

5. Paired Associates

This section is designed to measure the participant's rote memorization ability, which is a typical component of foreign language learning.

It is now accepted that language learning aptitude consists of three sub-abilities: the grammatical sensitivity, the phonetic coding ability and the rote learning ability for foreign language materials. The first refers to the ability to recognize the grammatical functions of linguistic forms in sentence structures. The second refers to the ability to identify distinct sounds, to form associations between those sounds and symbols representing them, and to retain these associations. The third refers to the ability to learn associations between sounds and meanings rapidly and efficiently, and to retain these associations.

What English teachers should know is that a learning method matching a learner's aptitude is likely to bring about better learning. Learners with good memories may prefer lessons putting emphasis on memorization and those whose grammatical sensitivity is high may enjoy activities where they can analyze sentences. English teachers are expected to take each learner's aptitude into consideration in thinking about what language activities to incorporate into their lessons, which is called Aptitude-Treatment Interaction (Cronbach & Snow, 1977). It is necessary to understand that the MLAT was developed in order to predict how fast learners would master a foreign language. Although it may predict who is likely to make quick progress, it does not predict who will achieve high level of foreign language proficiency. It is generally accepted by SLA researchers that anyone can learn a foreign language under the right circumstances. Therefore

English teachers should be aware that each learner is different in his or her aptitude. Teachers are expected to ensure that all learners with various aptitudes can learn English effectively in class.

2.4 Motivation

It is quite evident that learners with high motivation are likely to be successful language learners. Learners with high motivation will probably make more effort than learners whose motivation is low. The more effort they make, the more successful their learning will be and they are likely to successfully develop their ability to use English for communication. Although numerous teachers are likely to believe that motivation is something that learners are responsible for, it is possible for teachers to increase learners' motivation for learning with motivational strategies.

The Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), which has attracted a lot of researchers' attention in motivation studies, posits three basic psychological needs: the need for competence, the need for relatedness and the need for autonomy. Competence refers to being effective in dealing with the environment a person finds himself or herself in. Relatedness is the universal want to interact with and be connected to others. Autonomy is the universal urge to be a causal agent of his or her own life. These three needs are regarded as universal necessities that are innate and seen in humanity across time, gender and culture. According to the theory, people become positive and well-developed in the context where these three psychological needs are fulfilled at the same time.

To satisfy the need for competence, learners should deal with a task which leads them to think that the task which they are now working on is challenging and demanding enough to match their competence. Employing materials which are not challenging enough to satisfy their need for competence may decrease their motivation to learn English. Teachers are expected to make challenging materials accessible to learners with pedagogic ingenuity. They should refrain from employing less demanding materials in class without careful consideration.

If teachers incorporate collaborative learning activities in class, the need for relatedness is likely to be fulfilled. They are considered to create a cooperative atmosphere in class and the cooperative atmosphere encourages learners to get intrinsically motivated. Even if they are not forced, they seek to try, contribute and satisfy other members of the same group. A number of studies have shown that there are both pedagogic and social gains for most learners working in small groups (Storch, 2002). If they can work together collaboratively with others, the need for relatedness is likely to be satisfied.

Learner autonomy involves learners both having choice and feeling responsible for their own learning. They increase their motivation to learn when they have choice and are able to decide what they can do themselves rather than being told what to do by others.

Quite a few studies have been trying to clarify whether learners' motivation could be increased by fulfilling the three psychological needs posited by the theory. Iwanaka (2011a), for

example, has investigated the effect of classroom environment in satisfying the three psychological needs on learners' motivation to learn English. After the treatment, the participants' motivation for an English lesson increased significantly. The result of the study shows that teachers can increase their students' motivation with motivational strategies.

2.5 Effectiveness of Learning

Successful language learners learn an L2 in an effective way. It is necessary for teachers to encourage their learners to choose an effective method. Although Krashen (1982), Long (1990) and Swain (2000) have slightly different opinions concerning roles of input, output and interaction, they all agree that learners acquire an L2 effectively if their learning environment is similar to the LI acquisition environment. That is:

- (1) Focus is put on meaning rather than form.
- (2) Ample comprehensible input is available.
- (3) Opportunities to engage in meaningful use of an L2 in anxiety-free situations are available.

It is necessary for teachers to take the above three conditions into consideration when they reflect on how to teach English.

How do learners develop the ability to use the TL for communication? As Long and Robinson (1998) have pointed out, what is taught by teachers in class is not what students learn when it is taught. The process of L2 learning is not straightforward. What is presented in an L2 becomes *input* for learners. They interact with input data and then convert some of the input data, not all, into *intake* by taking what is necessary and leaving what is not necessary. What is intaken, after being consolidated with their existing L2 knowledge, constitutes their *IL system*. The knowledge stored in their IL system is employed for producing *output*. By producing output, they have better access to the knowledge stored in the system. This is how L2 learners acquire the ability to use the TL for communication.

What should be emphasized here is that learners gradually deepen their understanding on linguistic forms. An effective lesson needs to be structured in a way where learners progressively enrich their understanding on linguistic forms. For them to be able to do so, it should have the following four stages: presentation, comprehension, practice and production (PCPP). A lesson organized in the FCPP sequence is considered to act positively on learners' cognitive processes (Muranoi, 2006).

It is worth noting that the three conditions mentioned above all put priority on meaning. Although grammatical knowledge often serves as a backbone for accurate output and has an important role to convert *input* into *intake*, meaning always takes precedence over form. It is necessary for teachers to understand that language and content are like two sides of a coin and that they should be presented in an integrated way (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). If they are

presented in an integrated way in the PCPP procedure, learners are likely to develop their English proficiency effectively.

Of the five characteristics which successful language learners are likely to have in common, only the fourth and fifth items are susceptible to pedagogical intervention. Teachers cannot change learners' age. They cannot change the language difference between Japanese and English, either. Language learning aptitude is rather innate and considered to be resistant to change.

It should be stressed, however, teachers can increase learners' motivation to learn English with motivational strategies. It is also possible for teachers to structure their lessons in a way which would bring about effective development of learners' IL system.

3. Pedagogical Suggestions for Effective Learning

The author has been interested in ISLA research and trying to clarify what would constitute effective pedagogy for the acquisition of English in a classroom context. In other words, the author has been trying to answer the question: How can instruction best ensure successful language learning?

In this article, the author would like to offer three pedagogical suggestions for effective learning. They are: Content-Language Instruction, the PCPP sequence and Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). These are the areas that the author has been particularly interested in. The author has been conducting practical studies in these areas and shown that they would bring about desirable learning outcomes.

3.1 Content-Language Instruction

Content-Language Instruction (CLI) provides learners with opportunities where they focus on meaning rather than form and engage in meaningful use of the TL. Although it puts emphasis on meaning, CLI does not deny the importance of language learning.

Iwanaka (2014) has tried to clarify whether learners with low English proficiency accept CLI favorably and whether CLI encourages them to improve their English proficiency. Twenty-one undergraduates were employed as the participants, whose average TOEIC score was 309.17 ($SD = 42.47$). They took a course taught by the author. The textbook employed for the course was *Globe Trotters* published by Cengage Learning in 2013. The course consisted of 16 lessons and encouraged the participants to show interest in the countries and regions introduced in the textbook. The results are: 1) the participants accepted CLI favorably and 2) their English proficiency went up slightly. The results indicate that CLI would be a promising pedagogy for Japanese learners of English.

Some may argue that CLI is impossible at junior high schools. The author would like to assert that junior high school English lessons are ideal for teaching content and language in an

integrated way. As mentioned before, deepening cultural understanding is one of the goals of English language education in Japan. The author would like to emphasize that junior high school English textbooks are rich in cultural materials.

Ookawa (2013) has analyzed six junior high school English textbooks and clarified how materials for intercultural understanding are employed in them. Out of 199 units which were examined, materials for intercultural understanding were employed in as many as 171 units. This probably reflects the idea that learning a language necessarily entails cultural understanding. Ookawa's analysis reveals that countries where English is used as a second or foreign language are likely to be treated more in new textbooks than their former counterparts.

If learners are interested in the content of the materials, they are likely to increase their motivation and learning can be achieved in English. In such situations, language is learned incidentally. The author believes that materials for intercultural understanding are likely to attract learners' interest and bring about effective learning.

3.2 PCPP Sequence

As discussed above, learners gradually deepen their understanding on a linguistic form and develop the ability to use the form for output. Teachers are expected to structure their lessons in a way that sees learners progressively enrich their understanding on linguistic forms. As mentioned above, a lesson which brings about effective learning should have the following stages: Presentation, Comprehension, Practice and Production. It is considered that a lesson organized in the PCPP sequence is likely to act positively on learners' cognitive processes and help them deepen their understanding on how a certain linguistic form should be used.

Iwanaka (2013) has investigated how an English lesson organized in the PCPP sequence would contribute to the development of learners' listening comprehension ability. A total of 20 undergraduates were employed as the participants. They took a course taught by the author. The textbook employed in the course used CBS news as its materials. Although the course was basically conducted in English, the participants were allowed to ask questions in Japanese when necessary. Each lesson was 90 minutes long and the basic procedure of each lesson is as follows:

(1) Presentation (00-15)²⁾

1. The participants review the previous lesson.
2. The teacher shows a few photos and pictures and explains each of them briefly in English. Learners listen thus activating their background knowledge of the content which they are going to understand more deeply at the comprehension stage.

(2) Comprehension (15-55)

1. The participants watch a video and answer the questions about its content.
2. The participants read a passage and answer the questions about its content.

(3) Practice (55-70)

1. The participants engage in oral reading, parallel reading and shadowing.
 2. The participants practice reading a dialogue in pairs.
- (4) Production (70-90)
1. The participants engage in dictogloss.³⁾
 2. The participants engage in information-gap activities.

To evaluate how the participants listening skills improved over the course, the listening section of Ace Placement Test⁴⁾ was employed. The participants took the test in the second (Time 1) and 15th lessons (Time 2) and their average scores went up significantly from Times 1 to 2. Out of the 20 participants, 19 of them increased their scores. The result of the study suggests that the PCPP sequence is likely to bring about effective learning.

3.3 Sustained Silent Reading

Language learning starts with input. Without comprehensible input, nobody can learn a language. In Japan, English is used as a foreign language and most Japanese learners of English have few opportunities to understand English input outside school. It is evident that the amount of input which they receive through their English textbooks is insufficient. As connectionists have pointed out (Elman, Bates, Johnson, Karmiloff-Smith, Parisi & Plunkett, 1966), learning results from the strengthening and inhibition of connections in an associative network. Exposure to ample comprehensible input is indispensable for this to happen. It is one of the most important teachers' roles to see to it that their learners are exposed to abundant comprehensible input.

SSR can be one promising solution. It is a form of school-based reading where students read books silently in a designated time period regularly. This aims at nurturing students' autonomy as well as fostering their reading comprehension ability. SSR enables them to be exposed to abundant comprehensible input. Exposure to abundant comprehensible input is considered to help them develop their expectancy grammar. A learner's expectancy grammar, according to Oller (1978), is the nucleus of his or her predictive capacity.

Iwanaka (2011b) has clarified how SSR would contribute to the development of learners' English proficiency and whether they would foster a positive attitude toward English learning through SSR. A total of 32 undergraduates, who were not majoring in English, were employed as the participants. They took a course taught by the author. It was a TOEIC preparation course and each lesson was 90 minutes long. In each lesson, they spent 25 minutes for SSR and Penguin Graded Readers were employed as the reading materials. The participants took TOEIC in April and December and the average score in December was significantly higher than that in April. SSR also encouraged them to foster a positive attitude toward English learning.

4. Conclusion

In this article, the author first described five characteristics which successful language learners were likely to share. He then made three pedagogical suggestions which would bring about effective learning, referring to the studies done by the author.

English teachers are always expected to improve their teaching skills. They need to continue making an effort to upgrade their teaching. In reflecting on how to teach English, how to organize a lesson and what activities to incorporate in a lesson, the author often consults with ISLA research findings. ISLA can be defined as “any systematic attempt to enable or facilitate language learning by manipulating the mechanisms of learning and/or the conditions under which these occur” (Housen & Pierrard, 2005, p. 2). The three pedagogical suggestions made above are compatible with ISLA research findings and are likely to bring about effective learning.

Notes

- 1) See www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/.../1298353_3.pdf for further information.
- 2) The figures in parentheses indicate time allotment.
- 3) It is a language teaching technique that is used to teach grammatical structures (Wajnryb, 1990). First, the teacher prepares a text that contains examples of the grammatical form to be studied. The teacher reads the text to the students at normal speed while they take notes. The students then work in small groups to reconstruct the text read by the teacher and finally each group presents their reconstructed text to the rest of the class.
- 4) See <http://english-assessment.org/products/test/placement.html> for the details.

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